

# HEIDI McKENZIE

DEBRA SLOAN

## Imaging and Imagining the Inheritance of Colonialism



Heidi McKenzie is a Canadian, and a fine-craft ceramic artist of Indo-Trinidadian and Scots-Irish descent. During the last decade, McKenzie has been producing ceramic sculptures engaged with issues concerning systemic racial inequality. Through the lens of her familial encounter with indentureship, McKenzie encircles such specifics as the duality of bi-racial descent and the global consequences of colonialism. Her visual treatise urges the white community, to which I belong, to collectively recognize embedded racial privilege, and to work towards change. In the words of the American, Theastre Gates, whom McKenzie admires, “Art and Protest are forms of political thought”.

McKenzie and I first met in 2013, in the elegant Romanian city of Cluj-Napoca, as participants in the first Cluj International Ceramic Exhibition and Symposium. Romania is progressively recovering from millennia of invasion, colonization, and in 1989 successfully rose up against the horrific Ceausescu regime. We discovered that we share the surname of Sloan/Slone, and that our Scottish ancestors were probable participants in displacing thousands of slain Catholics in Northern Ireland, in the mid 1600s, dispersing thousands more, indentured to the Caribbean. Two centuries later our

**Family Portrait**, 2012, stoneware, epoxy wood frame, 100 cm h x 76 cm w x 28 cm d



**First Wave**, 2021, stoneware, porcelain, ceramic decals, wood, string, metal hooks, 47 cm x 60 cm x 16 cm

Scots-Irish ancestors immigrated to Ontario, Canada, during the catastrophic potato famine of the mid 1800s. Our connections are small examples of interconnection and global consequences resulting from cyclical struggles enacted as racial, economic and political aggressions.

Heidi McKenzie has chosen clay as her interpreter. Often, when ceramic art is written about, artist, material, concept, technique and process become interactive actors in the narrative. When concept precedes process, which is McKenzie's practice, the artist instead wrestles with the "tyranny of technology", bending the entire enterprise to serve the concept. McKenzie noted that she had tested twenty different porcelains for strength, shrinkage, and image compatibility for a current project. "Happy" accidents are not on her agenda.

Every mission has a beginning, and for Heidi McKenzie, it started in the 1990s, when, during her studies of Multiculturalism, she awoke to how the colonial mind-set had been institutionalized as the status quo in Canada, i.e., artistic excellence was a category for white settler artists while visible minorities alongside Indigenous artists found themselves in "folk" or "community arts." McKenzie sought redress for these marginalizations through two decades in arts management and policy before, in her words, "she found clay". During her first immersion, in 2009, McKenzie embarked on a 12-week residency at Andretta Pottery, in Himachel Pradesh, India. By 2010 she had enrolled at Sheridan College, Toronto, Ontario. McKenzie continued her studies over the next decade and the ceramic praxis has become her visual and conceptual resource to actively draw attention to the arc of pervasive attitudes stemming from colonial dominance.

*Family Portrait*, 2012 is an early, ambitious work. Through gestural manipulation and interweaving long, variously earth-coloured clay strands, McKenzie has made a graceful and substantial construction that denotes the tangled web of her family ancestry. In her own words, they suggest DNA sequencing. In 2012, McKenzie embarked on an MFA in Criticism and Curatorial Practice, at the Ontario College of Art and Design University. Her degree culminated in the 2014 curation of *Face Value*: an exhibition that explored performance of Caribbean multi-racial identity.



**In My Bones No.1**, 2019  
earthenware, underglaze decals, 53 x 68.5 x 21 cm



**Spaces Within**, 2015  
porcelain, 15 x 15 x 15 cm each, installation variable

**Body Interrupted**, 2016, earthenware, ceramic decal, raku fired pieces  
aircraft cable 150 x 150 x 3 cm mobile strands, installation variable



**Division**, 2020, porcelain, iron oxide decals, plexiglas, acrylic tape  
wood, metal hinges, 165 x 84 x 3.75 cm



During a 2014 residency at the Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Center, Denmark, McKenzie learned to make slip-cast block-like moulds (14-sided tetrahedrons). With this technology, she made a "Self-Portrait", pouring layers of liquid clay, in various subtle earth-coloured hues, into the moulds in a process called *neriage* – where colours swirl around each other but remain distinct. McKenzie also learned how to transform her family's photographs into image-decals. In *Postmarked*, 2016, using the same moulds, McKenzie has taken image-decals from postage stamps picturing a Eurocentric Canada and fired them onto the sides of the hollow blocks. She then placed images of her child-self on the corners. The image-decals, suspended in an iron-rich slip, are permeated with a nostalgic memory-rich sepia tone.

*Body Interrupted*, 2016, is a mobile, with familial image-decals fired onto fragile randomly shaped porcelain tiles and suspended in space. They depict her father's physical fragility and his resilience as a migrant of colour in a predominantly white Canada, in what McKenzie called his "double diaspora" or "second exile" from India to the Caribbean and then again to Canada.

In 2017 McKenzie attended the Newington Armory Residency in Sydney, Australia, and built abstracted, Modernist-influenced forms. She realized abstraction releases the artist and the viewer from the predominance of Eurocentric figurative art. She learned how to build, glaze and reduction-fire large sculptures – size matters in clay. McKenzie fashioned spherical apertures, as gateways, passing through the sculpture as metaphor, and hope for future dialogue. This body of work was continued in *Spring: Paisley Uprooted*, 2019 during a residency at the Medalta Historic Ceramic Centre, Medicine Hat, Canada.

*House of Cards*, 2019, returns to the use of image-decals and is another poignant look at McKenzie's father's life. The "photographs" range from a rare early picture to one taken shortly before his passing. The image-decals are fired onto delicate porcelain rectangular tiles and precariously stacked into a steeple of "cards", an allegorical balancing act around belonging, creating a home, and precarious health.

In 2019 McKenzie returned to the large abstracted structures, this time uniting object with image and metaphor. The mass of the balanced forms surrounds the apertures, and carefully placed image-decals reinstate the lens of her family history. In her works, *In My Bones*, McKenzie has merged her objectives.

During these investigative years, McKenzie immersed herself in research locating historic and family images around indenturedship in the Caribbean. In *Division*, 2020, potent imagery reveals flagrant societal and racial inequities customary in colonial societies, with the subtext that these issues persist today. *Division* is a screen, a formal partition, indicative of past and present racism embedded in society, governance and education.

*First Wave*, 2021, represents the *Fatal Rozack*, was the first ship to carry indentured South Asian workers to Trinidad. In adopting this image, McKenzie unleashes the metaphorical ship – instrument of invasion, change, transport, and escape. Ships transported enslaved, indentured and migrant alike. McKenzie has begun to investigate her maternal Northern Irish history – around English dominance, textile mills, famine and migration. The Ship may be the device that will integrate the voyages of her maternal and paternal ancestors.

Heidi McKenzie engages our empathy through the storyline of her ceramic objects. Her oeuvre is a participant in world-

wide protest around systemic racial imbalance and subsequent injustices. She asks us to actively acknowledge the pervasive colonial / Eurocentric gaze embedded in our institutions. McKenzie demonstrates that art is a resource for societal and political change and is capable of altering our habituated optics.

### **DEBRA SLOAN**

is a Canadian ceramic artist, teacher, adjudicator and author from Vancouver, BC. [www.debrasloan.com](http://www.debrasloan.com). She is President of the North-West Ceramics Foundation. [www.nwcf.ca](http://www.nwcf.ca)

**Heidi McKenzie** is a Toronto-based ceramic artist. In 2009, Heidi apprenticed in her father's ancestral home with India's foremost studio potter, Mini Singh (student of Bernard Leach). Heidi returned to Canada and completed her Diploma at Sheridan College in 2012 and her MFA at OCADU in 2014. In 2011 Heidi received the Emerging Artist Award at Toronto Artists Project, and in 2012 exhibited at the Toronto International Art Fair. In 2013, Heidi created in Jingdezhen, China and in Bali, Indonesia. In 2017 Heidi apprenticed in Sydney, Australia with Master Mitsuo Shoji. Her work is currently touring Europe and Scandinavia as part of the "best of" exhibitions with Cluj Biennial and Guldagergaard International Centre for Ceramic Research.

Heidi's work, *Postmarked*, was acquired by Global Affairs Canada in 2020 to be placed in embassies internationally. Heidi curated/exhibited/moderated on *Decolonizing Clay* at the Australian Ceramics Triennale in 2019, and recently presented at the World Indian Diaspora Congress in Trinidad, August 2020. Heidi's writing and research in ceramics garnered her the inaugural 2020 NCECA Helene Zucker Seeman Curatorial, Research, and Critical Writing Fellowship for Women. Heidi recently joined the Board of NCECA. Heidi has exhibited around the world in Romania, Hungary, Italy, Indonesia, Denmark, Australia, and in the United States.

### **HEIDI MCKENZIE**

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### **Gallery Representation:**

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