

# Crafting Identity

## Heidi McKenzie's "Family Matters"



Text by Lera Kotsyuba



Art by Heidi McKenzie

There is a familiarity and wonder to objects that you can hold in your hands. Heidi McKenzie's work occupies the liminal space between the familiar and fine craft, with objects that recall domestic furnishings, childhood toys, and the all-important photograph. Familiar objects elevated into ceramics. Touch, with its haptic nature, its presence in an echo of an object, recalls what we have lost and what has become all the more precious to us because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This sense of touch is one of the key ways in which we relate to family and one another. In her 2019 exhibition "Family Matters", last summer at the Gardiner Museum Shop in Toronto, McKenzie explored familial ties and her own mixed-race identity through the lens of domestic objects by an implied tactile nature inherent to clay. "Family Matters" is a deeply personal narrative, decolonizing the gallery space: the body of work exalts family history in placing the image as a form of public archive, and as a form of reclaiming public space, wherein family narrative is interwoven with

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Body Interrupted (Detail), 30cm x 28cm x 0.7cm, earthenware, glaze, iron-oxide ceramic decal, 2016, photo credit: Heidi McKenzie

Working in porcelain and earthenware, McKenzie's highly technical process of multiple firings, raku firings, transforming photo images into iron oxide decals all highlight a focus on haptic and visual connection. Investigating family histories through personal photo archives, McKenzie credits an inclination for geometric forms that inform her process<sup>1</sup>. In her body of work, McKenzie's investigation of dual identities and mixed-race heritage coalesce into uncanny geometric forms, from polyhedron blocks, playing cards, and a hanging mobile that give glimpses into the lives of people we do not yet know, but will by the end of the exhibition.

Beginning with "House of Cards" (2019), thin porcelain pieces are stacked atop one another in a tower, the face of each card a photograph. In an allegory of fragility, McKenzie connected her investigations into her family's history which yielded a photograph of her great-great grandmother, who came from Calcutta to Guyana circa 1865 to work as an indentured labourer<sup>2</sup>, to the fragility of her father's immigration to Canada to build a new home. Illuminated in the porcelain tiles, given the familiar shape of playing cards easily recognizable and familiar to the eye, the narratives intersect. In applying images to an unglazed surface, McKenzie draws attention to the haptic experience of clay through a visual medium. The body of work of "Family Matters" sublimated her ideas from the Australian Triennale's theme of "Holding Space, Making Place" in 2019, bringing McKenzie's family's immigrant histories into the public eye by weaving narrative and clay forms together. The impetus for the work is auto-biographical<sup>3</sup>, as McKenzie interweaves family history with historical trauma, manifested in both the clay and in the human body.

"Body Interrupted"<sup>4</sup> (2016), a hanging mobile with fragmented images of Joseph Addison McKenzie, the artist's father, a parallax between photographs from his life and his fragmented body in a state of an eternal present, bearing the physical marks of his life. The fragile nature of suspended clay mimics the fragility of the human body and of memory, a tangible physical presence with an inherent vulnerability. A mobile hangs suspended, moving in a shift of breeze, marking the importance of a physical presence for movement, tying the viewer into the piece itself even without physical touch. McKenzie relates her father's physical struggles with her own, and pairs this work with "Moving Forward" (2016), later renamed "Boxed In", depicting fragments of her own body on polyhedron blocks that were slip cast, as illness had prevented her from throwing on a wheel<sup>5</sup>. Creating an archive through images, McKenzie works through and links her physical body to the clay body, and herself to her father through a visual language of absence and presence. A synecdoche for connection, "Boxed In" (2016) is a conversation between the physical body, the immediacy of geometric form colliding with our visual understanding of the intimate nature of a hand, the echo of memory in a gaze, each work connected as if seeking one another. Absence depicted on blank facets, jarring and devoid of the familiarity of the body, a severing of connection. McKenzie's work does not shy away from pain, her work leans into discomfort to confront a pointed absence, a painful presence, and the ever-present spectre of colonization. McKenzie's work is the making of memory through images and the familiarity of objects rendered in clay.



House of Cards, 40cm x 60cm x 11.5cm, porcelain ceramic substrate, iron-oxide ceramic decal, 2019, photo credit, courtesy of Latcham Art Gallery.



Moving Forward, 11cm x 11cm x 11cm "cubes", porcelain/iron-oxide ceramic decal, 2015, photo credit: Dale Roddick

Confronting dual identities in "Postmarked" (2017), McKenzie explores Canadiana in archival images on a tetra decahedron, 14 sides that are not symmetrical. The form is rendered in porcelain, a stronger medium but one that shatters more easily, at odds with its scale and form which on first glance invites touch. There is an inherent stability in geometric forms that juxtapose with the inherent fragility of clay that also can be extrapolated to identity, which is as fluid as a sense of self. A self that is made of memory and one's perception of our place in the world, changing through new information as if shifting the sides of a polyhedral die. McKenzie's "Postmarked" showcases postage stamps alongside family photographs, wherein she is relegated to the margins on an object that is reminiscent of childhood toys, overwhelmed by symbols of Canadiana. Here McKenzie's reclamation of childhood object is in conversation with the nature of the fragile clay body of the polyhedron, its fragility tied to the notion of a fixed identity, its imposition and shifting nature a commentary on immigrant identity that McKenzie explores in her body of work. This theme is continued into the porcelain forms of "Building Blocks" (2018-2019), as a fusion of her Indo-Trinidadian and Irish ancestry, wherein photographs overtake each facet of the geometric forms in equal measure. Each piece can be continuously reconfigured in their placement to shift the narrative. The maker's hand is evoked in the imperfection of the handbuilt slabs<sup>6</sup>, McKenzie's touch is prevalent in the work, each block bearing the mark of touch, as well as visually inviting it.



Building Blocks (Detail), prisms: 28 cm x 14cm x 14cm; half-cylinder: 14cm x 14cm x 7cm, stoneware, iron-oxide decal, 2020, photo credit: Ali Kazimi

The deeply personal work is not easily digestible, and showcases the multifaceted labour of working in clay, in family history, and in the trauma of colonization that presides over the work. A response to everyday life, rather than confronting colonial attitudes, McKenzie's work revels in family history<sup>7</sup> as a response to the acts of care in everyday life. McKenzie has recently evolved the work into a new series that focuses on Indo-Caribbean indentureship more generally: "Division" (2020) and "Illuminated" (2020), a room screen and lanterns that continue with archival photographic images onto domestic objects, imbuing the metaphorical home with recently uncovered family history. A technical feat of ceramics in hand-built porcelain slabs, the slowing the kiln cooling process<sup>8</sup>, all showing the act of tremendous care in bringing a family history to the public eye. "Family Matters" is an exploration and confrontation of McKenzie's ties to mixed-race identity, and invites us to examine

<sup>1</sup> Phone Interview with Heidi McKenzie, August 18th, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> This work was not on display at the Gardiner Museum due to technical restrictions but forms part of the body of work of "Family Matters".

<sup>5</sup> Phone Interview with Heidi McKenzie, August 18th, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Heidi McKenzie credits potter Angelo di Petta with giving her the idea to make her own tiles.



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