

ANTHONY STELLACCIO

# Drink from the River

by Natalie E. Phillips

Haunted objects replete with totemic meaning comprise the deeply moving body of work featured in ceramic artist Anthony Stellaccio's exhibition, "Drink from the River," which was on view at Du Mois Gallery ([dumoisgallery.com](http://dumoisgallery.com)) in New Orleans, Louisiana. Stellaccio embarks upon a cathartic journey in this work, one in which he confronts intense personal pain and the enduring symptoms of loss that have stemmed from the death of his father. His objects have great potency. They include mementos of the deceased that are haunted by memory, like echoes from the past. An echo is an ephemeral, immaterial record of a person's presence, though like memory, it weakens as it reverberates and becomes further removed from its origin. It is thus suggestive of both presence and absence, and this duality is a common thread in Stellaccio's work as he seeks to unite material record with intangible memory. He holds tight to these ghostly remnants of the past while also questioning the logic of trying to preserve something that is so transitory.

*Drifter (Home)* and *Drifter (Rest)* use earth taken from several locations that are meaningful to Stellaccio: family graves, his mother's home, and several New Orleans cemeteries. The use of cemetery dirt represents both disturbed ground (the result of collecting the dirt) and disturbed feeling. In *Drifter (Home)*, inclusions from the dirt in the cemeteries, which consist of shells and small pebbles, resemble what remains of a cremated body in an urn. Forms that mimic both domestic architecture and those used in many New Orleans mortuary monuments allude to the safety of home as well as the elegiac spaces of death. *Drifter (Rest)* evokes similar dichotomies. The pillow-like shapes lend a softness to the work that belies the hard, earthen-materials out of which the piece is made. The pillow is associated with nightly rest and a person's final resting place, merging the concepts of life and death, comfort and discomfort, safety and fear, as well as sustenance and decay.

Stellaccio's work is intensely biographical, but also points to very universal human emotions regarding loss. He wants viewers to confront their own vulnerabilities and discomfort with mortality. The specific stories behind each work are not made explicit, though Stellaccio's choice to include a detailed list of the materials



used in each piece (such as blood from the artist, earth from the grave of his father, or personal correspondence) allows the viewer to intuitively gravitate toward the intended meaning of the art. "The point," Stellaccio explains, "is not to inform people of my personal narrative. It is to hopefully create reactions that are commensurate with my own feelings about the work. I want people to be disturbed and see these works as confrontational. I'm essentially using my personal story as a way to get at that power, that force, and hoping that the arduous process of putting this together will translate into effective works of art."

One of the most powerful works in the show is *To Give and to Take*, which features a phallic axe embraced by a soft, maternal form. What is so poignant, and also profoundly disturbing, about this piece is that it includes the ashes of a goat's heart. In a bold and painful effort to truly come to terms with the stark reality of death, the artist killed the goat himself, participated in its disembowelment, and ate it. Noting how we tend to sanitize and separate ourselves from the process of slaughtering our food, Stellaccio explains, "As deep of an impression as it made on me, that's what people do every time they eat a piece of meat, the only difference was I saw how it was killed. It was a powerful experience." The work violently and radically

reconciles the relationship between death and sustenance, which we have so earnestly tried to keep separate in our modern world.

Much of Stellaccio's thematic concerns revolve around ambiguity, the vacillation between opposites, and the perpetual shifting of boundaries. These unstable dualities define Stellaccio's life; he is equally a scholar and an artist, and is constantly negotiating between these two alternate identities. His interest in dichotomies derives largely from his parents, who had a true marriage of opposites: "One was very mathematical and calculated, the other very expressive and musical. I always found those dichotomies to be ever present in my life, so I tried to find ways of finding formal binaries in my work, like form and surface, or white and black, as a way of translating this relationship between my parents."

Concerned, however, that his work was becoming overly intellectualized and divorced from emotion, Stellaccio looked to African art for inspiration. Heavily influenced—though not limited by—African art, his work mirrors the powerfully visceral aspects of objects such as African *bocio* or power sculptures. The affective impact of the *bocio* speaks to their function; they are loaded objects in several senses of the word. *Bocio* are physically loaded with blood, earth, or other offerings designed to ward off sickness or protect from the chaotic forces of the outside world. They are simultaneously loaded with great metaphoric weight. Realizing that he was without the necessary means to attack the emotionally charged ideas that interested him on his own, Stellaccio uses *bocio* as a guiding tool and source of inspiration, but applies this to his own individual experience. He does not try to copy the forms or specific meaning used in African art, nor does he feign being a part of those traditions simply because he is informed about them on a scholarly level. He thus effectively avoids the common pitfall of a white artist borrowing from black

culture, which often primitivizes and exoticizes these art forms in unintentionally negative, even patronizing ways.

In *Expectations*, multi-colored ceramic gourds are placed inside of a freestanding, door-sized Plexiglas vitrine. The gourds contain clothing from people who have passed and other libations designed to empower and activate the sculpture. The liminal space of the door suggests the passage between life and death. But the antiseptic, industrial nature of the Plexiglas clashes with the more organic formal characteristics of the piece. It suggests preservation, or even entombment, alluding to the sterility of death in our modern culture. The process of decay is grotesque, yet our Western funeral conventions shield us from its gross reality. Mortuary practices, such as embalming, help us to more easily divorce the concepts of death and decay. The contrast between the crisp, clean Plexiglas and the dark, visceral magic of the gourds further enhances this contradiction.

*Tributary* most clearly shows the African influence on Stellaccio's work. The irregular, rounded forms of the sculpture have an unsettling libidinal, and even excretory character. Designed as an homage to the power of African art, it is also a sorrowful reference to the troubled history of the slave trade in New Orleans. Consisting of a circular formation of abstracted gourds, the work includes Civil War-era bullets from Louisiana. The way in which the historically significant bullets are trapped by the surrounding clay, cement, and earth, subtly revealed piecemeal to the viewer, give it the appearance of a partially excavated archaeological remnant. The distant past is often considered in abstract terms; we intellectualize tragedies like war and slavery and tend to view them as nothing more than historical record. But the reality of these events is savage, brutal, and violent. The anthropomorphized, bulbous shapes of *Tributary* remind us of the humanity behind the history.

1 *To Give and to Take*, 3 ft. 4 in. (1 m) in height, clay, lead glaze, cement, *Historical Introduction to Philosophy* by Albert Hakim (ash), axe, rope, goat's heart (ash), 2014. 2, 3 *Drifter (Home)* and *Drifter (Rest)*, 25 in. (64 cm) in height, earth from the grave of the artist's father (fired), earth from the home of the artist's mother (fired), earth from the town of the artist's birth (fired), earth from two New Orleans' cemeteries (fired), pigment, clay (unfired talc, ball clay, and Ferro frit 3124), sodium silicate, 2014. 4 *Tributary*, 19 in. (48 cm) in height, clay, cement, sand from Africa, Louisiana sugar, earth from Congo Square, lead shot from the siege of Port Hudson, Louisiana (1863), 2014.

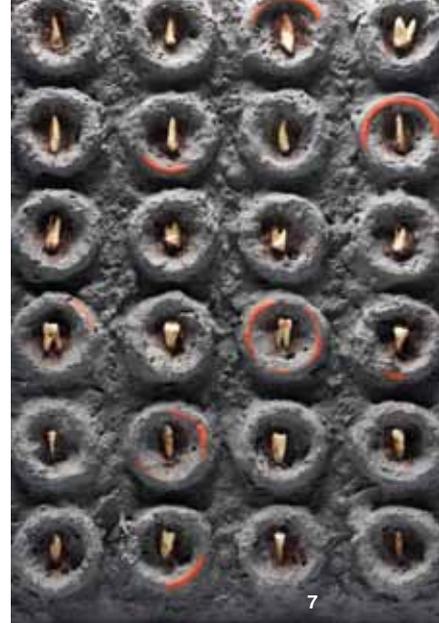




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5 *Memento Mori (To Live and Fake)*, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, clay, lead glaze, earth from the town of the artist's birth, rope, 2014. 6, 7 *Isolation*, 17½ in. (44 cm) in height, clay, lead glaze, cement, correspondences (ash and fragments), human teeth, blood from the artist, 2014.

One of the most unnerving works in the exhibition is *Isolation*. Inserted into one side of a cold, gray slab are human teeth and the artist's own blood. While these objects allude to the physical presence of a person, they have been removed from their source and thus further enhance the theme of isolation. The somatic emphasis of the work also denotes violence, as though these objects have been forcibly torn from the body and have left behind pustule-like wounds. Opposite the slab is an organic shape which leans against its surface. The slouched, mournful posture of the form suggests shame, melancholy, and loneliness, as well as a desperate desire to connect to what lies beyond the wall. Like much of Stellaccio's work, *Isolation* is heavily anthropomorphized; his sculptures act as surrogate people and bear a silent, disquieting presence. One feels strongly the concept of the uncanny as these works fulfill the role of both object and subject simultaneously.

A common thread throughout the exhibition is the definition of failure versus accomplishment. The books in *To Live and to Fake (Memento Mori)* symbolize the artist's own publication on Lithuanian folk pottery, which he uses to ponder the nature of accomplishment and consider the ways in which we mark and preserve it. Stellaccio explains, "On the one hand the book is a compilation of experience, with building a community in Lithuania. All of these real, very meaningful experiences are now compressed into this book which, being a copy of something, is an intangible thing. So where do all those personal experiences exist? If I look back on my life, what were my accomplishments exactly?" But these are not real books, only abstractions made from clay. The interplay between real and unreal points to our yearning to concretize accomplishment in physical form. Adjacent to the book is a horse skull with an excerpt from a letter by the artist's father written on its surface. The text is a meditation on personal failure and serves as a foil to the professional accomplishment represented by the books. The horse skull is also a symbol strongly associated with masculinity in Lithuanian culture. Never able to have the approval of his deceased father, Stellaccio is constantly searching for ways to measure up to him: "Not having him around for so long, I inevitably, as his

son and as a male, have this complex about his approval. What is his idea of accomplishment for me? What is the stereotypical male idea of accomplishment? I really have no idea because I was raised by a woman."

Mementos of the dead are like ghosts. They allow a person to preserve memories, to find solace, and to symbolically feel the lingering presence of that person. Yet like a ghost, they also suggest entrapment, an inability to move on, and the sheer terror that comes with confronting death and monumental loss head-on. *Take You With Me* embodies this contradiction well. The piece is overloaded with charred and twisted padlocks, as though the owner of the vessel was obsessively fixated on protecting its contents at all costs. While a lock is designed to protect what is dear to us, it is also associated with enslavement and captivity. Is this vessel being protected, or is the overabundance of locks actually symbolic of being trapped by our own attachments, fears, inadequacies, and neuroses? The locks make the vessel appear impenetrable, but they also fail at their protective function; they are bent, decayed, and ultimately ineffectual. Concealed within the vessel are remnants of letters from past loves and loved ones who have passed, proving again how these specters of memory both comfort and bind us.

Stellaccio's exhibition is beautifully evocative and mournful, while also managing to be formally and conceptually sophisticated. It is a therapeutic meditation on life and death that goes beyond the concerns of the individual by eliciting ideas and emotions that have a universal relevancy. Drink from the River poignantly explores the ghosts that haunt the artist's life, and forces the viewer to discover what ghosts are haunting them.

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