



Flow

The 2014 NCECA Ceramic Arts Invitational
Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

SOLID STATE: “*Flow*”, 2014 NCECA INVITATIONAL

Essayist - Sarah Archer, November 2013

Fired clay, which we tend to associate with heat and flame, is actually frozen in time. Firing affords us the opportunity to behold and study the evidence of an object's physical transformation: all those drips and pools of glaze suggest suspended animation, and remind us that the pliable nature of the raw ingredients - their flow - has been abruptly stopped.

The word “flow” is derived from the Latin word *fluvius*, meaning “river,” and it has several cousins that figure prominently in ceramics terminology: “flux,” and “fluid.” **Flow** is situated inside the Milwaukee Art Museum's Baumgartner Galleria, part of Santiago Calatrava's 2001 expansion of the Museum, a dramatic space overlooking Lake Michigan. Its wall of windows tilts inward, punctuated with large, sinuous white girders, giving the space the look and feel of a modernist cruise ship. The Baumgartner space lacks the usual physical features of a gallery: there are no uninterrupted runs of white wall, nor is the light easily controlled, and this unusual setting serves the exhibition's theme effectively. With so little separation between inside and outside, both natural light (or dark) and an awareness of the changing seasons flows into the space. The traditional effects of the white cube gallery, which functions as an isolation tank for artworks, visitors and gallery staff alike, are obliterated.

The twenty artists whose work comprises this exhibition are an aesthetically varied group, and their diversity demonstrates the breadth of the theme. Each one specifically addresses the theme of “Flow” in their statement, giving us a sense of how they interpret the concept: some take it literally, some metaphorically, and some weave the two together. Some suspend matter, focusing their attention on the essential concerns of color and form. Others capture the physical movement of humans or animals, creating works that embody dynamic gestures. Still others suspend history itself, referencing the designs and patterns of another age, either studiously or irreverently. In all senses, we can stop and appreciate the flow of matter, culture, or time, precisely because it has been disrupted.

It is no accident that many of the artists in **Flow** are captivated by the action and unpredictability of glaze, and find inventive techniques to harness its visual similarity to viscous liquid. Like an iceberg ripping through the pedestal underneath it, Tsubusa Kato's 2006 *Object* is an abstract form with a purposeful arc, formed in porcelain and enveloped in the artist's signature celadon glaze. Unlike the pristine bottles and bowls we ordinarily associate with this ancient clay and glaze combination, Kato's form is aggressive and non-utilitarian. But the abstraction only goes so far: though it does not intend to mimic a natural setting precisely, the piece clearly communicates to us that it is sharp, wind-blasted, and cold. Similarly cool to the eye is Ryan LaBar's machine-inspired, site-specific installation, *Mihaly's Drift*. LaBar's piece is the most directly responsive to the Baumgartner space of any in the exhibition, snaking its way from the wall onto the floor. He describes the clay components of this piece as “failures,” though they fail only in the sense that they melted a bit too much during firing, and this was intentional. The components lend the finished installation the distinct feeling of movement, almost illusory, as though the viewer must look twice to make sure the piece isn't really moving. Color drives the composition of Lauren Mabry's astonishing *Composition of Enclosed Cylinders*,

comprised of interchangeable elements. Most are glazed in brilliant hues, while some have been left only bisqued. The detail on each cylinder reveals whether it is installed upside down or right side up, and the direction of the glaze drips is the viewer's only real clue, subtly demonstrating a contradiction in "flow." The surfaces are animated with Mabry's painterly compositions, made to seem effortless through her masterful application of glaze.

Several artists engage nature directly in their work, through avenues as diverse as sound, the pattern of creatures swarming, plants, flowers, and raw clay itself. Responding to the natural site of the Museum, Jeffrey Mongrain's witty contribution is a black, undulating form entitled *Sound Wave Model for Milwaukee (Sculpted Quote from Santiago Calatrava, Architect for Milwaukee Art Museum)*. This wall piece is formed using the curve of a sound wave that has been spun around an axis. The resulting object resembles a high relief, monochromatic bullseye. The sound wave sample is derived from the Ojibwe word *ominowakiing*, "a gathering place near the water," believed to be the origin of the word Milwaukee. Linda Swanson's *Seep* is the only work in *Flow* to incorporate raw clay. Water slowly drips from a nylon tarp suspended above two neat piles of bentonite and iron. Over time, the iron oxidizes, turning the bentonite rust-colored. Though unfired, the clay undergoes a chemical change, remaining soft and reminiscent of wet earth.

Tsehai Johnson's installation *Swarm* takes the ordinary form of a cup and reimagines it as part of an army of airborne insects, amassing within a pattern and logic all its own. At once beautiful and slightly menacing, Johnson's work encourages a thought experiment in which we transpose the patterns we can see in the natural world onto the manmade objects that populate the scenery of daily life. Jae Won Lee occupies similarly ambiguous conceptual territory, somewhere between the manmade and the natural. Her arresting work *Seize the Flower in the Mirror* is part of a suite of sculptural projects in various media entitled *In Search of Streams and Mountains*. The series explores what she characterizes as "the acculturation of Eastern ideas in a Western environment." Using Song Dynasty poetry and traditional Chinese and Korean paintings and drawings as her guide, Lee reimagines the storied chrysanthemum as a steely, enduring creation, more elemental than organic. The black porcelain, faintly reminiscent of charcoal, has the effect of making a delicate form seem impervious to decay. Like Jae Won Lee, Rain Harris uses the form of the flower to explore her ideas in a cultural context, in this case the perception of poor taste. Deliberately choosing garish colors (in this case chartreuse), Harris teases out the design elements common to ordinary flowers, and assembles component parts into an object that reads as floral rather than natural. Each petal is encased in resin, giving the piece the look of an upholstered sofa covered in protective plastic.

Gestural flow runs through the creations of Chris Gustin, Beth Cavener, and Gerit Grimm. Gustin's work, which rarely strays from the vessel form, often suggests human posture and movement. Their impressive size often makes them seem unfamiliar as vessels, since one of the essential characteristics of a cup or a bowl is our ability to pick it up and use it. Gustin's forms are designed to contain only space. Beth Cavener, who is widely known for her moving and anthropomorphized portrayals of animals in varying states of distress, created *Tangled Up in You* for this exhibition. This sculpture depicts a muscular hare intertwined with a snake, both of which hang from the ceiling suspended by a chain. This work is pure potential energy: the

tattooed snake's curling body and the hare's inability to break free elicit a visceral response in the viewer, no less than a sudden awareness of a desire to breathe deeply. Cavener's work succeeds because she embraces the formal and narrative implications of her piece equally; the emotion registered on the face of the hare and the physical entanglement of the two animals sends the same urgent message. Gerit Grimm employs an unusual method of throwing cylinders on the wheel and assembling them into figurative sculptures. Where Cavener's forms appear sinewy and burly, Grimm's figures recall the hollow delicacy of a china doll, reimagined as a sturdy, stoneware creature.

While most of the artists in this exhibition interpreted the theme of *Flow* physically, as it concerns clay, glaze, or a natural phenomenon, others explored it metaphorically, through the lenses of history and time. The flow of time is powerfully felt in ceramics - indeed it can be nearly impossible to outrun. With thousands of years of historic inspiration from which to choose, it seems telling that five of the artists exploring the passage of time focused on European ceramics of the 17th and 18th centuries. Two of these, Chris Antemann and Arlene Shechet, completed residencies (MEISSEN artCAMPUS®) at the legendary MEISSEN Porcelain Manufactory in Germany, and their works in this exhibition, which could not be more different, were both created there. Antemann's *Paradise Chandelier* is part of a collection called *Forbidden Fruit*. Here, she has reimagined an existing porcelain chandelier by Johann Joachim Kändler, the model-master who worked for MEISSEN® in the middle decades of the 18th century, at the height of their Rococo glory. Antemann's interpretation has added elements: tiny figures, birds, flowers and plants, miniature dishes, and life-sized fruits (the symbolically fraught apple, pomegranate, and fig) hang from each arm. *Paradise Chandelier* plays with numerous ambiguities as references from one culture and time period flow into the next. Her selection of fruits suggests ancient stories from the Garden of Eden to the Persian Paradise Garden, but juxtaposed with 18th century lighting fixtures, they also suggest a nod to the *vanitas* tradition in Northern European painting. In this iteration, the symbolic fruits will never decompose. Arlene Shechet explored the rich material heritage of MEISSEN® during her residency with a different focus: forms and production methods. Working with original molds, she created works including *Overflowing*. What interested her most about the factory was the repository of overlooked and discarded objects. Assembling cast elements that bear the characteristic flourishes of MEISSEN® objects, Shechet fuses seemingly unrelated elements in a composition that is decidedly modern. Fused with blue glaze, one era flows into another. *Overflowing* bears a conceptual, if not aesthetic, similarity to Elenor Wilson's *American Tourister Still Life*. Wilson's sculpture is comprised of stacks of slip cast porcelain suitcases. Like Shechet's work, Wilson's *Still Life* contains recognizable objects, decontextualized: a soda bottle, a pair of high heels, an apple, and four ornately carved feet supporting it all. Both works elicit a melancholy sense of loss, and the care with which outmoded or cast-off objects are rendered is sharply poignant.

The only truly macabre piece in *Flow* is Michelle Erickson's porcelain work *Valentine*, which depicts the skeletons of two lovers that the artist describes as a "stone age Romeo and Juliet." One is rendered three dimensionally, and the other is depicted with cobalt painted on porcelain. Their remains were excavated on the eve of February 14th, 2007, and the position of their bodies suggests that they had an intimate relationship. Erickson's work calls to mind a convention of Northern European drawings and engravings, particularly in 16th century

Germany, when skeletons were widely featured bearing warnings and admonitions for the living. *Valentine* is perhaps not intended as a warning per se, but it does remind the viewer of life's transience, indeed the form of "flow" over which we have the least control. Equally corporeal is Del Harrow's *Air_Breath*, an installation that explores the idea of two pots that together suggest inhalation and exhalation, as though one were the deflated version of the other. Each pot, one a Song Dynasty vase and the other a British apothecary jar, was digitally scanned prior to undergoing reductive carving through use of a CNC machine. The resulting series of pots illustrates the movement of "breathing" that Harrow refers to - a metaphor commonly used in the descriptions of pottery forms. Whereas Harrow is concerned entirely with form and volume, Billie Theide's *Guise* plays with surface decoration across multiple vessels. Theide selects well-known commercial china patterns, in this case *Blue Willow*, *Fiesta*, and *Desert Rose* by Pfaltzgraff, then fabricates a "companion object" decorated with elements from each source plate. Like Harrow's work, in which pots appear to produce offspring, *Guise* suggest a new form of hybridization in which patterns can reproduce and pass on elements of their makeup, but cannot duplicate themselves in their entirety.

Three works in *Flow* seem almost to eschew physicality altogether in the pursuit of something transcendent. Jeanne Quinn, Jarred Pfeiffer, and France Goneau have each created installations in which small parts are deployed in the creation of a large, rhythmic pattern. Pfeiffer's *Torus 4* is comprised of 61 torus forms (the mathematical term for a ring resembling a doughnut), casting dramatic shadows that in turn create second and third layers of shapes. This forces the eye to toggle back and forth between the forms and their shadows as the viewer struggles to ascertain the depth of field. Without any movement of its own, *Torus 4* thus manages to become kinetic. Jeanne Quinn's installation, *True And Reasoned And Impure And Inexplicable*, is quite distinct in style from Pfeiffer's work, though she is exploring similar questions of depth and the layering of pattern in her installation. Quinn often draws inspiration from the design of lace and textiles in her work, using their patterns to explore the manipulation of space; often what characterizes her large-scale ceramic works is a dialogue between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional. That tension is at play in *True And Reasoned And Impure And Inexplicable*, which pairs a rigid, geometric pattern reminiscent of a Piet Mondrian painting with curvaceous design elements inspired by a lace pattern she studied at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Like Ryan LaBar's *Mihaly's Drift*, Quinn's installation was created with the Baumgartner space in mind, and makes a visual connection between the imagery of flowing water and flowing fabric. To evoke these images without actually using water or fabric, she draws a clear picture of the implied flowing movement using the spatial relationship between each component. The resulting installation gives the viewer a sense of water cascading downward over a modern, landscaped waterfall, or a lush fabric underskirt with a rigid structure that cannot contain it entirely. In Canadian artist France Goneau's installation *City*, which is the only piece in *Flow* that is kinetic, dozens of rich gray porcelain forms are suspended from black ribbon. Faintly resembling an urban landscape, *City's* ceramic components can be read as ultra-slim cinderblocks or as rows of windows, with the uneven lengths of ribbon evoking the tight chaos of a geometric skyline. Each of these three works communicates breadth, and make the viewer keenly aware of being smaller than the built environment, and nature itself. Visually, their hypnotic patterns return us to the feeling of being frozen in time, and being able to momentarily capture something that is, and should be, in flux. ■

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