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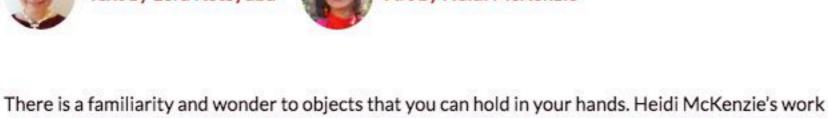
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## Heidi McKenzie's "Family Matters"

Art by Heidi McKenzie Text by Lera Kotsyuba





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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her process 1. 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.

clay and in the human body.

of objects rendered in clay.

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 2, 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 autobiographical<sup>3</sup>, as McKenzie interweaves family history with historical trauma, manifested in both the

"Body Interrupted" 4 (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

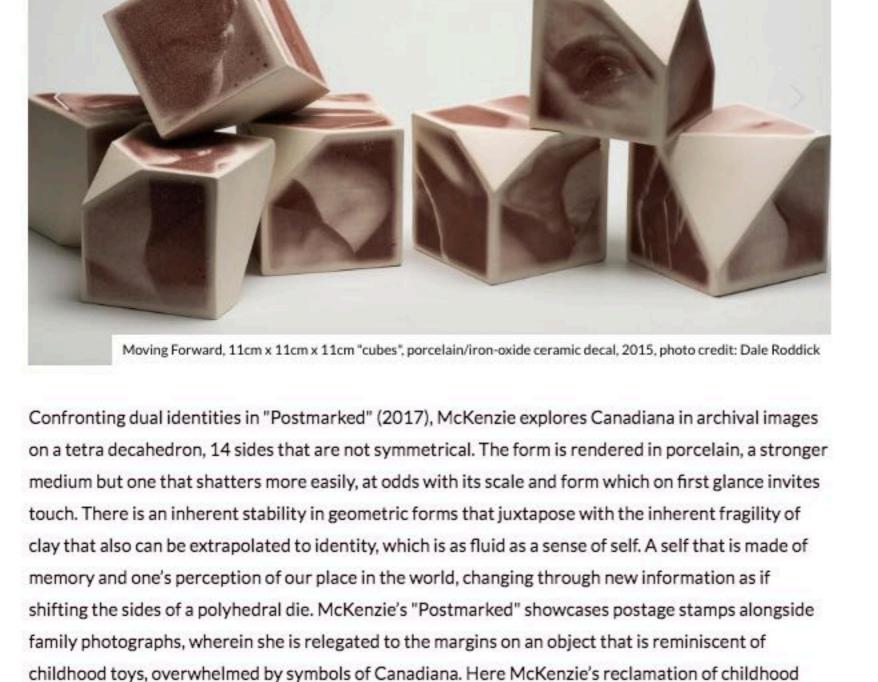
Beginning with "House of Cards" (2019), thin porcelain pieces are stacked atop one another in a tower,

the face of each card a photograph. In an allegory of fragility, McKenzie connected her investigations

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 5. 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



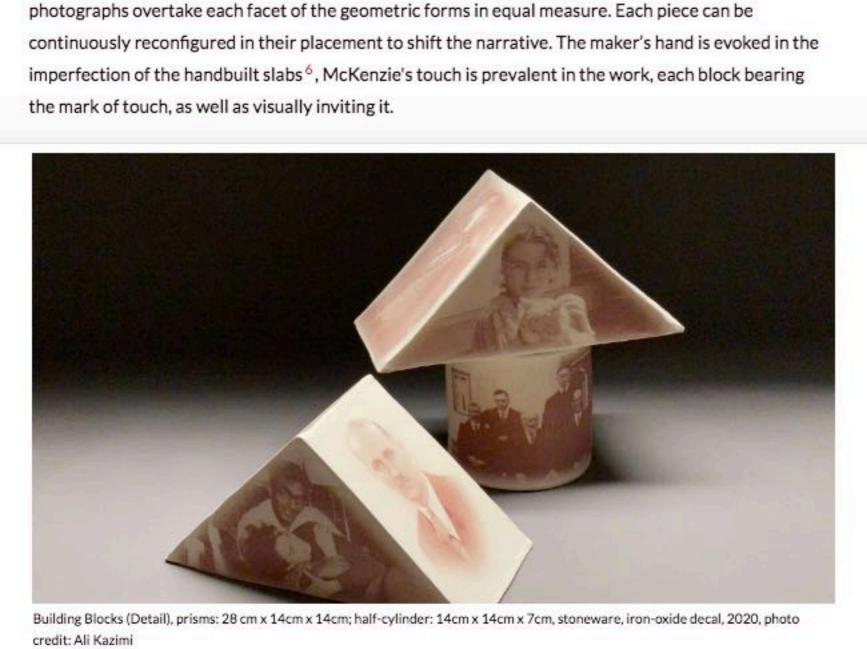


object is in conversation with the nature of the fragile clay body of the polyhedron, its fragility tied to

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



The deeply personal work is not easily digestible, and showcases the multifaceted labour of working in

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 8, 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. 2 Ibid.

clay, in familial 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 as

6 Ibid. 7 Ibid.



Editor of Studio Magazine and has been working across disciplines in architectural history and craft. View bio.

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<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.

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