



View of the hall with the commercial stands

CONFLUENCE NCECA 2023

JUDITH S. SCHWARTZ

NCECA is an amazing confluence of ceramic enthusiasts. There is something for everyone, regardless of entry point or level of engagement. This year, the NCECA convention (the National Council for Education in the Ceramic Arts) was held in Cincinnati,

Ohio, an area rich in ceramic history. Although I am a veteran of these meetings, having attended more than 30 of them, I continue to be amazed how the organizers seem to create a new theme for the convention year after year that sparks the imagination.

Megumi Naitoh, bisque



This year I was particularly impressed with the sensitivity to social change, with more people of color participating in all areas than ever before - from exhibitions, lectures, demonstrations, to emerging talent. Clearly, NCECA has made a conscious effort to provide a platform for various ethnicities, backgrounds, and cultures.

This was further reinforced by the opening ceremony, which acknowledged the region's First Peoples - The Eastern Woodland Indian Tribe, an indigenous group who contributed much to the region's clay industry, first with construction materials and later to manufactures such as the Rookwood Pottery, an endeavor that became so successful that Cincinnati became known in the 1890s as the Paris of America.

Both the opening and closing keynotes were unusual with the renowned artists Rose B. Simpson opening, and her mother Roxanne Swentzell closing with lectures filled with metaphor and depth of feeling as each explored their extraordinary figurative work.

This brief report will now focus on the work seen in the major exhibitions.

I start with the *NCECA Annual* as it is considered the bellwether of the shows. This year the multitasking curator, writer, educator and artist, Garth Johnson, installed a particularly thoughtful exhibition that focused on the vessel. This was a much needed theme since the majority of members show a steadfast commitment to this humble form and constitute the core interest, yet it is often given little focus in exhibitions. Johnson invited 6 artists known for their commitment to the vessel: Beth Lo, Jeff Oestreich, James Watkins, Stephen Creech, Bari Zipstein, and Natasha Smoke Santiago. Their skilled and mature understanding of the vessel conveyed superb mastery and an exciting range of expression.

The 43 other artists included were taken from a juried pool and their work reinforced the vessel commitment in ways that were revelational, ranging from quirky videos to interactive social projects. I was particularly impressed with the tour de force crocheted colored porcelain socks of **Jeremy Brooks**,

with its implied sexual orientation.

The digital video of **Katheryn Baczeski** and the stop motion video of Megumi Naitoh both were delightful journeys that explored clay's plasticity and liquid states.

Colleen Toledano drew influence from Wedgwood and Sèvres by creating a tri-vessel that paid homage to her nucleus family that conjured memory and tenderness. Certainly, the vessel could not be in better hands than in the unmistakable stylistic moniker of **Jim Connell** vessels – forms that he has been nurturing for more than 40 years. His deeply carved surfaces, impeccably incised, fired and

then sandblasted are sheer beauty in motion on perfectly balanced forms.

There were many amazing contributions too numerous to describe in this brief overview, but collectively the entire show gave this particular annual special appeal. How marvelous to find the venerated vessel given a spotlight with such a glorious tribute. As Garth Johnson aptly stated in his catalog essay, "How can this, the most tangible of objects, serve to connect us in a time of isolation? This is just one of the profound contradictions that reveals how profoundly the vessel is intertwined with our DNA."

The next shows deserving attention were the *NCECA Juried Student Exhibition* and the *Multicultural Fellowship Exhibition*. They were spaciouly and brilliantly installed at galleries at the University of Cincinnati. Natalia Arbelaez, a Columbian American artist, and Wesley Brown, a Black American artist, were curators of the student show, and they made a conscious effort to focus on being inclusive of diverse cultural backgrounds, introducing new voices from a younger and under-recognized population. The works selected used a variety of mediums - fiber, wood, sequins and found

Eugene Agyei, *Outside Beauty*

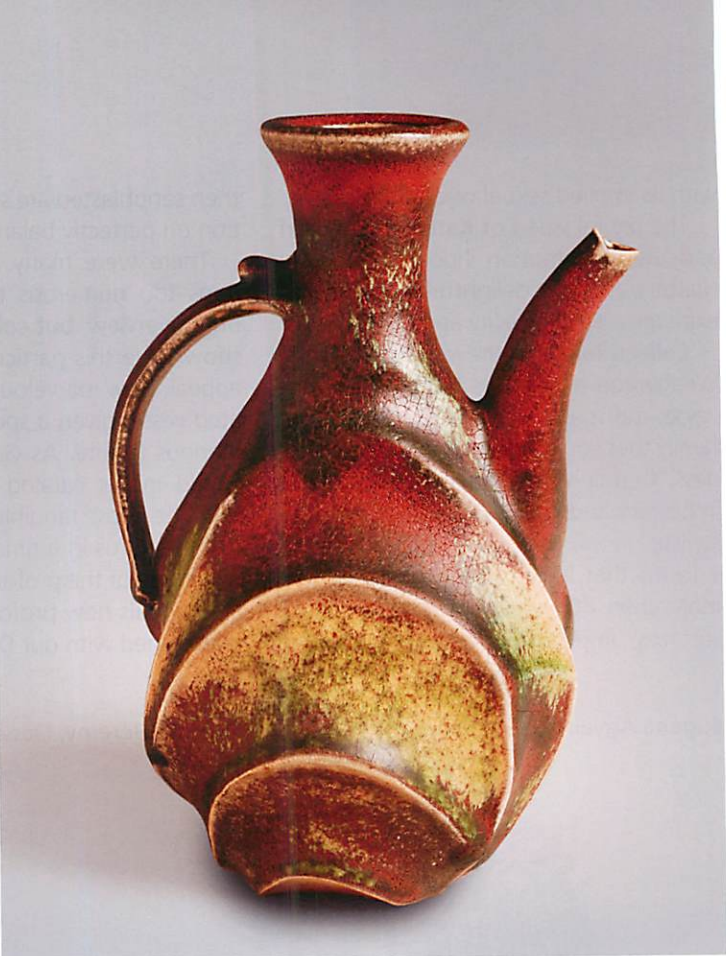


Brooks, Jeremy, *Crossed Swords (Condoms)*



Brooks, Jeremy, *My Cup Runneth Over (Pink Sock)*





Jim Connel

objects, even acrylic surfaces – to convey meaningful connotation and rich imagery. One typical example was the Ghanaian artist **Eugene Agyei**, who drew on the brightly patterned and colorful Batik cloth prevalent in his native country. His mixed-media work, *Outside Beauty*, coalesced the myriad rich hybrid mix of identity and migration that permeates his culture.

Space does not allow me to elaborate more about this show, but it would be worth the readers’ time to access this show (and in fact, all the exhibitions) online to see the variety and extent of this new wave of talent coming from our teaching institutions. This younger generation seems to be concerned with identity, technology, sustainability, re-

lationships, feelings of isolation and repercussions still felt from our global pandemic. The show was both heart-warming and inspirational. The *Multicultural Fellowship Exhibition* curated by Kelly Phelps and Kyles Phelps is a relatively new initiative again bubblingly up from the grass root organizers of NCECA’s leadership to specifically uncover, sup-

Kathryn Baczeski, Hieroglyph-1



port and give voice to and repair neglect of these underrepresented populations of ceramic artists. Work in the show ranged from functional vessel forms to sculptural works and ran the gamut from impeccable detail to strange and unnerving imagery. Certainly, the effort to give exposure to the underrepresented is to be applauded and I hope will continue.

Of course, the K-12 exhibition has for years been a joyful event where work is arranged according to age level and where "free play" is self-evident. It is certainly a place where, as the architect Frank Gehry acknowledged, "the creator casts caution to the winds, experiments and remains childlike". It is this sense of playfulness, daring, joy and experimentation that makes the K-12 so popular and where I saw a steady flow of viewers no matter when I entered the room.

There was one further exhibition at the convention that was unique to this year's offerings and that was the ingenious idea of an organization called the Curated Storefront, based in Athens Ohio. The Curated Storefront is also the home for the newly reestablished Clayton Bailey Museum and is directed by the renowned art collector Rick Rodgers. The state of Ohio is particularly known for its large low fire clay deposits that fueled Ohio's famous pottery industry and has also been the basis of numerous teaching institutions that have first-rate ceramics departments.

While Ohio State University is perhaps the best known, Mr Rogers gathered over

100 artists' work from diverse northeast Ohio institutions including the Cleveland Institute of Art, the Baldwin Wallace University and the Youngstown State University, to name a few, and trucked the work and pedestals for this impromptu show. In addition, it was a treat to see Clayton Bailey's work on view again in his World of Wonders Museum.

NCECA continues to endure, surprise and delight. It had managed to embrace social change and has amply demonstrated that it can survive a pandemic. Interestingly, it is now possible to "attend" online, with an app that is a joy to navigate. Of course, it cannot replace the chance encounters and the opportunity to make new friend that only an on-site presence can provide, but it clearly is the next best thing.

All in all, this year's NCECA convention, with its diversity and scope, can be considered a success. I am certain the more than 5,500 who attended would likely agree.

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Coleen Toledano, Ripe2, 2022

Elaine and Richard O'Henry at the New Ceramics stand

