

# ceramics

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SUSAN BEINER'S

# *Garden of* UN-Earthly Delights

by Elizabeth Kozlowski

Looking back at history, I believe that this century will be defined by the continuous stream of fake news, which has unfortunately become an accepted form of reality, alongside an increased blurring of lines between the digital and the physical dimensions of our existence. What separates science-fiction fantasy from our technological marvels?

## **Stranger in a Strange Land**

The work of Susan Beiner is a formidable garden of un-earthly delights, paired with a visual depth achieved by few. It would be a disservice to lead with a singular comparison to the paintings of

Hieronymus Bosch, and the characteristically male (reflections from the art-historical canon), overtly sexual, and highly detailed narratives. Rather, I would liken her work to the prolific, yet undeniably cult science-fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* by American author Robert A. Heinlein. As an avid reader and science-fiction enthusiast, I've carried around a battered copy that lost its cover years ago. Published in 1961, it tells the story of Valentine Michael Smith, born during, and the only survivor of, the first manned mission to Mars. The novel takes its title from the scriptural verse Exodus 2:22 and Moses' reflections on fleeing Egypt. Notably, Heinlein's wife Virginia was an accomplished biochemist and engineer.





In her role as an educator, Beiner's enthusiasm knows no limits. As an artist, her personal practice is mindful and deliberate. In revisiting a career that spans decades, the notion of place has as much contextual influence as being raised by a chemist, surrounded by inquiries of the scientific world. Beiner was born in Newark, New Jersey, and raised in my namesake, the town of Elizabeth, New Jersey. Her father adopted the painstaking process of hybridizing and grafting flowers as a hobby. Beiner's artistic journey from industrial Detroit (Rock City) to the redwood forests of California, and eventually the desert mountain horizon of Arizona is an obvious source of material, as is her upbringing.

### A Rise of Questions

Buried within her expansive landscapes are questions about what is of the natural world and/or birthed from synthetic manufacture. Clay and other ceramic materials are naturally derived, mined from depths under the surface of earth we tread upon daily. Plastic, foam, and acrylic materials are a result of man's industrial aptitude, rarely produced with any regard to their devastating consequences. Our landfills are over-run with Styrofoam to-go boxes and discarded remnants of fast-fashion and industrial waste.

Appropriately, Beiner is able to move beyond the dystopian world of global manufacture and present a different point of view; a hybrid world saved by an ecosystem able to adapt and evolve from the detritus of human wreckage. She left the singular object behind long ago and now delves into massive installations, growing in size from one iteration to the next, much like the flora she depicts. *Synthetic Reality* (2009), her first foray into large-scale work takes up 252 square feet of wall space. Slip-cast forms from 50 different plaster molds are altered and assembled into various configurations, much like the grafting of a new plant species. Beiner continuously expands her visual footprint, including the floor of the gallery in *Organic Dissolution* (2013). The installation covers a space roughly 8x8 feet and weighs in at 600 pounds. The stark white accumulation of clay is bursting with porcelain flora,



**Opposite:** *Organic Dissolution*, 22 ft. (6.7 m) in width, porcelain, mixed media, glazes, gas fired to cone 6, 2013. **1, 2** *Hive Expanded* (room corner and detail), 60 ft. (18 m) in length, porcelain, wood, graphite, beeswax, house paint, glazes, gas fired to cone 6, 2017. **1, 2** Photos: Daniel Christian.

whose lack of color is a nod to the sterile environments of our daunting future. We are able to glimpse inside Beiner's creative process, laden with a scientific and artistic vision—one of meticulous observation and execution. It is a "controlled chaos of sorts," to quote the artist.<sup>1</sup>

According to the US Census Bureau, our global population is expected to grow to nearly 10 billion by 2050. Our food chain is being exploited and our ecological systems are suffering from the strain. Accordingly, farmers need every available tool to produce more food sustainably. Seeds from more than 5000 species of crops are being held in preservation at Svalbard Global Seed Vault, located 800 miles from the North Pole. It is a glaring opposition to the genetically modified (GM) food supplied by engineering giant Monsanto, which controls 80 percent of the GM corn market and 93 percent of the GM soy market ([www.organicconsumers.org](http://www.organicconsumers.org)).

### Presenting a Different Point of View

How did we get here? Besides the obvious and uncurbed growth in human population, I would argue from a quite familiar compulsion of getting lost in the making process—and ending up with a mountain of clay components used to construct an alternate reality.



A recent collaboration with scientists at Arizona State University (ASU) School of Life Sciences (SOLS) and ASU BioDesign provides a lens through which Beiner can explore and further analyze her artwork. Her newest body of work is a subtle shift toward the containment of nature, rather than the wild landscapes of previous work. It has evolved into a presentation of organic versus artificial plant life via cross-pollination and genetic engineering. The plant forms are colored either by vibrant artificial hues or a muted white, indicating sterilization and decay by genetic engineering experiments.

Conversely, our ecological balance is not being maintained and, as a result, Beiner is increasingly concerned about the changes in the environment caused by hybrids, cloning, and other non-natural laboratory processes. We can all foresee possible and serious consequences for not only our living environment, but also for our collective health. Beiner constructs visual representations, illustrated through form and confrontation, of these consequences. The foundation of her research is based upon the altruistic goal of bioengineering plants to create improvements in crop production

and yield to benefit the global population, as well as to minimize the potential health risks of genetically altered plants.

A number of hybridized food and nutritional systems have recently been linked to many rampant health problems including obesity, heart disease, and even cancer. Watch one episode of *Rotten*, produced by Netflix, and you will shudder at the severity of our physical impact upon the natural environment. The recent de-colorization and death of vast areas of coral reefs is attributed to global warming (a man-made phenomenon) and increased levels of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere and oceans. Visual representations of these harmful industrial byproducts are embedded in Beiner's artwork as warnings.

### Inspiration from the Physical Environment

In 2016, Beiner and her partner discovered a colony of bees following renovations on their home. The bees moved in freely and constructed their hives in and around a scrap pile. A local bee farmer was contacted and subsequently found over 30,000 honey bees living amongst the wood. Beiner was able to suit up and experience the mesmerizing practice of smoking and calming bees. They were guided onto wooden frames and relocated to a honey farm in Phoenix. She observed first-hand the organized clumps and clusters that had been built on wooden panels while bees were swarming around her head.

The internal structure of a beehive is a densely packed group of cells called a honeycomb. The bees use the cells to store food and to house the brood (eggs, larvae, and pupae).

Beiner's piece *Grown Over Pattern* finds its beginnings in the honeycomb structure. Each wall unit within the installation represents a cell grown over, occurring long after the bees have been forced to abandon the colony. The installation situates thriving flora onto plywood panels. Muted hues are applied to numerous hybrid plant forms with glimpses of red to attract bees to the process of pollination. *Hive Expanded* continues the conversation with geometric patterns in ceramic form. Graphic details on the surface of the panels provide a microscopic view of the process of plant growth. Lime-colored, spindly forms sprout from the walls of the gallery space. Directional black lines map the dividing and expanding cells.

Each visual frame reinforces the landscape formed and then abandoned by the bees. Hexagonal shapes extend across and complete the honeycomb while others leave cells empty, mimicking the eventual loss of its host. Habitually, Beiner returns to her physical environment for inspiration and guidance. *Hive Expanded* highlights the growth, reproduction, and proliferation of plants and insects with a desire to educate the global community about sustaining an ecological balance.

### A Sense of Life and Growth

I was pleased to discover that Beiner's more recent work (shared while still in-progress) substitutes the colors of the honeycomb and surrounding overgrowth, in favor of the more luscious and saturated hues of previous work. Color choices are often indicative of context. However, I would argue that Beiner's work is at its strongest, both



3, 4 *Allium Sensation* (center section and detail), 22 in. (56 cm) in height, porcelain, glazes, fired to cone 6 in a gas kiln, wood panel, 2018. Photos: Tim Bailey. 5 *Synthetic Reality*, 28 ft. (8.5 m) in length, porcelain, glazes, fired to cone 6 in a gas kiln, 2008. Photo: Daniel Swadener. 6 (*Three Hives*) *HIVE: Grow Over Pattern*, porcelain, glazes, fired to cone 6 in a gas kiln, wood panel, 2016. 7 *Allium Sensation*, 35 in. (89 cm) in height, porcelain, glazes, fired to cone 6 in a gas kiln, wood panel, 2018.

visually and contextually, when you can sense the life and simultaneous growth occurring through a more dynamic color palette.

Beiner's work embodies a moment in time, the genesis of a hybrid form, the symbiotic relationships that define the world we live in—and lastly, the determination and foresight necessary to survive. To that end when writing about Beiner's work, the author Andrew Buck insightfully articulates that “sustainability suggests vulnerability,” our vulnerability, which may eventually necessitate colonization on the moon or Mars; at least in my science-fiction world.<sup>2</sup> Am I stating anything new? Perhaps not. However, I will freely suggest that the main idea of Susan Beiner's work is to provide hope—and the promise of a better future with a discerning human hand. Do you Grok?<sup>3</sup>

**the author** *Elizabeth Kozlowski is an independent curator and writer with a specialty in contemporary ceramics. Her most recent exhibition, “Material Domestication,” debuts at the Museum of Craft and Design, San Francisco, in 2019. Kozlowski has a masters degree with honors in museum studies from the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University and a BFA from Florida Atlantic University. To learn more, contact Kozlowski at ekozlowskiarts@gmail.com.*

1 Buck, A. “Organic Dissolution, An Installation by Susan Beiner.” *Ceramics Monthly*, (March 2013), 45.

2 *Ibid.*, 46.

3 Robert Heinlein first introduces the term “grok” on p. 142 of “Stranger in A Strange Land,” during a conversation between characters Valentine Michael Smith and Jubal about gender. Both Merriam-Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary define “grok” as “to understand profoundly, intuitively or by empathy.”

# mid-range glazes

Susan Beiner shares cone 6 sculptural glazes that work great in combination, while Yoko Sekino-Bové shares a reliable celadon green glaze for use in oxidation.

34  
ARTICLE

44  
ARTICLE



1



2



3



4

## Susan Beiner's Recipes

### GREEN APPLE (1, 2)

Cone 6-7 Oxidation

Barium Carbonate	16.0 %
Whiting	11.0
Nepheline Syenite	41.0
EPK Kaolin	11.0
Silica	21.0
	<hr/>
	100.0 %

Add: Chrome Oxide . . . . . 0.5 %  
Copper Carbonate . . . . . 0.5 %

This glaze is applied in a medium-thick application and fired to a hot cone 6 in a gas kiln. Not food safe.

### TURQUOISE MATTE (1, 2)

Cone 6-7 Oxidation

Barium Carbonate	23.53 %
Lithium Carbonate	4.90
Nepheline Syenite	58.82
Grolleg Kaolin	5.89
Silica	6.86
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	100.00 %

Add: Copper Carbonate . . . . . 2.94 %

This glaze is applied in a medium-thick application and fired to a hot cone 6 in a gas kiln. This glaze is not food safe.

### MY #3 MATTE (1, 2)

Cone 6-7 Oxidation/Reduction

Barium Carbonate	3.37 %
Whiting	15.73
Ferro Frit 3134	2.25
Kona F-4 Feldspar*	39.33
Nepheline Syenite	23.60
EPK Kaolin	15.72
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	100.00 %

Add: Zinc . . . . . 7.87 %

This is a matte base glaze that works well with stains and oxides. Not food safe. \*Substitute Minspar 200 Feldspar for Kona F-4 Feldspar, which is no longer mined.

### RUDY'S OPAL (1, 2)

Cone 6 Oxidation/Reduction

Whiting	15.05 %
Gerstley Borate	9.68
Custer Feldspar	43.01
EPK Kaolin	8.60
Silica	23.66
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	100.00 %

Add: Zinc . . . . . 7.53 %

Application can be thin to medium thick. This is a transparent base glaze that works well with stains and oxides.

I use several heavily fluxed base glazes combined with a variety of Mason stains, rare earth oxides, and encapsulated pigments to create palettes of color to glaze in a more painterly manner. Multiple glazes overlap, which influences how the glazes move across the forms. I am continually testing glazes and looking for interesting overlaps. Glaze application is done with a spray gun and bulb syringe. I draw with glaze using a bulb syringe to further increase the mixing and melting of the glazes.

## Yoko Sekino-Bové's Recipe

### FAKE KOREAN CELADON GLAZE (3, 4)

Cone 5-6 Oxidation

Gillespie Borate	30.0 %
Minspar 200 Feldspar	46.0
EPK Kaolin	13.0
Silica	11.0
	<hr/>
	100.0 %

Add: Iron Chromate . . . . . 0.5 %  
Copper Carbonate . . . . . 0.5 %

You can use any soda feldspar you have and any Gerstley borate substitute, but always test first.

1, 2 Susan Beiner's *Everlasting Revolution*, 3 ft. 4 in. (1 m) in height, porcelain, glazes, fired to cone 6 in a gas kiln, 2008. 3, 4 Yoko Sekino-Bové's sushi platter set, platter: 15 in. (38 cm) in diameter, small plates: 4½ in. (11 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown and altered mid-range porcelain, Fake Korean Celadon Glaze, sprayed, fired to cone 5-6, 2018. 3, 4 Photos: Charlie Cummings Gallery.

Want to test more mid-range glaze recipes? Looking for recipes at different temperature ranges? Visit <http://ceramicrecipes.org>.