

BY **EMILY FALVEY**

PHOTO **ERIC TSCHAEPPLE**

MONTREAL For French-born, Montreal-based ceramic artist Laurent Craste, aesthetics and politics meet in the decorative. Working primarily with porcelain, a material strongly associated in the West with aristocracy, imperialism and the early trade routes of globalization, Craste creates surreal, darkly humorous sculptures that underline the relationship between the decorative arts, and particularly the history of the Royal and Imperial porcelain factories, and broader socio-economic themes, including colonialism, revolution and vandalism.

In his best-known body of work, *SéVICES* (in English, *Abuse*) (2008–), porcelain figures inspired by 18th- and 19th-century Sèvres decorative pieces anthropomorphize into the aristocratic victims of working-class coups. A rococo terrine deflates like a soufflé under the violent weight of a crowbar. A resolute axe is embedded in an ornate urn. Refined vases covered in cameos and courtship scenes peel open to be nailed to the wall like animal hides.

While the relationship between politics and craft practices is a common theme in contemporary Canadian art, there is a tendency to consign it to an overly aesthetic context that shifts emphasis from more general forms of social protest to strategies aimed solely at the institution of art. Although Craste's work reads well within this framework, it would be misleading to describe it as a simple subversion of historical fine-art hierarchies, like separating "high" from "low art," or avant-garde practice from kitsch. Instead, at the heart of his practice is a complex understanding of how the decorative embodies both social oppression and freedom.

This tension is integral to Craste's other major body of work, an ongoing series of porcelain sculptures that he recently exhibited alongside *SéVICES* in "Shards of Vanity," his solo exhibition at the Tom Thomson Art Gallery. Cleverly titled *Détournement* (both an avant-garde technique and the French word for "diversion" or "misappropriation") (2010–), the sculptures combine references to the history of Sèvres porcelain manufacture with images drawn from a variety of historical and contemporary media sources. *Vase Intifada* (2014–15), for instance, features an urn whose style and gilding recalls the neoclassical period of Sèvres manufacture, but whose sentimental cartel has been replaced with a media-inspired image of a Palestinian protestor. At once subtle and highly provocative, this new work teases out connections between history and the political economy often overlooked in contemporary-art discourse. ■

Laurent Craste in his Montreal studio, March 2015