

One Part Clay

by Garth Clark and Mark Del Vecchio



A.

As owners of a specialty ceramics gallery the current and intriguing question, “what is, and is not, ceramic art today?” is a practical issue rather than an academic one. When we look at new art that is only minimally about ceramics or else employs only a small part of the medium in the finished piece, we have a dilemma. Do we broaden the boundary of what we consider to be ceramic art? For instance, with some Native American tribes one is considered to be a member if one has one-sixteenth Native blood. Could the same apply to ceramics?

It is a complicated question, not easy to resolve. Outside the gallery neither of us see art in black and white terms, fired or unfired, clay or not clay. But inside the gallery that perspective is necessarily more conservative. We are a private entity. No one subsidizes us for showing new art that might be a decade ahead of its market. That is the role of public spaces, not for us, although we do try and work on the fringes of innovation.

If we are to remain a gallery for and about ceramics, where do we draw the line without becoming dinosaurs? If we go too far we become a multi-media gallery, which is not our intent. If we pull back too much we cut ourselves off from the invigorating energies of the new. But clearly we are not super-conservative because a few of our artists have made it to *One Part Clay*, the first exhibition to try and define this tricky line between ceramic art’s presence and its near invisibility.

Organized by Mark Dean of Dean Project, this exhibition excites us because we have been witnessing (and enjoying) the morphing of ceramics from a remarkably hermetic field into one that is beginning to flourish in the creative sunlight of multi-media. We have even played a small role in its advance and recognition with exhibitions like *Groundswell: The New Wave in Ceramic Art*, at our Long Island City Project Space. But taking this on and explaining and propagating this should be the charge of a younger generation, not just the artists, but also the support team, writers, curators, dealers. Monkey gland injections do not substitute for real youth; brash, fearless, and eager to assault the status quo. Ceramics desperately needs youthful heretics and Dean, thirty-two years old, bursting with energy and vision, fits the bill.

This exhibition comprises work by eight artists, seven from the United States (John Byrd, Nicole Cherubini, Chad Curtis, Doug Jeck, Michael O’Malley, Reinaldo Sanguino, Adelaide Paul) and a collaborative from Europe (Liet Heringa and Maarten van Kalsbeek from Amsterdam). Most of these artists once had a primary interest in ceramics. Now they have reduced clay to part of a broader palette of materials. A few, notably Cherubini, have kept it as their dominant material. But for the others one might even argue that its role is of little consequence, just a passing holdover from their recent past. Either way, all of this is deeply threatening to a ceramics world that is wrestling with a very rapid deconstruction of the place of ceramics in art.

Many view this multi-media movement as a Trojan horse, ready to release its warriors in the dark of night and destroy the medium’s material solidarity. In talking of Greeks, remember how Voulkos was seen in the late 1950s and early 1960s as the Ceramic Antichrist, a destructive force who would kill off ceramics? Today his work looks more traditional than radical. The threat of change is always more terrifying than change itself.

In art, when the revolutionary spirit takes flight, there is always a period of destroying the old followed by rebuilding. Often in the later stages of the coup, cherished aspects of the earlier regime are restored, rehabilitated, modernized and taken back into the fold. This is healthy revitalization—the eternal renewing cycle of birth-death-decay-rebirth—and by its nature it is often messy, smelly, disrupting, disturbing, irreverent, even cruel.

What Dean is encouraging us to do is to look at work that does not slavishly worship the kiln and see it as new romance that takes ceramics to a place that is, yes, risky, but because of that also exciting. This will not be an easy show for many to swallow. Aside from getting used to differences in our levels of comfort and reward, this work also challenges what has always been the basis of collecting in craft-based materials. Mostly collectors have a passion for one material; clay, glass, wood, metal, fiber, and focus mainly on that interest. Yes there are collectors who collect all materials, but they are decidedly fewer.

A.
Adelaide Paul
Orsomadre, 2005
porcelain, leather, metal, mixed media
28.5 x 10.5 x 21
photo: John Carlano



B.

B.
Adelaide Paul
Orsomadre detail, 2005
porcelain, leather, metal,
mixed media
 28.5 x 10.5 x 21
 photo: John Carlano



C.

C.
Chad Curtis
Platform Landscape
(single tree, green), 2006
ceramic, mixed media
 21 x 11 x 18



D.

D.
Chad Curtis
Untitled
(Anatomy Series #4), 2005
earthenware encapsulated
with rubber, fluorescent,
mixed media
 23 x 12 x 12

E.
Chad Curtis
Untitled
(Anatomy Series #2), 2005
unfired porcelain, earthenware
encapsulated with rubber and
resin, mixed media
 20 x 16 x 12



E.

These works immediately question the viability of this kind of material specificity. For instance, is Adelaide Paul's new work no longer of interest to those who have collected this artist's ceramic work in the past? Does this sculpture with its meticulously assembled and sewn skin of lamb's leather now belong to the fiber camp? What do you do when one of your favorite artists shifts their materials and yet continues to explore what you have always loved in their vision? The crucial question is simply, do you now grow with the artists into new zones of experience, or do you reject them and go back to others who promise predictability?

Interestingly, the artists Dean has selected, while not seeing themselves as part of the craft movement, have mostly chosen not to express their independence by going either anti-craft or anti-beauty, which is a relief after years of the badly-made and the ugly claiming higher ground. Much of the work in this exhibition is made with breathtaking skill, not an uncommon path in recent postmodernist art and one that the art critics are beginning to notice and applaud.

Adelaide Paul's leather clad greyhounds for instance have masterful tailoring in grey lamb's leather that makes her work more chic and elegant than the greyhound itself. Even elements in this piece that are disturbing—like the metal zipper in lieu of a spine, suggesting a crippling bondage, a dark implication for a racing dog, or the absence of gender—have an aesthetic charm and are impressive for the skill with which they have been realized.

In this case we see the artist's craft not as a demonstration of her manual abilities but as a way of imparting a tenderness and respect through the touching fidelity of her handwork. The purpose of her craft is not to impress but to impart emotion. And the ceramic part? That is not easy to spot. In *Orsomadre* one finally has to look into the dog's mouth for the almost fetal porcelain pup it contains.

One can read certain meaning into the choice of porcelain, its unglazed nakedness, its skin-like smoothness, its ominous use of black rather than white, its preciousness but then it may also just have been a convenient option. The artist herself barely addresses material as a subject in her own explanation of the piece, "it is a piece about indefinable and irresolute dichotomies. It has lush leather skin but no gender, a zipper yet no clothing,

nothing to reveal. It carries a puppy—or a fetus, in its mouth, but it cannot nurture it. The puppy/fetus is at once vast possibilities and lost potentials; she and her caretaker are inextricably bound to each other and yet cannot reach each other."

Chad Curtis's strange machines are likewise made with impressive precision and seem to be so perfectly engineered (i.e. high craft in industrial terms) that one almost expects them to switch on and be functional rather than fictional, even though what their purpose might be is not clear. This handling of his objects has a physical authority. This is necessary if one is to take the next step with confidence, into the artist's imagination.

In *Untitled (Anatomy Series, #4)*, Curtis manages to communicate several things at once. Despite the almost precious look, the work comes across as strongly masculinist. Not that stylishness and masculinity have any reasons to be contradictions but in the conventions of our culture that is often the stereotypical take. Also in this piece, the only element that is ceramic is a spout from a pre-Columbian stirrup pot. For the ceramic cogniscenti this is a charming piece of wit, particularly seeing the way he has adapted it to his work, juxtaposing futuristic laboratory equipment with a rich cultural past.

In *Untitled (Anatomy Series, #2)* Curtis works with unfired porcelain encapsulated in rubber and other mixed media, embalming the clay permanently in its raw and plastic state. At the same time the form he uses for the clay, the outlet pipe under the toilet bowl, has its own history courtesy of Mr. Crapper, the Englishman who perfected the flush toilet, and Marcel Duchamp who transformed bathroom plumbing into high art. This is playful, providing us with an ever-shifting array of targets both informed by the past and immediate intuitive reaction.

As he explains it, "My work is primarily concerned with the psychology of objects and the way objects are experienced through the body, both in the traditional modes of sculpture and the visceral nature of our own experience. A curiosity for structure, form and color continues to drive my investigations while conceptually exploring the packaging/marketing aspects of our culture and the drive for technology, resulting in a curiously familiar hybrid that deceives expectation. Materials—wet clay, rubber, aluminum, porcelain and plastic—are chosen for both their known tactile nature and the metaphorical qualities this process of hybridization suggests. The slick,

inviting and, often times, seductive surface/skin of the work gives way to implications from the source of these objects and the suggestions they provoke."

There is another edge to Curtis's work and that is what could be called "fi-sci," this is fictional science, objects that seem to be part of some scientific process or experiment. We have seen this with other artists as well. Cindy Kolodziejki's work started taking on this position some years ago with her vessels attached to retort stands. It harks back to a long-standing romance between art and technology, a seemingly incompatible relationship, yet with a lot of potential even if it is teasingly difficult to consummate.

The best-known collaboration in this regard in American art dates back to 1956 and Robert Rauschenberg's EAT (Experiments in Art and Technology) but there have been others and fi-sci is all over contemporary art today. Curtis makes the point that, "Technology has become the filter through which we, principally, see the world. In fact, technology, defined as the sum of a culture's practical knowledge, has *always* been the filter through which the world is viewed and, in that sense, this experience is not new."

In his latest work there is another twist on the technology theme. *Platform Landscape Series: place / location / locale*, deals with the transient nature of life, "transient both in terms of one's locale and, also, one's existence. In many ways, this work serves as iconic imagery, memories of places visited or inhabited, and dreams of locations yet to be realized." With these artworks Curtis invokes the global positioning satellites (GPS) and *Google Earth*, which offer the ability to plot locale, globally, within a matter of feet. But with a twist. GPS is used to locate where a place *is*. Curtis's wall mounted landscapes use simple technology allowing one to position a place where you want it to *be*.

Reinaldo Sanguino's ceramic crowns from his *Gods & Designers* series, a delightfully tongue-in-cheek title in a celebrity infested design world, uses imagery from past and present society, "with particular reference to class, religion, and gender. I work with diverse materials such as clay, paper, plastic, canvas, wood, and also new and found objects. My work is about individuality and desire, with particular interest in the fusion of these ideas in relationship with our current society."

In *Black Crown #4*, beauty is delivered with a glossy, smooth, Disneyesque charm. It is almost too pretty but this is deliberate and the saccharine quality also sets up an edge, provoking a mild aesthetic toothache. It makes us feel a little uncomfortable as it teeters on the cusp of low and high art. This kind of object confuses those audiences who confuse roughness of finish for sincerity. Its superficial slickness makes it suspect, untrustworthy, but conversely it also offers an aesthetic that by its very accessibility, becomes seditious.

The crown could rest happily on the head of Sleeping Beauty, perfectly designed for sentimental cartoon royalty, but in a ironic twist it ends up getting placed on the head of its purchaser, and then a photograph is taken of its newly minted owner and is shown alongside the crown, completing the work. The collector being crowned by his or her purchase of art is a wonderful irony that resonates on a dozen different art levels, political, aesthetic, financial. Does this crown the collector as the true power? Or does it talk about the power behind the throne?

What this group of works does not uphold is the love of process and material as an end in itself. As exquisite, hedonistic and self-indulgent as some of the processes and material choices are, and as much as the artists often enjoy this part of their art, this work clearly tells us that it is not about being dazzled with skill. Clearly, all of the beauty and process is just a conduit and we are left, sometimes to our own devices, sometimes aided by titles and other material, to discover that loftier destination.

Nicole Cherubini's pots make this point rather brutally. They are not polite and of all the artists in this exhibition, her work is the most different. It is in its way anti-pottery, anti-craft and anti-conventional beauty. She is an artist working outside the usual expectations of ceramics. The bridge between art and the design-look is missing. The work is still primarily clay albeit playing host to a wide array of other, mostly found, materials. Her craft is determinedly without finesse, cherishing its inelegance like a clunky badge of honor, but it is not without intelligence. She knows what she is doing and what disturbances she wants to create and just how far off balance she wants to keep the viewer. It has a similar feel to the work of Andrew Lord, which is also very well crafted but adopts an outward style that would seem to deny this fact.

In *A Pair of G-Pots with Some Cherubs and Two Branches*, Cherubini has assembled a mixture of hand made and molded forms in ceramics (both earthenware and porcelain) embellished with luster, fake gold and silver jewelry, chain, yellow and pink rabbit fur, enamel, and a plywood pedestal. This ooze of color creeps over the highly textured surface like a relentless oil spill but it has a visceral energy and is effective at getting under one's sense of good taste.

Her work has always intrigued us, however, we never "got it" personally until we came across a series of her photographs, *Rose's House*. As the artist explains, "These images are from an on-going project documenting my grandmother's house, both the interiors and insides. By cataloguing her surroundings, I am able to enter into this developed aesthetic and come to a more complete understanding of excess, abundance and at times, their subsidiary, decay."

In the context of her photographs her pots make wonderful sense as the one medium brilliantly illuminates the other. The photographs show us exactly what the eye sees in the beginning. The pots reveal to us how her mind transforms and mutates the same images, into another landscape of experience, reaching into the gut and letting the images melt and merge into new realities far beyond retinal accuracy. This is how we understand many artists in the arts; seeing their main body of work in juxtaposition to a variety of other secondary media that they pursue simultaneously—on film, on paper, on canvas, in performance and other means.

Film tells us something about the artist that their sculpture may not. Their drawings reveal truths, insights and epiphanies that are too deeply imbedded in the sculpture to be easily detected. Collectively they explain the artist's vision. This has very rarely been the way of the ceramist. Shows are traditionally all-ceramic and in this regard we blame the schools that have, with exceptions, not encouraged their students to explore their artistic vision beyond the kiln.

Indeed education is going to have an even greater problem with this direction than we, its audience, because many schools are simply too unsophisticated in their approach to art to be able to understand and encourage this direction. For an artist to thrive in this open pluralistic manner requires an education that is more diverse, more inclusive of other media, less judgmental about defining ceramic arts boundaries. We see that ceramic

departments fear this direction as, if this course is taken, they may end up being nothing more than a technical facility, like a bronze foundry. What we must be careful to acknowledge while praising these artists is that this work is, outside the clay club, not new. The artists are working with languages already in current use. Work of this style and content, sans clay, has been around for some time amongst younger artists and harks back even further to Dada, Surrealist assemblages in the first half of the 20th century and to *Arte Povera*, *Nouveau Realisme* and Pop Art in the second half. Ceramic art is encountering the mainstream and is making its own contribution and adaptations that result from the difference in the journey that brought them to this point. This is not insubstantial as developments go. Moving from Side Street to Main Street is quite a journey for a traditionally provincial medium.

We are sure that the right wing of the medium will bemoan this growing trend and fret endlessly in *Ceramics Monthly* and other journals that these artists are joining the enemy (which is how many ceramists view the fine arts) and are giving up what is unique about ceramics as their price for membership in the high-art club. The truth is that there is room for both, all-clay and partial-clay are not mutually exclusive. Also, from what we have seen, those who come from ceramics into the mainstream tend to be mobile and unpredictable, at times de-accentuating the ceramic role and at other times celebrating it. In an ever more pluralistic world (and we speak of the world at large, not just art) this move to put art ahead of clay signifies a healthy maturity that many of us thought would never arrive. Now that it has, let's give it the benefit of the doubt and see where this leg of the journey will take us.

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Garth Clark is a dealer, historian and critic. He was the 2005 recipient of the Mather Award for Distinguished Art Criticism from the College Art Association and his latest book, *Ceramic Millennium*, an anthology of papers from twenty years of the Ceramic Art Foundation's symposia, has just been published by NSCAD Press.

Mark Del Vecchio is the co-founder of the Garth Clark Gallery. He is a recipient of the Visionaries Award of the Museum of Arts and Design and an Honorary Doctorate from the Kansas City Art Institute. Del Vecchio was an organizing director of the massive Ceramic Millennium conference in Amsterdam in 1999 and author of *Postmodern Ceramics* for Thames and Hudson in 2002.

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F.
Reinaldo Sanguino
Portrait #4, Gods and
Designers Series, 2006
lambda print, edition of 5
15 x 20
photo: Nick Ghiz

G.
Nicole Cherubini
A Pair of G-Pots with Some
Cherubs and Two Branches, 2004
terracotta ceramic, fake gold and
silver jewelry, chain, natural and
green rabbit fur, luster, enamel,
gouache and plywood
60 x 38 x 20
photo: George Lynde

H.
Nicole Cherubini
Rose's House, 2002
c-print mounted on aluminum
edition of 5



G.



H.



F.