

ceramics

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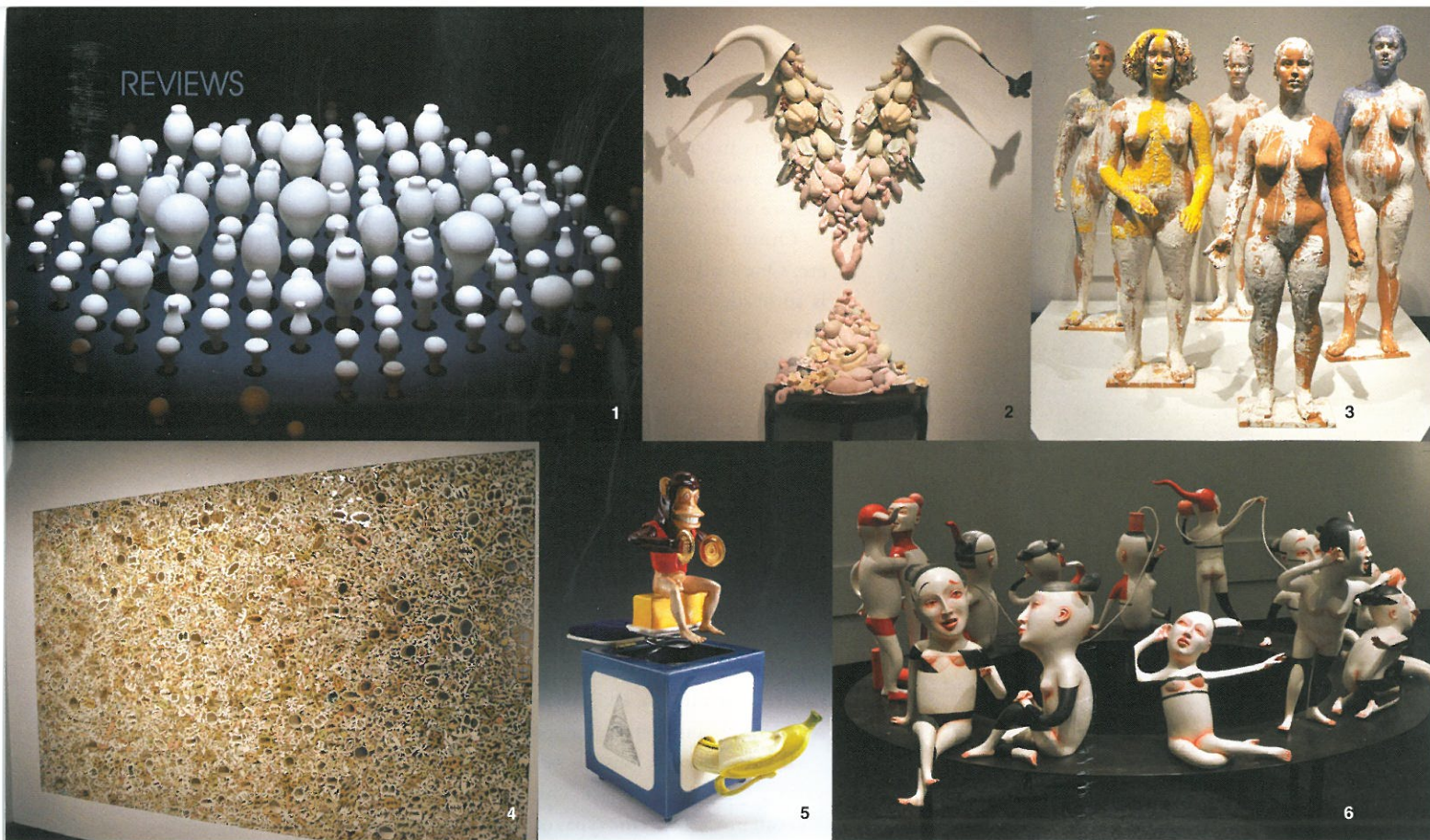
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1 Yuki Nakamura's *Brightness*, porcelain, DVD, DVD player, projector, 2010. 2 Dirk Staschke's *My Beautiful Nothing*, ceramic, mixed media, 2010. Courtesy of Kobo, Seattle. 3 Kathy Venter's *Coup D'Oeil*, terra cotta, 2010. 4 Nathan Craven's *Kosmeo Wall* (detail), ceramic, glaze, 2010. 5 Sean Erwin's *Guilty Pleasure*, porcelain, glaze, China paint, luster, mixed media, 2010. 6 Patti Warashina's *Gossipmongers*, whiteware clay, underglaze, cords, steel, 2010.

Bellevue Arts Museum Biennial 2010: Clay Throwdown by Matthew Kangas

This exhibition at the Bellevue Arts Museum (www.bellevuearts.org) in Bellevue, Washington, was exemplary, demonstrating how group shows with ceramics should be selected, juried, curated and displayed. Not perfect, it was nonetheless the most important museum survey of contemporary Pacific Northwest ceramics since curator and historian LaMar Harrington's 1979 double-museum survey, "Another Side of Art," at the Seattle Art Museum and the University of Washington Henry Art Gallery. The accompanying book has become an iconic record and guide.

Thirty-two years later, ceramic art from Alaska, British Columbia, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Washington has matured and improved considerably. The emergence of strong individual talents not necessarily tied to regional trends like Funk art (as was the case with the Harrington show) was the most newsworthy and critically significant factor. With 33 artists chosen by a jury out of 170 entries, there were a few who barely merited museum inclusion but, by and large, the artists selected were impressive. Jurors were BAM chief curator Stefano Catalani; professor and artist Akio Takamori; collector and ex-dealer Bif Brigman; and Museum of Contemporary Craft curator Namita Wiggers. Each entrant was asked to suggest a museum-specific installation or special project.

Catalani shrewdly followed up on the accepted artists' proposals, suggesting they pursue something special, less commercial perhaps, for the exhibition. Like a true biennial, say the Venice Biennale (where Catalani lived briefly), artists had a chance to make special installations in some cases, taking advantage of the museum's sleek, 7000-square-foot, third-floor area and outer rooftop sculpture court (containing Arun Sharma's deteriorating human figure, *(de)composition man*).

Thanks to the presence of the Canadians, the whole affair took on an international character that was missing from the 1979 extravaganza. Unlike a true international biennial, however, there was no big catalog filled with learned and trendy essays. Instead, there was one all-day symposium that artists, collectors, curators, and critics attended. Again, unfortunately,

there was no proceedings document either. BAM has generated over a dozen catalogs in the past four years; these documents should have been among them.

Pottery, sculpture, gallery vessels, and installation art were the predominant categories on view, spread throughout the spaces in generously lit and displayed areas.

Chris Antemann [see the September 2010 CM, p. 22], for example, had an entire "formal dining room" set aside for her spectacular riff on 18th-century Meissen porcelain figurines of young men and women. Spinning off a banquet table at its center, Antemann (now a visiting artist at the Meissen factory) arranged couples in racy embraces, secret encounters, and humorous assignments, all of which were echoed in surrounding framed color photographs detailing the couples engaged in amorous acts. By alluding to an era that produced the French novel of seduction and betrayal, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, Antemann draws analogies to the naughty "hooking up" generation of today who, as in her photos, are often caught in *flagrante delicto* thanks to video, iPhones, and Facebook presences.

With the Canadians Paul Mathieu, Kathy Venter, Dirk Staschke, and Brendan Tang [see February 2011 CM, p. 30], Pacific Northwest ceramics look more sophisticated and Euro-tilted than in 1979—when the Canadians were left out. Mathieu's *Odalisque* bowls are now produced in the People's Republic of China. Reversing the feminist male gaze toward women to the gay male gaze of other men, reclining nude men are photo-filtered and applied to the bowl's interior and outer lip. Probably the most widely acclaimed among all the chosen artists, Mathieu's new work has evolved in much more interesting ways beyond his fragmented and deconstructed pots of a decade or more ago. He also symbolized a trend (revived by Howard Kottler 30 years ago) of outsourcing fabrication and construction and using photographic decals. Remaining big gallery vessels and failing as sculpture, Mathieu's *Odalisques* could only have their



7 Charles Krafft's *National Futurist Object for Stefano C.*, slipcast, hand-painted porcelain. 8 Paul Mathieu's *Damien (Odalisque Bowl)*, porcelain, hand painted in China from Photoshopped photographs morphed over a virtual bowl form. 9 Arun Sharma's *(de)composition: man*, clay, plastic. Courtesy of Monarch Contemporary, Seattle. 10 Jason Walker's *Nuisances, Bread Crumbs, and the Pedestrian*, porcelain, underglaze, overglaze enamel luster, concrete, 2008. Courtesy of Ferrin Gallery. 11 Nicholas Nyland's *Totem*, glazed stoneware, 2010. All images courtesy of the artists and, where applicable, of the galleries noted. All photos: Nora Atkinson.

impact executed in ceramics. Art-historical allusions, rather than Antemann's ceramic-historical ones, strengthen Mathieu's new vision. Can we now look forward to bowls based on David's *Death of Marat* or Courbet's controversial double nude lesbian portrait, *La Source*?

Smith People's Choice award winner Nathan Craven made *Kosmeo Wall*, which comprises an entire wall viewable from both sides. Cleverly accentuating the Steven Holl-designed building as container, the idea of architecture was expressed as a tour de force of extruded and fabricated forms; each perforated or punctured, many with witty sayings or words on them. This provided an unusual see-through screen that also recalled Islamic and Indian Mughal latticed sunscreens.

Yuki Nakamura's *Brightness* was in a darkened area nearby, all the better to see the video projection of light-bulb filaments onto the cast-porcelain floor display of differing light bulb shapes. This contrasted with the fantastic satire of social networking media by Patti Warashina, *Gossipmongers*, a circular display of seated figures connected by wires and earphones, each face expressing a different surprise as the original message is distorted and relayed.

Celebrity culture is delightfully skewered by Charles Krafft. Why is it that only older artists seem to be the critical voices about the shallowness of today's tabloid-driven society? Coming on the heels of important group shows in European museums and a solo show in London at Stolen Space in the East End, Krafft adapted his signature blue-and-white ware to five celebrities who combine warped political power with cheesy, personal absurdity: Kim Jong Il of North Korea; President Mahmoud Ahmedinijad of Iran; popular singer Amy Winehouse; serial killer Charles Manson; and turn-of-the-century charlatan and occult poseur Aleister Crowley. Their animated facial expressions contrast well with Tip Toland's contorted, gold-covered male nude. Both artists nod to the facial contortions on the figures of 18th-century Austrian ceramic sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt.

The human figure, so strong in Harrington's survey, is still an important subject in Northwest ceramics, but perhaps not quite as important

as before. Sean Erwin's *Guilty Pleasures*, and works by Cynthia Lahti, Saya Moriyasu, and Jason Walker suggest that size plays less a part when bolstered by numbers and density of display. Elsewhere, Daniel Duford adapts tabletop display by painting scenes on the "walls" of the table. It was hard to detect the connections between the side images and the figurative objects up top, including a self-portrait as a severed head on a platter.

Critic Donald Kuspit long ago made the comment that Seattle artists seemed to create out of a sense of occasion rather than inner necessity. (At the time, public art was riding high, but the charge may still hold in shows like this.) Not all of Catalani's generous faith was repaid: one Ken Shores gilt-edged and feathered assemblage would have been enough.

On the other hand, stacked-shelf and tabletop displays of functional wares by Nicholas Bivins, Rob Fornell, Damian Grava, Sequoia Miller, Kevin Snipes, Gwendolyn Yoppolo, and looked great. Fornell deserves a museum show of his own with his luscious glazes and woodfiring genius. But then, for young curators and critics, "Clay Throwdown" was a godsend: plenty of new artists to watch (my money is on Nicholas Nyland); time for mid-career assessments (Attention, curators: catch up with European museums and Charles Krafft.); and lots to discuss about the jury system; awards funding; institutional politics; and the national craft leadership position that BAM is gradually staking out for itself.

Dirk Staschke's Price Award piece, *My Beautiful Nothing*, ends the exhibition on an enigmatic note. Garlands of flowers descending to a black hole in a table, it embraces celebration but somehow, like a vanitas still life, reminds us of imminent mortality as well. With all due respect to the late LaMar Harrington (who once had a rock band named after her, to be fair), Pacific Northwest ceramics have come a long way.

the author Matthew Kangas, frequent CM contributor, has a new selection of art reviews, *Return to the Viewer* (Midmarch Arts Press), which also includes some pieces that originally appeared in these pages.