

Article by Michael D Carrasco



DESPITE ALBERT EINSTEIN'S FAMOUS DICTUM THAT "God does not play dice with the universe", modern science understands reality through probability. We live in a world of chance. And chance at the level of our genetic makeup is indeed the engine behind the development of all living things. Holly Hanessian's artwork articulated in porcelain, Plexiglas, found objects and fishing line among others, explores a consistent series of major themes such as: origins; choice and chance; and concepts of the

book and writing, including codes, formulas and scientific notation. From ceramic objects in traditional utilitarian forms such as the *Molecular Ware* series to sculptural, multimedia books such as *Blood & Taste* to installations involving LED lights, Hanessian takes part in the historical marriage of writing and clay to engender a code switching between symbolic abstraction and materiality that entices the viewer to contemplate the construction of meaning and how identity is formed in the crucible of chance.



As a student of ancient writing systems, I have long been fascinated by those moments when artists spotlight the materiality of writing in order to efface our expectation of how meaning is conveyed and to set up a movement between writing's function as a vessel for information and its own material existence as a graphic mark or sculptural form. It is an alchemy wherein the lightness of a symbol is brought to earth and the boundaries between the categories of language, writing and meaning fog. The viewer is awaked from normative expectations.

One might not initially suspect that writing and ceramics are natural bedfellows. The archaeological record, however, gives ample testimony to a close relationship between ceramics and writing. From the origin of the cuneiform script to dedication texts on Mayan chocolate cups, clay has been a frequently inscribed medium. Indeed, ceramic tokens of commodities, according to Denis Schmandt-Besserat, were critically important to the development of writing in the Near East. The tokens, she argues, represented commodities offered to temples. Initially the tokens were enclosed in clay containers called *bullae*. Over time the tokens in a variety of shapes were pressed into these containers so that the ancient accountant could discern the contents of the *bullae* without opening them. Writing reveals what is enclosed within. At this moment of writing's origin the impression of the token in the soft clay of the *bullae* was evidence of the transformation of the object into a symbol and proto-writing. In a reverse but like process, Hanessian recovers the objecthood of writing.

Her work oscillates between the objectification of writing and symbolic meaning. A review of her pieces reveals a recurring vocabulary of forms, colours and textures reminiscent of scientific instruments, agar jelly and other substances associated with a laboratory setting and motifs likewise drawn from the lab, scientific notation and writing. That scientific symbols such as X and Y chromosomes and molecular formula and texts are articulated in materials and in ways outside the norm, highlights their form. Central



Facing page: **Prescription Filled.** 2011. Porcelain, glass flask, water, rubber table runner and wooden table. 59 x 24 x 32 in.

Facing page, top: **Molecular Table (Detail).** 2010.

Facing page, below: **Molecular Table.**

Above and below: **Blood and Taste.** 2011. Glazed porcelain, Plexiglas, monofilament, rubber, hair and nail clippings. 9 x 11 x 5 in.

Above: **Blood & Taste (Detail).**

Below: **Blood & Taste.**



to these is the markedness of the letter or symbol as a porcelain or Plexiglas object or as a graphic mark. In *Molecular Ware* plates imprinted with the molecular formula for Paxil, Cymbalta and Zoloft potentially incite a number of initial reactions ranging from incomprehensibility (How many people actually know the molecular formula for Paxil?) to probing the complex relationship between eating, the gastrointestinal system and mood and, finally, to consumption itself and the important symbolic value of the meal. Can one eat comfortably off such an object while contemplating these various lines of thought? Hanessian writes of the series that it, "pays homage to the culture of anti-depressants, exploring the dark connection between anxiety, contemporary design and food. Anti-depressants diminish anxiety, emotional pain, hot flashes or depression. Consuming drugs is a new daily ritual, it begins the day or is taken before or after mealtime. . . The artwork plays

with the idea of our consumable culture and is decorated with a red alert glaze and a centrifugal pattern of black engobe."

*Prophase* and several of her earlier works develop interplay between writing, language and the illustration of fertilisation. These works take up the chance involved in conception with depictions of chromosomes, the double helix of DNA and the moment before fertilisation. The words 'luck' and 'maybe' conjoined with biological illustrations to emphasise the chance involved in the creation of new life. Additional meaning resides in how the viewer reads the interaction between text and image. This is a critical aspect of these works. For the act of interpretation implies, like the development of the person who results from the conception, that meaning is highly subjective and that the hermeneutics of reading and experience and the chance involved in these actions, continue to be important throughout our lives.



These objects underscore that a different interpretation might lead to a different action. Indeed, God is always playing dice.

*Blood & Taste* lends credence to this interpretation. It is an O-shaped porcelain container holding six tubes of her daughter's hair and nail clippings, an O-shaped book sewn shut inscribed with words describing daily life and genetic characteristics and a urine specimen bottle on which to set the book for viewing. This book-object builds on the themes explored in the above-mentioned works. Significantly, it adds specific information about Hanessian's own family, particular her daughter, Olivia.

In explaining *Blood & Taste* Hanessian states that she has, "introduced words that describe daily life within our family and the genetic characteristics of my Chinese daughter, Olivia. My interest is both scientific and protective. I will watch how she takes her adaptive behaviours from our environment and frames many of the choices she has in her lifetime."

Like a medieval reliquary, *Blood & Taste* is more than an historic record; rather, it is the actual presentation of bodily relics of Olivia contextualised with inscriptions that create a personal narrative of origin, as well as serving as an apotropaic talisman. Again there is a code switching between the abstraction of information in the form of language and the scientific symbolism of the urine specimen bottle and test tubes and the materiality of the body. *Blood & Taste* challenges us to negotiate the relationship between representation and reality and to explore the book as an archive that, in this case, assimilates even the physical remnants of the subject of which it speaks.

Recent installation pieces, *Epigenomes* and *Illuminated Markers*, develop the feeling of embodied presence through the use of interior lighting. The light passing through translucent porcelain in *Epigenomes* and reflected off mirrors through layers of Plexiglas and resin in *Illuminated Markers* glows in the darkness of the installation. We are there to witness this spark of life, attracted to the sensual physicality of the pieces while at the same time attempting to read the messages only partially legible. To read the inscription alienates the viewer from experiencing the living presence of the object that initially drew one in to read the text.

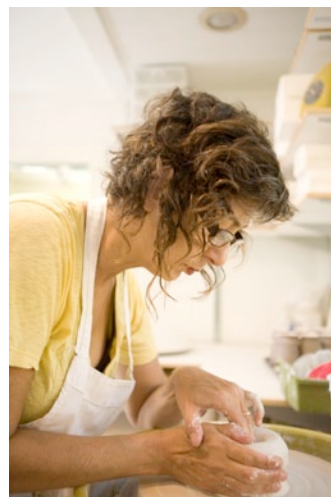
Hanessian's objects, from books, to tableware and scientific equipment reference objects with which we almost always unselfconsciously interact. The book is opened and read. The plate is the stage for the performance of the meal. The lab equipment is used as a utensil and discarded. The uncanny adaptation of these forms in media outside the norm or inscribed in ways that highlight symbolic linkages usually unreflected upon, force an intensified experience of the quotidian. Ludwig Wittgenstein stated, "each thing modifies the whole of the logical world, the whole of logical space" with the additional observation that "aesthetics and ethics are one" suggesting that objects are formative of this logic of space. Holly Hanessian's artwork rearranges our expectations of things and their uses to underscore that a different series of symbolic linkages lead to different interpretations that might lead to different actions, a different logical world. Indeed, God and the rest of us are always playing dice.

#### REFERENCES

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All photos by Christina Poindexter.

*Facing page: Epigenome*. 2011. Translucent porcelain test tubes with rubber stoppers and glass bottles with porcelain markers. 10 x 20 x 5 ft.

*Below left: Illuminated Markers*. 2011. Porcelain, glass Petri dishes, laser-cut mirrors, resin and LED Lights. 5 x 4 x 3 in.

*Below right: Illuminated Markers (Detail)*.

*Above: Holly Hanessian.*

