

La Mesa Exhibition

A Review by Antoinette Badenhorst

IMAGINE GETTING INVITED FOR DINNER BUT RATHER THAN getting food, you are served with place settings, serving platters or casserole dishes, spiced with salt and pepper shakers or complemented with vases for flowers. Such a show has been dished up with the work of approximately 150 artists for audiences for the past six years.

Avra Leodas, curator of Santa Fe Clay in New Mexico originally presented *La Mesa* in their gallery some years back. The interior of the gallery offered a perfect venue for a banquet table format but Avra realized the uniqueness of such a show should be shared with more than just her community, so she took it on the road for many more to appreciate. In 2005, *La Mesa* was shown for the first time at NCECA in Baltimore and since then it became one of the most popular shows during the conference.

I had the opportunity to see *La Mesa* evolve over some years. Each invited artist presents an average of three pieces and it becomes a mouth full when 150 artists' pieces are displayed together on one long table. Seeing the exhibition in which Leodas put together artists who deliver connoisseur (epicurean, gourmet) work of that format, displayed together, is quite a unique experience

that only comes to life if one sees it in person. I decided to observe all of the artistic flavours with my hungry artistic soul and then find some to feast on.

Kristen Kieffer and Robert Briscoe were placed next to each other despite the strong contrast in their work. Kieffer is clearly influenced by feminine clothes and jewellery from an era gone by, whereas Briscoe's works carry some raw elements found in nature. Something about the unpretentiousness of Tim Rowan's dish (or is it a plate?) managed to slow me down and touch me personally. The piece seemed to be out of place but then, maybe the very success of it being in place was what slowed me down to think (ponder). Just for one moment it took me back to basics, so much so that I could taste the wet earth in my mouth.

Tara Dawley's place setting was one of the eye catchers. Using the contrast of movement and strict precision worked well with what appeared to be a white slip over dark clay in unexpected areas while serving words on the plate. Priscilla Mouritzen of Denmark offered egg-shell porcelain pieces covered with shino glazes that deserve close study. There is a lifetime of precise pinching, touching and forming in one single piece and only those who take the time will enjoy it.

Installation View of La Mesa at NCECA 2010, Philadelphia.



An element of the formal ceramic tableware industry bridged with the more informal studio arts is visible in the work of Andy Shaw. Working in porcelain, he uses the water etching technique to soften the strong formal lines normally associated with dinnerware. He keeps the place settings white with only the textured patterns to give a hint of his artistic sentiments. Doing so, he generously invites the cook to complete the design with good, colourful food.

Heather Mae Erickson displays sensitivity in her work that radiates a deep understanding of porcelain. The strong smooth and modern lines are well designed and invite the viewer to examine and test them carefully with many senses.

To look at Mike Jabbur's beautiful fat mug, created pure delight. Something about it made me wonder how he views the human body and I found the answer in his own words: "Our bodies are the conduit through which we relate to the fortunes and plights of our existence." Jabbur has humour and empathy for the human body that he implies carefully, yet successfully to his ceramics.

If I were to give an award for technical skill, craft and design precision in any environment, it would go to Munemitsu Taguchi. There are several outstanding elements in his work that deserves mentioning. Taguchi succeeds to create functional works of art, pleasing to the eye and excellent for every day use. The bottoms

of his objects are as refined as the celadon glaze that fits the overall piece. There is a contrast between the interior and exterior of his works that creates just enough tension to raise curiosity and by further investigation one realizes that the smooth, rounded interiors are kept neatly compacted by the exterior design that carries an element of the mechanical.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Lisa Clague. Clague is considered a sculptor in all senses of the word, so when I found three human figures sitting in the middle of the table, it immediately raised my imagination. Are those three observing the observers or are they feasting on everybody else's work? How do they fit with the rest of the exhibition? The 'Do not touch' sign restrained me from close investigation but then someone else lifted the upper part of one of the heads and the piece cleverly became a human cup.

Overall the *La Mesa* exhibition is carefully curated with many of the world's finest ceramic artists, some well known and others, precious gems ready for further exploration. I am looking forward to NCECA 2011 in the hopes that I will be able to feast once again on some of the finest meals of the year, *La Mesa*.

Antoinette Badenhorst, a potter for almost 29 years, emigrated from South Africa to the US where she earned international recognition with her porcelain work. Although her native tongue is Afrikaans, she writes and teaches in English. (porcelainbyAntoinette21@comcast.net)

Top: Andy Shaw. Assorted Tableware.
Below: Mike Jabbur. Assorted Tableware.



Installation View (Detail).

