

CERAMICS

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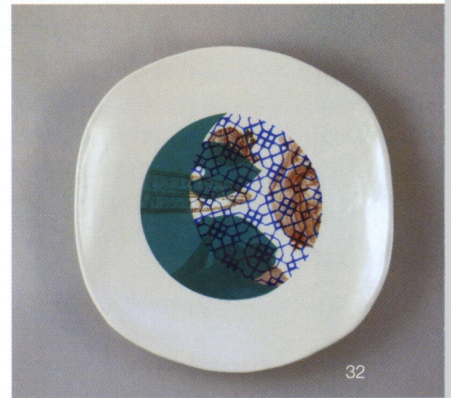
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Natura Viva VIII #1-4 Commercial Plates, laser decals, color sheet decals, vintage decals, gold luster, each plate 15 x 15 cm, 2013

I'LL MEET YOU THERE: THE WORK OF ANNA CALLUORI HOLCOMBE

TANYA HARTMAN

'As I turned to leave, I looked down. Beside my foot, a sprout of greenery was clawing its way through the pristine nothingness to begin anew....it had shown me that nothing is ever completely lost, unless you cease searching'. J.D. Strube, Epiphany

'Snow was falling,
 so much like stars
 filling the dark trees
 that one could easily imagine
 its reason for being was nothing more
 than prettiness'.
 —Mary Oliver, 'Snowy Night'

Anna Calluori Holcombe's current studio, located in North Central Florida, is striking; an oblong room, tidy and bright, filled with light from long windows that look out on a veritable jungle of verdant foliage and tropical flowers. Resting regally on a small dog bed is Smokie, an aging and ailing Cairn terrier. The sun pouring through the windows pools in warm puddles that sooth the dog's sore joints. The artist speaks gently to the quiet dog, helping her to stand and to hobble outside into the lush garden. The clean and tidy studio, its white walls in contrast to the frank and riotous beauty of the nature outside the windows, the vulnerability and decline of the animal in juxtaposition to the robust energy of the swooping birds and buzzing insects, all find their way into Holcombe's work, which addresses themes of the interconnectedness of creation, the finite and the infinite, and the distinction between prettiness and beauty.

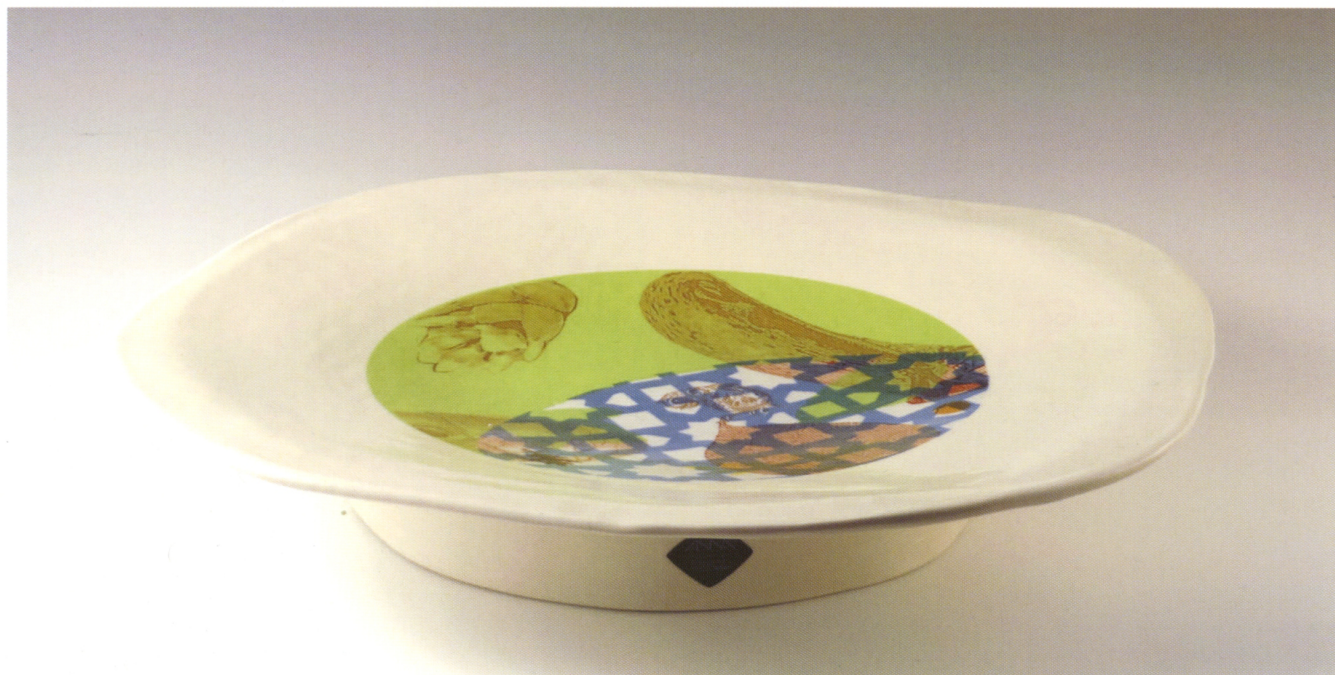


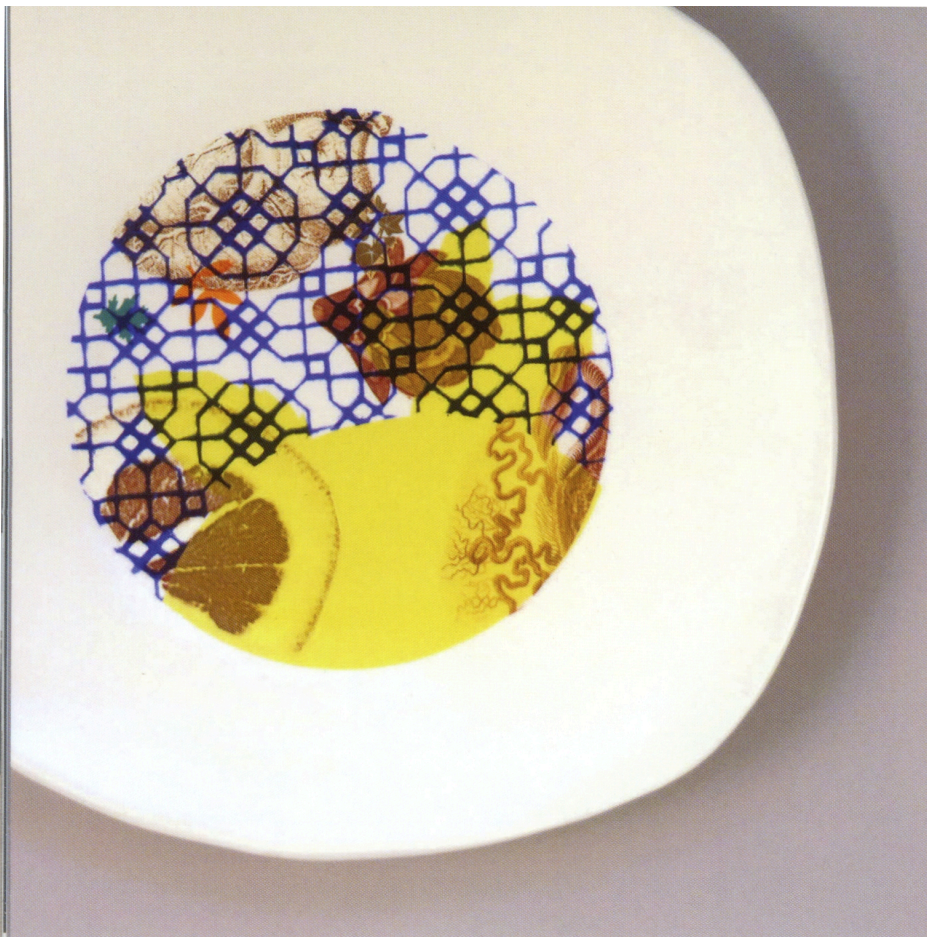
Natura Viva Series XI #8 Mid-range porcelain, slab and wheel off hump mold, laser, color sheet and silkscreen decals, 5 x 38 x 38 cm, 2014

The difference between prettiness and beauty is fascinating, and Anna Calluori Holcombe's work displays both attributes, an act of courage on the artist's part in a visual culture that currently prefers the facetious and the ironically unattractive. The concept of prettiness connotes innocence. It implies a love of the visually appealing as a conduit to straightforward pleasure and happiness. Beauty, however, hints at moral content. Something that is beautiful can be broken, but with a brokenness that is profound and that comments on human experience. A pretty object gives visual pleasure. A beautiful object uplifts. Anna Calluori Holcombe uses both beauty and prettiness as carriers for different sorts of meanings in her work. For this reason, her art is inherently spiritual.

Born in 1952 in Newark, New Jersey, Calluori Holcombe was raised by an Italian mother from a small town in southern Italy and an Argentinian-Italian father; a painter who left Argentina perhaps due to Peron coming into power. He died when Anna was just seven years old. Calluori Holcombe describes how she and her younger brother were protected from the loss: 'They shielded us from his dying. They protected us. We didn't see him on his deathbed. We never had closure'. Though it is a foolish exercise to attribute too much meaning to any one event in life, it does seem striking that Calluori-Holcombe so consistently layers images of nature over and under images of manmade objects, sometimes on manufactured plates, as if the stark fact of a natural but cataclysmic event (death) and the well-intentioned but possibly unnatural reaction to it (having it shrouded and hidden) are forever and subtly being alluded too in her work. For instance, in the recent series, *Natura Viva*, plates, pristine and white, are juxtaposed against decals that artfully layer patterns

Natura Viva Series XII #4 Mid-range porcelain, slab and wheel off hump mold, laser, color sheet and digital and decals, 5 x 38 x 38 cm, 2015





Natura Viva Series XII #9 Mid-range porcelain, slab and wheel off hump mold, laser, color sheet and digital and decals, 5 x 38 x 38 cm, 2015

collages, and was loosely quoted as having said that no work of art requires more than three colors. In Calluori Holcombe's work, decals are used as painterly collage. In *Natura Viva*, she limits her palette to just three dominant colors: rich burnt orange (applied in varied values), cobalt and beige. Tiny 'pops' of citron and aquamarine make minor appearances in the receding space behind the dominant images. The tension between the intense warmth of the orange pigments in contrast to the reserved cool of the cobalt accentuates the meaning of the imagery that is composed of a fragment of sacred geometry and half of a tomato. Two tiny leaves and a bit of another fruit complete the composition.

The Islamic decoration in *Natura Viva* series is not mere adornment, but a means to pull the viewer towards an awareness of a majestic and holy reality that lies just outside of human cognizance. And the tomato, halved and therefore somehow neutered, also seems infinite; ripe and filled with seeds, and bobbing like an orb, planet or sun at the edge of the composition. And yet, a tomato is a rather mundane object from daily life, a humble component of a meal. By using manufactured plates with human made decals, and placing all in provocative arrangements, the artist can speak poetically about how the ordinary and the profound are interwoven and can never be disentangled. Our experience of what is extraordinary in our lives is intimately interwoven with what is common. In Calluori Holcombe's work, even the white plate, an object so perennial as to be almost invisible, becomes a stand-in for the cosmos.

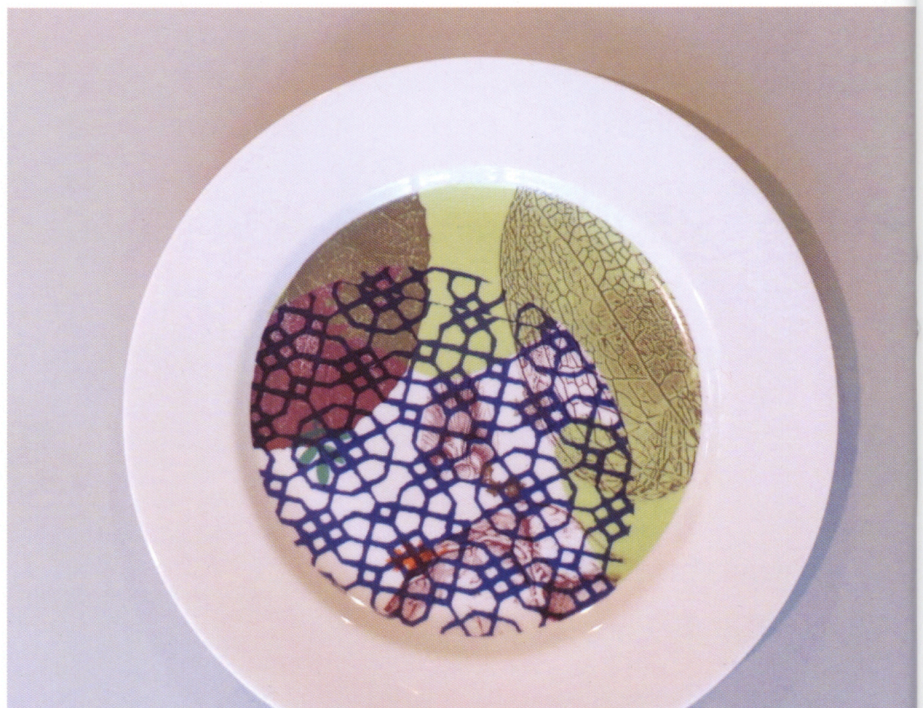
The motif of the ordinary in intimate juxtaposition to the mysterious runs throughout Calluori Holcombe's *Natura Viva* series, as well as her work as a whole. In

from sacred geometry or European decorative arts, with foliage and anatomical organs from the human body. Often, the veins and structures of nourishment in the foliage are collaged into the human organs, so that the image of a heart has the delicate and lace-like networks of plant systems running through it. The effect is poetic and subtle; showing the viewer that all living systems are interconnected, that emotions are intimately felt through observation of the natural world, and that lived experience is contained within a pure and infinite mystery.

So much is being communicated in the *Natura Viva* series that cannot be easily communicated, and yet is pertinent to human experience. In a piece from 2015, titled simply *Natura Viva*, a white plate is embellished with imagery that sits securely in its center, mandala-like. The edges of the plate are slightly imperfect, undulating in an organic manner that complements the mostly natural imagery and also alludes to the idea that this "plate" represents the immeasurable, its edges energetic with a rhythm that undulates ever outwards. And yet, it is merely a simple object. This inversion of expectation in Calluori Holcombe's work is very effective. What human hands make can be mysterious and suggest boundlessness. And nature, which is vast, can be contained as image, symbol and metaphor within human imagination.

Colour is used with great discipline in the *Natura Viva* series. Henri Matisse used limited palettes in his

Natura Viva VIII (5) Edition: 15 C-File Shop Commission
Porcelain, industrial plate, laser, digital and commercial decals, Ceramic Art Cart Mono-color Decal, hand cut, 2.5 x 27 cm, <https://cfileonline.org/cfile-shop-plates-anna-colluori-holcombe/>



a means to amplify the theme of the human made object as a stand-in for the mystical. Each work in the series is small, and the depth of the light boxes and use of three-dimensional objects in some of the works, gives the series the appearance of reliquaries.

In *Heart's Desire*, a small, gold heart, anatomically specific, is mounted against a backdrop that initially reads as abstract, atmospheric space. Yet, on closer inspection, it appears that the environment is a close up of a silk pillow, so that the heart rests gently in the ambivalent embrace of the domestic, which contains both 'Eros' and 'Thanatos' in equal measure. Light pours from behind the seemingly simple image and the stark white frame acts as a stand-in for heavens. The piece reminds me of a wonderful poem by the 13th Century Sufi poet and mystic Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase 'each other'
doesn't make any sense.

The use of the 'sacred' object, gilded in gold or created in porcelain, pressed against a background of anatomical illustrations of human guts, lit from behind and framed in simple and unadorned wood is another facet of the new work, and speaks differently to similar themes. Here, the objects seem to want to arch out of their edges, to transcend the physical and the coffin-like enclosures of the frames.



Natura Viva Lightbox Series I #1 PC substrate, laser decal, wood, porcelain, luster, LED lights, 17 x 23 x 6.5 cm, 2014
Photo credit: Cheuvront Studios

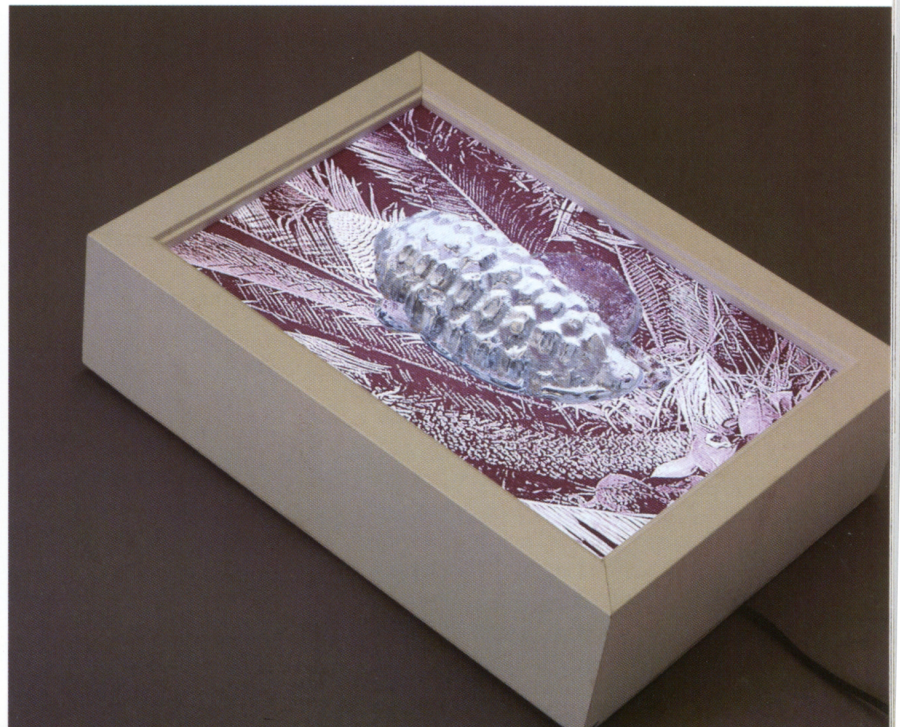


Calluori Holcombe's work is both pretty and beautiful. Well-constructed, technically sophisticated and thematically profound, the work can be experienced on multiple levels. At a glance, it is lovely; visually appealing and pleasure inducing, its botanical and anatomical forms seemingly innocuous and visually playful. But when carefully considered, it is instructive and possesses raw truthfulness. We strive to transcend our limitations, our vulnerable and finite bodies, and to experience a larger reality that allows us to focus on what, in each of us, is eternal. The writer and scholar Isaac Bashevis Singer is quoted as having said that the purpose of all art is first to entertain and then to edify. The work of Anna Calluori Holcombe does just that, allowing visual delight in conjunction with existential inquiry.

Tanya Hartman is an artist and writer living in the USA. Her writing and art can be viewed at www.tanyahartmanart.com



1213 PC substrate, laser decal, wood, cast glass, LED lights, 10 x 29 x 22 cm, 2014
Photo credit: Cheuvront Studios



Heart's Desire, PC Substrate, laser decal, 3D printed model, slip cast porcelain, gold luster, wood, with LED light, 13 x 23 x 23 cm, 2015 Photo credit: Cheuvront Studios