

EARTH AND ALCHEMY: CONTEMPORARY CERAMIC SCULPTURE

Stephen D. Paine Gallery
Massachusetts College of Art and Design
621 Huntington Avenue
Boston

Through November 24

Sprawled throughout the airy expanse of the Stephen D. Paine Gallery at MassArt is "Earth and Alchemy," a survey of contemporary ceramic sculpture featuring over two dozen nationally known artists, including three MassArt alumni. In her first foray into ceramics for the MassArt galleries, curator Lisa Tung mixes it up — presenting several lenses through which to view current trends and discoveries in the craft.

Three brilliantly executed, allegorical figurative sculptures by Jason Walker examine human civilization's relationship with nature. Meticulously surface-decorated, the works manifest as 3-D drawings. "Capsized" depicts a floating hybrid man-vessel, bobbing in place and mesmerized by the brilliance of his own idea, represented by an ironically matte, incandescent light bulb flanked by two small birds. His limbs act at once as buoys and anchors, terminating in additional "idea" bulbs painted to resemble wood, or possibly brick — hardly the buoyancy that our thought leaders require to let loose positive developments on the planet.

Tucked behind a wall of pebbly, off-white rectangular orifices (Elizabeth Orleans' "Inner Spaces") is self-taught artist Kamio Ogata's "Spherical Neriage Vase," a flawless stoneware vessel whose marbled S-curves are augmented by "neriage" — a Japanese clay technique that is to ceramics what Italian "millefiori" is to glasswork. Layers of pigmented clay are wedged together, then hand thrown on a wheel. Unbelievably precise ridges circumnavigate the vessel, causing surface effects akin to the strata of our Painted Desert

— blown in the wind over eons, yet retaining a magical order.

Nearby, a gourd-shaped and mounted globe by Kurt Weiser beckons an allegorical examination of its lustrous surface. Using the centuries-old technique of china paint on porcelain, Weiser renders a fantastic Pangaea, leaving the viewer to determine if the map is of our past or future. Weiser's imagery is inspired by the Old Masters: Eve's unmistakable visage peeks from behind foliage, as real and imagined creatures and geometric forms float by. Curiously, Weiser's Eve has not two, but three hands — one teases the branch of the fateful apple tree.

The exhibit's installation is at times refreshing, while frustrating at others. Naoko Matsumoto's (MassArt '06) "Reverberation of Summer" rests on a low platform, inviting the perfect perspective for a naturalist's examination of her concentrically ringed saucers sprouting writhing, fungus-like porcelain spores.

Conversely, Seattle-based Japanese-American ceramicist Akio Takamori's "Venus and Island 2" feels less approachable from a similar high



Jason Walker, *Capsized*, 2011, porcelain, china paint, overglaze enamel (Courtesy of the artist and Ferrin Gallery, Pittsfield, MA).

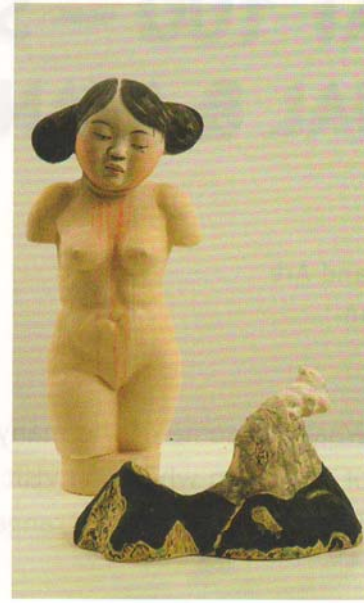
vantage point. His matte "Venus" torso capped by a folksy, melancholic Japanese woman's head regards a smoking, volcanic island. Although inspired by "ukiyo-e" Japanese woodcuts, Takamori's work takes on a tongue-in-cheek, "Godzilla vs. Tokyo" quality on its low pedestal. Toward the rear of the gallery, Takamori's mid-sized figurines suggesting letters of the Roman alphabet are a pure pleasure. "O" depicts two cross-legged lovers, foreheads completing their union in a gentle nod. "F" is formed by the figure of a

beehive-coiffed woman incredulously examining her outstretched, bright yellow stained palm.

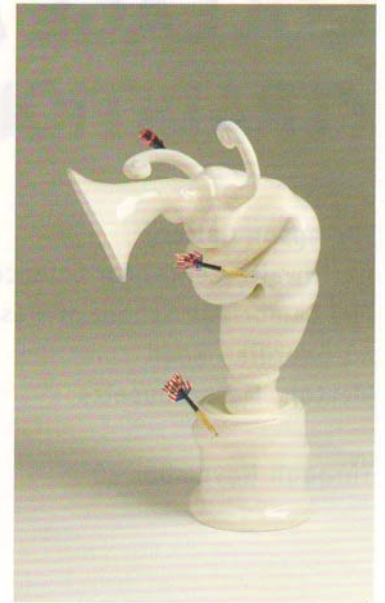
Megumi Naitoh (MassArt MFA '00) pushes the boundaries of traditional tile work in modestly sized mosaics that ripple with multiple images. Naitoh combines photos from her everyday life with screen captures from the online virtual reality world, Second Life. When viewed head-on, dual images morph into and away from each other, suggesting a shifting and tenacious boundary between life



Annabeth Rosen, *ROOL & PLU*, 2012, fired and glazed ceramic, steel stand, baling wire, metal tape measure and casters (Courtesy of the artist and Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia; photograph by Christopher Woodcock).



Akio Takamori, *Venus and Island 2*, 2008, stoneware with underglaze (Courtesy of the artist and Barry Friedman Ltd.).



Laurent Craste, *Saint-Sébastien*, 2011, porcelain, glaze, darts (Courtesy of the artist and Gallery SAS, Montreal).

in the real and virtual worlds. In “6/12/2009,” the yellowish scene of a generic Laundromat shifts to that of a large-breasted, sly-eyed mouse-girl avatar in an incomplete imaginary landscape. Naitoh deliberately mounts some of her tiles a bit cockeyed, so that interrupting squares of either unglazed earthenware or a solid color will interrupt the eye to appear as dead pixels as the images transition with the viewer’s movement. The installation team has done Naitoh’s work justice by placing it centrally in the gallery, where natural light from the high, arched windows can amp up her sometimes subdued color palette.

While thumbs are mostly up for the exhibit’s inviting and freewheeling structure, the atmospheric soundtrack to Paul Swenbeck’s (MassArt BFA ‘91) sci-fi inspired installation “Dor and Oranur” pervades the celestial tranquility of the entire gallery. Like the Plasticine fantasy of a pre-teen hopped up on H.P. Lovecraft, Swenbeck’s fossilized and mutating flora and fauna pop and preen in otherworldly Day-Glo and matte hues. This work is “Different” with a capital “D,” and while its placement in the gallery’s mezzanine was a sound decision, the soundtrack

(titled “Terminal Buzz” and produced in collaboration with Aaron Igler) disturbs the sanctity of other works and feels inappropriately imposed across the exhibit as a whole.

Fossilized nearby are two untitled works by conceptual ceramicist Yo Akiyama. Formidable in their solidity and placed teasingly high — thick, earthy walls surround inscrutable voids.

Mark Cooper’s “Yu Too” is an installation of large, lumpy vessels perched on a scaffold built of mass-produced boards and brackets complete with barcode stickers. Cooper bestows his sculpture and pedestals with equal value. Scaffold-like pedestals take on the shape of a vessel, while other sections climb up the wall to suggest a wall sculpture. Cooper’s purposely non-functional vessels call forth the ghosts of celadon and Han Dynasty bronze relics, boasting lumpy glazes with coloration ranging from blushing scab to creeping mold. A mere excerpt of the over-the-top, immersive environment Cooper created for his 2011 solo show at Samsøn Projects, this parenthetical iteration is risky, yet offers a clever,

curatorially-imposed contrast to some of the more deliberately polished neighboring work, such as Laurent Craste’s “abused,” ivory porcelain period pieces.

Another example of the pedestal confidently claiming its territory can be found in “ROOL & PLU” by Annabeth Rosen. Brightly and graphically decorated anthropomorphic forms suggesting gourds, lanterns and entrails are bound together around steel pedestals mounted on casters. Rosen often experiments in indelicate ways, delighting in the unexpected. “Of all the remarkable things in ceramics ... the explosion of a piece may be the most shocking,” she said.

Concord-based Warren Mather has developed methods for transferring photographic and digital images onto ceramic, a technique he uses to sophisticated advantage. Reminiscent of old mill stones found scattered throughout New England, his doughnut-shaped, wall-mounted representations of tree bark suggest aerial terrain photographs — leaving the viewer to question issues of material, agriculture, history and perception.

J.J. McCracken’s expose on scarcity titled: “Hunger. Philadelphia — Banquet,” features a dry pile of raw clay, cast to resemble surplus produce decaying into dust on a reclaimed wooden table. The work strives to raise awareness of the social problem of unequal access to nourishing foods faced in urban environments struggling with low incomes and retail scarcity. Intelligently tucked away so as not to interrupt the visitor’s first view of the installation are photos documenting a 2010 performance where actors “consumed” the clay produce in a reference to “geophagy,” the practice of eating earth for nourishment. Offering a cyclic symbol of sustenance, installation remnants are recycled to build a bread oven and stoneware for a Philadelphia homeless shelter.

With work ranging from socio-political and environmental to experimentally digital and purely material, “Earth and Alchemy” invites both leisurely exploration and serious discussion.