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Wedging clay with feet after slaking down and drying by evaporation.

Sarawak Pottery

by Bruce Dehnert

I have a householder in mind, head of a large family, who sold his freedom, along with that of his wife and children, for the paltry sum of f 650 he owed, rather than parting with a Belanga jar he owned, even though £3,500 was offered to him for it in my presence.

T.H. Perelier, Borneo, 1870.

Like many things in the history of pottery production, use, and trade in Borneo, little is known of when it all began, or even where. What is known is that this large jungle island smack in the center of the South China Sea has been the place of several ceramics traditions through the ages, and the pots that have been the center pieces of those traditions have enjoyed a remarkable status. The indigenous pottery tradition, that of the Dayaks and the Oran Ulu ("bumiputra" groups of several aboriginal ethnic tribes), was estimated to have begun at least 3000 years ago. Examples of their work have been found in silent, mysterious places like the Niah Caves, among the world's great mammoth caves carved through startling limestone cliffs a balmy day's travel by longboat from the northern coast of Sarawak.

In this corner of Southeast Asia, history is told through artifacts,

dance, music, and storytelling. The dates recorded on the face of history, as in the West, are irrelevant here. Like the origin of pottery tradition, so too is the birth date of a child forgotten. Only when that child is married or a *pusaka/pasu* (pot) is either traded for or purchased, is a date acknowledged or possibly noted. There are still a handful of Oran Ulu and Dayak potters coiling, scraping and paddling their generously round, thin cooking pots out of sandy earthenware, but most have given way to cheap, bright plastic or aluminum cookware portaged over the rugged highlands of the interior from Kalimantan, Indonesia. Regrettably, yet understandably, it doesn't bode well for the *bumiputra* potter.

Tucked amongst the steamy mangrove swamps of western Sarawak, on the smoky fringe of Kuching, however, there grows a different tradition. With its date of origin spanning back hundreds of years, the Chinese *pusaka* trade and subsequent production is expanding, not shrinking, from the economic constraints felt up the rivers that run brown with muddy erosion from enormous timbering activities.

In recent years there has been a curious renaissance of sorts in the pottery trade. Kuching, a hyperactive port city bristling with Sikh, Buddhist, and Hindu temples, Islamic mosques, and Catholic cathedrals, is the hub of that resurgence. With its silky, white stoneware clay, this city sports more than a dozen large family-owned potteries and a recently opened Institute of Ceramic Research. But long before the Malaysian government kick-started one of the world's most aggressive development schemes, the Chinese were doing business with the Oran Ulu

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Decorating vase form, Sarawak Pottery Centre, Kuching, Sarawak.

and the Dayaks, and an important commodity in that relationship was the pottery.

Chinese junks from the southern provinces of China were the first to brave monsoon seas bringing the bulbous, thick-lipped jars to Borneo sometime in the 12th century. These jars, with their five looped handles cast in the likeness of dragons and beasts, were covered with plump ash glazes that virtually dripped in rich hues of honey, deep red iron, mellow celadon blues, and even a marvelous soft glaze with the appearance of fresh lime. These junks, often hounded by pirates and destined for ports in India and the Middle East, would call into northern Borneo anchorages in order to service the wealthy Sultanates before navigating their way around the southern tip of peninsular Malaysia which is now Singapore.

These pots, which included blue-on-white kitchenware, became so cherished that as heirlooms they marked the genealogies of most families. Used as containers for *tuak* (rice wine), rice, corn, curried delicacies, medicinal brewing pots, the *pusak* was, and still is, sometimes retired as a coffin for the bones of its owner. But as the economic and social structures of Borneo changed, so too did the status of the pots, used instead as a commodity and losing their precise genealogies in exchange for money. But not all were traded. On one of my visits to an Iban longhouse up the River Rajang, I sat down on a rattan mat to meals of curry chicken, glutinous rice, and spicy pork



Goh Teck Yuong with shrine.



Tooling foot of bowl, Sarawak Pottery Centre, Kuching, Sarawak.

served nonchalantly in sturdy Ming dynasty bowls.

My compliments to the chef went almost unheard, but when I remarked on the dinnerware there was suddenly something to talk about.

It is estimated to have been in the late 1800s that the first *pusakas* were produced in Sarawak. Though the banks of the Sarawak River are thick with crocodiles, they also consist of an enormous abundance of fine clay running deep to the sea. In an area nearby called Tanah Puteh (or "white earth"), the first woodfired kilns were built. These behemoth kilns, or "Dragon Kilns," are familiar to many Western potters as "anagamas," the Japanese term. Most Sarawakan Dragon kilns have a full, generous body that reaches 30 meters or more in length. Having one chamber, the firebosses stoke through a number of ports in order to reach climax temperature of 1300°C in 18 to 24 hours, leaving little glimpses of fly ash melted on the shoulders like rutile-blue butterflies. Just as in the old days, the heirloom style pots are

glazed beforehand with glazes made primarily from burnt lime and *padi* husk.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a renewed interest in the exquisite patterns and designs practiced by the Dayak and Oran Ulu people. The patterns vary from group to group but are, generally speaking, a balanced mixture of designs representing jungle flora and fauna, humanoid shapes that arise out of dreams, and marvelously complex geometric patterns and

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This vase was presented to the King of Malaysia on the occasion of his visit to Borneo. Usually, the pots are covered with colored engobes and then decorated with sgraffito patterns. The pots are then biscuited and gloss fired to 1300°C with a transparent glaze imported from England. The Gohs also use a tenmoku-like slip glaze for some of the larger vases. This slip glaze is also sgraffitoed.

The clay processing is done in a series of time-consuming steps. The Gohs purchase their clay from land developers who have dug into veins of clay while starting construction projects. The clay is then slaked down, ball-milled, and laid out in the stifling tropical sun to dry until it has reached the appropriate consistency to be wedged and thrown. The potters throw on large stone wheel-heads that are belt-driven by motors located underneath the floor boards.

The Gohs maintain a diverse marketing strategy that includes a majority of sales to a bustling hotel industry. The hotels purchase decorative as well as utilitarian pots on a regular basis. The State Government is also a consistent customer, using the Goh pottery for decorative as well as gift purposes. A number of national dignitaries have received the Goh work as honorific gifts; these include the King of Malaysia as well as the Prime Minister and others.

The tourist trade has been a variable source of income for the Gohs with sales reaching their peak during the 1980s. Nowadays, tourists are able to travel in Borneo much more easily, so they don't stay in one place as long as in the past, thereby accessing the outlying potteries. The Gohs have aggressively sought commission work from conventions and conferences that are held in the Kuching area, producing small souvenir pots for the participants. They also sell a good deal of work through the local Sarawak Museum, reputedly one of the best museums in South-east Asia.

The challenge of the Goh Pottery is to be able to compensate for the elder Goh's retirement recently. The Goh Pottery's reputation was built on the superb throwing skills of two generations, and the firing skills of another. After a stroke last year, Mr. Goh's father has reduced his involvement in the production so a younger potter's services are being shared with another pottery in the area. Mr. Goh's approach is one of open-mindedness and invention. To this end, he is always interested in exchanges of all sorts, thus there are always changes at hand in the Pottery. He has been selected on a number of occasions to represent Borneo potters at significant conferences and study trips abroad, including one to Japan several years ago. He has also purchased a large filter press that will herald a new era of clay production not only for the Sarawak Pottery Center but for other potteries as well.

Mr. Goh's intention is to keep alive two pottery traditions — the Indigenous and the Chinese — at once, in a curious melding of the two. Upon meeting potters from these different traditions, one becomes aware of the mutual high regard each holds for the other. Being keen practitioners of their own cultures, they seem to believe that in order for the cultures to survive, the artifacts must continue to evolve in the context of the modern Malaysian society that is a rich mixture of cultures, much like the interwoven patterns etched into the shoulder of a Goh family pusaka.

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There Is No Customarily

Bruce Dehnert details the experience of a Peters Valley Craft Center woodfire

"Heorot – he named it whose message had might in many a land. Not reckless of promise, the rings he healt, treasure at banquet: there towered the Hall, high, gabled wide, the hot surge waiting of furious flame." Anonymous. *Beowulf*.

Bruce Dehnert: *Flaming Head 2*.
Figure sculpture. Stoneware and
flashing slips. Photo in front firebox by
Quinn 'The Eskimo' Kimball.

*The woodfiring gamut is at
once with and against, Nature.
Like Beowulf's, it seems a classic
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one; lit by virtue,
antiquated by hypocrisy.*

LIKE A SLOW HOG TO SLAUGHTER, COLOUR COMES to clay. Every minute around side this planet, somewhere tucked in a hovel of refractories and oddly configured tools, someone is bringing the colour with stokes of oak or cherry or pine. As ashes melt in redundant ooze, surfaces just keep piling up. Herein lies the supple binary of information and passion, bound-up in exotic tones and hues, without regard to moving on. In places like Peters Valley Craft Center, less tangible states or orbits become cleaved from experiences, gathered near relentless heat and placed like stones attached to a mossy forest floor.

John Dix, an American potter who has shaped a life in Japan since 1992, recently led the Anagama workshop at this centre in the hills of northern New Jersey. Dix joined a diverse list of artists who have braved firing our kiln's steep incline, imparting what has worked countless times before elsewhere but never facing our particular unknown. It amazes me, in this day and age, that this brand of maker risks embracing such rascals as variables in shape, fuel and stacking. Add to this a dozen or so anxious strangers committed

to making temperature, piling on surface and downloading as much information as possible and you now have the makings of a dynamic human experiment.

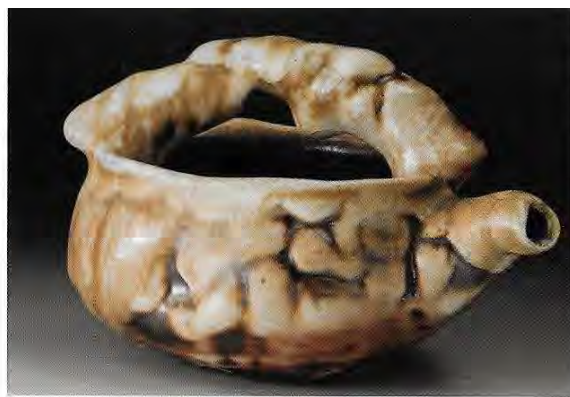
Like layers of neo-natural sediment, experiences too are heaped, one upon the other. Those educational experiences are one-part information slathered over one-part response, alternating between courses of influence intertwined with discovery. All of these elements come to the creative process not as dry 'system' but rather having the liquid integrity of simply figuring things out.

Like the teachers before him (Fred Olsen, Jeff Shapiro, Todd Piker, Shiro Otani, Janet Mansfield and others too numerous to name here), John Dix arrived in the cool evening going straight to the kiln to assess what he was up against. Typically, there isn't much small talk on the brief journey from our car park across basketball court to kiln. The importunate bewilderment of not knowing this 'monstrous hell bride' takes care of that, pronto.

Crouching low into the sweeping firebox and reckoning the oily darkness, Dix's first question was to regard previous efforts. "Did Otani get the tangerine thing going in here?" Shiro Otani, the distinguished Shigaraki artist, had indeed accomplished that and upon learning so, John disappeared up the steep steps towards that place in the far belly where the flames eddy, waiting to clear the flues.

One quirk I've noticed about the artists who have come to lead woodfirings at Peters Valley has been a shared penchant for experimentation. While this way of approaching the 'tool' seems to be couched in theoretical leanings, the needlesome constraints of time and a vivid bloodlust for surface development compete for focus. While our particular kiln and program are crafted to encourage risk taking and tentacular exploration, this distinct 'group' of artists takes the cake. What's more is they travel extreme distances to do so. These factors make our program unique in that while they may fire their home kilns in pragmatic, learned fashion, these teachers seem to arrive at Peters Valley intent on locating an inordinate balance between achieving results and altering, forever, the way they and their students stare down a new fire.

As most artists who have stoked a wood-fired kiln know, one of the determining prenuptials is the loading. In our kiln, one will notice many ideas and traditions converging to create a puzzlemaker's brainstorm. Outside the firemouth, the 'fishmongers' ply seashells that come from as far away as the South China Sea and as nearby as one joint on the Jersey Shore called, M & M's. During Dix's loading, longtime student Alwin Green set up his ubiquitous Wad Stand, like a naughty schoolboy selling lemonade without the sweetener. Others ferry pots or map strategies by stacking shelves. There is always madness in this choreography where Yamada meets Springsteen



Above: John Dix: **Funky Kelly Bag**. Stoneware with feldspathic aggregate and ash glaze interior.

Top: John Dix: **Big Katakuchi**. Stoneware with shino glaze.

At around 1280°C, the temperature up front stood still like frozen geography yet the pyrotechnics continued to crescendo throughout the rest of the kiln. While a belligerent heap of charcoal developed in the main firebox, the day stokers gave way to night shifters, the front cones upstaged by the back.



Top left: Dan Russo. **2 Vases.** Left one is stoneware with flashing slip. Right one is porcelain.
Top right: Dan Russo. **Torn Vase 8.** Porcelain with Bauer flashing slip.
Above: John Dix. **Basket.** Porcelainous stoneware with ash glaze.

covering some rift by Jerry Garcia sounding a little like Bjork. Some of it glued together in a hopeful, tie-dyed daydream. Visit the interior of our kiln and you encounter feral tumble stacking juxtaposing careless wanting with whoever-that-is prom queen.

One year, after Olsen laid down the kiln's first stunning cascades of acrid glass, Todd Piker styled his firing, in part, to the even rhythms of his forbearance, Michael Cardew. This kiln's legacy is strange but interesting stuff. Dix's inheritance in our firing wasn't so much mentored by Kanichi Mikami of Bizen, for whom he worked, but rather our exuberantly tight stacking of new shelves we so over-zealously put into service along the front course. At around 1280 degrees centigrade, the temperature up front stood still like frozen geography yet the pyrotechnics continued to crescendo throughout the rest of the kiln. While a belligerent heap of charcoal developed in the main firebox, the day stokers gave way to night shifters, the front cones upstaged by the back.

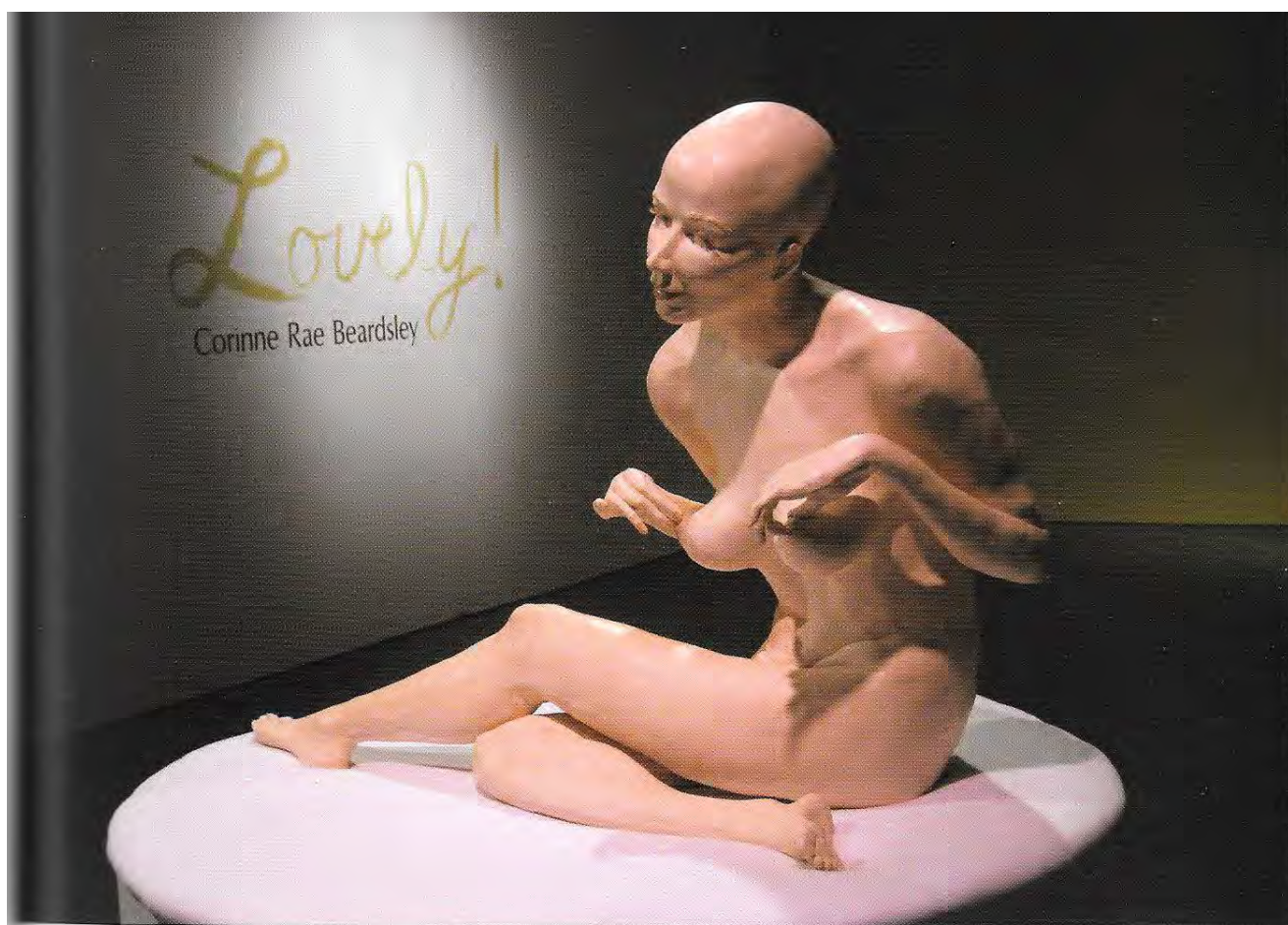
Over the years, unloading day has come to represent many different things to the participants. From anxieties borne of fresh experience to relief in the form of beauty unleashed, drawing fired work from the mouth of the kiln parlays exquisite memories. Dix's firing offered the full expanse of results, from delicious blends of cosmic hues and flashings-gone-mad, to raw development with sideways juice to bulldozers revealing earth's hidden loam. Nothing, in all its' splendor as zero, left the firemouth unscathed.

This is a contemporary world we inhabit with our industries, economics, politics and arts. Every time we unload a kiln that has been fired with the determination of leaving a record of the wood-firing process on the surface of our work, I question what that means. After all, ours is an age marked by growing desires to transform ceramic materials beyond their naturalistic provenance toward an elegant design. The wood-firing gamut is at once with, and against, Nature. Like Beowulf's, it seems a classic struggle...with its aesthetic being, at least in part, a primal one; lit by virtue, antiquated by hypocrisy.

REFERENCE

Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York. 2000.

Bruce Dehnert, Head of Ceramics at Peters Valley Craft Center in Layton, New Jersey, holds a BA in English Literature from the University of Montana and an MFA in Ceramics from Alfred University.



Hottie Tottie. Ceramic figure and cushion. 48 x 48 x 30 in.

Venturing Pleasure

Article by Bruce Dehnert

It is impossible to know a desire other than by satisfying it and the satisfaction of our basic desire is revolution.
The Cobra Group, 1949¹

WHAT IS IT YOU LONG FOR? WHEN THE VOLUPTUOUS tirade of 'must have' has passed, what can its vacancy tell us? Better still, who feels giddiest in the theatre of naked pillow play upside the head; actors or audience? This ironic and electronic age has young people relating to one another in previously unfathomable ways and since the production of Art is friable communication with all of its gooey, imperfect rules and some of those young people are producing the stuff, how do we steel ourselves for the latest conventions and take their inherent meanings for a walk?

In Cori Beardsley's exhibition titled *Lovely*, at Real Art Ways in Hartford, Connecticut US, the artist divided the sprawling gallery with three multi-media installations. Each employed a rich, representational narrative and put to work the figure. I asked Beardsley what, from the basement tapes of Art, provides grist or inspiration for her own sculptural practice? Her answer was succinct: "Pretty much everything figurative." But *Lovely* is where Figure, with a capital 'F', diverges from the dicey historical kind, like that which religious zealot and early 'installation artist' Bernini employed in



Bunny Pile (Detail).

his prophetic sculpture, *The Vision of Saint Theresa*.² Beardsley contests the confusion wrought by the jagged edge of puritanical impulse, adopting instead a preponderate, sexualised everything. Here we have kiss-and-tell bravado on the rocks. . . but painstaking in its process of shaping, chopping and changing.

There is irony, too, from the get-go, as Beardsley has put on her game face *vis-a-vis* poultry shed. That one has the artist as a young girl toiling on the family farm helping to clear crowded pens of dead chicks by the rusty shovelful. That is a scoop shovel with barely the weight of death on it. The irony exists somewhere in that area of preciousness folded seamlessly into having to get a burgeoning world fed. Farm kids have a wholly different view of the world than the rest of us, perhaps more realistic and pragmatic. And when they play, they play hardball because in the real world, dirt is dirt and pain is pain. . . even, sometimes, *Lovely* pain.

Unravelling the many stories in Beardsley's most complex installation titled *Bunny Pile*, set amongst misfit, cleaved beds, a seated figure in the upper corner appears to be experiencing a transcendent state, provided by an earthly pleasuring. She and another figure, melting tenderly in her lap, recline free of the flinty chaos. Because of her pallid skin colouring and far-away eyes, there would appear to be an awareness of something unstated beyond the restless and weathered bedsheets. Like visitants at a debutante party, melancholia follows from their lucid pondering.

In *Bunny Pile*, the artist has fleshed-out memories of 'girl play' in her childhood home of Maryland. That was a time of fashioning 'houses' out of available furnishings and having rambunctious go-gos with friends who would all too soon grow up and

into that unsteady glacier of adult self-consciousness and restraint. At the moment unbridled play between scantily-clad young women tugs us toward an epicentre of visceral dishevelment and sexual imbalance, the artist's memories merge with ours. As we begin to negotiate the irony between the exhibition title and the teenage wasteland before us, one problem becomes what to do with our gaze. While there is post-pubescent innocence being played out in this illusionistic arena, the viewer's dalliance might become uncomfortably telling. This, in itself, is evidence of Beardsley's achievement in the sculptural realm. We are, after-all, dealing with stoneware, Playtex™ and a cool, artificial breeze thrown awkwardly by twin fans whose exposed blades are tattered with dollar store glitter.

Beardsley cites an ideal world in which 'potentials' for magnificent relationships between her and her sisters might be possible. Culling signals from conversations, espionage-like visits to her sisters' Facebook™ sites and reminisces of teenage slumberparties, the artist renders ordinary reference to languid reflection obsolete. Hers are activated women who pleasure each other or themselves with physical and imagined play. In the installation, *Hottie Tottie*, the viewer is invited to be the mirror for a sultry figure lost in her private moment of pink feel-good atop a pill-box shaped and faux fur-lined stage. Is this titillation for public consumption, like in a steamy strip club, or have we chanced upon this *uber* vixen bare-skinned in her own suburban daydream teaching us that in this furtive world of endemic rush to stimuli, pleasure waits at our finger tips? Pulled taut, do we dare move beyond that?

There is a strategy for seduction here between the margins of figuration and content. While society tethers its desires to certain 'allowables', Beardsley seems to have opted for enchantment that is at once honest and staunchly non-utopian. Though the figure in *Hottie Tottie* beckons the viewer, it seems she will be fine without. This is not a pornography film. This is real space, real time caught in a draft of malleable things more poignant than any burden of superficiality.

In *Sandwich*, a stretched figure is humorously squeezed, seemingly face down, mostly out of sight, between two soiled mattresses. This autobiographical work speaks to vagarious joy; that of a teenager hiding from her world, transported, if she chooses, into that one where looms the darkness of naughty thoughts. The synthetic stitching, tight weaves of cotton and familiar, musty smells of bedding coax the skin into believing 'nothin' in the world's gonna getcha'. In this work, the artist flirts with vulnerability and what is to do about it. While the other two installations cut to the bone raw and perhaps uncomfortable sentiments, *Sandwich* offers the protective custody of padding



Installation view of Bunny Pile. Ceramic figures, clothing bedding and accessories. 168 x 120 x 82 in.

eight inches thick: safe again, prone and nearly breathless.

Encountering work produced by emerging artists of this age, a multitude of subjective symbols draws us into difficult realities. Ours is a shrinking world in which the depiction of behaviours spans the gamut. As before, these are reflections on the nascent human universe we inhabit. One only has to watch two films, *Into the Wild* and *Jackass* to ascertain a sense of the polarities raking against one another in this Post-modern world. The evolution of social/cultural rebellion, seemingly, has no bounds. Beardsley offers up no-nonsense menageries of exposures in which respite from this profane realm, through playfulness, physical stimulation and reflection find their way in the bedroom, coaxing a kind of tolerance on new terms. And like the capturing of events on cell phone cameras, whose vivid story lines can be impossible to look away from, Cori Beardsley's sculptures provide opportunities to wrestle with The Truth, perhaps acknowledging that, in the end, this contemporary life is really quite a mess.

Footnotes:

1. Herschel B Chipp. *Theories of Modern Art*. Berkeley. University of California Press. 1968.
2. E H Gombrich. *The Story of Art*. 15th Edition. London. Phaidon Press Ltd. 1989. p. 347.

Bruce Dehnert was raised in Wyoming, earned his BA in English from the University of Montana and his MFA from Alfred University. Awarded the 2007 Individual Artist Fellowship by the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, Dehnert is the recipient of three Fletcher Challenge Awards and the Settlor Prize in Sculpture, among others. His work is included in many collections such as the White House, Crocker Museum, Dowse Museum and Yixing Museum of Ceramic Art. He is currently Head of Ceramics at Peters Valley Craft Center in Layton, New Jersey US.

This exhibition is a result of Real Art Ways' "Go" Competition which requested proposals from emerging artists living in New York or New England. Proposals for solo shows were juried by Derrick Adams, Olu Oguibe and Jane Philbrick.

Photos by John Groo. All images courtesy of Real Art Ways.