

2015 NCECA BIENNIAL

BY GLEN R. BROWN



As the modernist inventors of the collage, assemblage and installation art formats were quick to realize, chance encounters between otherwise unrelated elements can add to art not only the potential for discovery but also a heightened poetic effect. The same consequences can accrue to art exhibitions when they lack predetermined themes. Such exhibitions—generally of the co-juried variety—tend

to create their own meanings spontaneously from the conditions under which they are organized, selected, and displayed, and these uncontrived but often surprisingly coherent meanings can sometimes be more interesting than those deliberately invoked. This has often been true of the “National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) Biennial,” which tends to be formed

through a not-always-genial negotiation among three jurors selected for their differing perspectives on contemporary ceramics. In its 2015 manifestation, this negotiation occurred between sculptor Anders Ruhwald, functional potter Linda Christianson, and Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery Director Jo-Ann Conklin. As Ruhwald's juror statement stresses, the Biennial was not a presentation of "current trends in ceramics" and could not be said to "point in any particular direction." It was, however, a creative collaborative expression that proved every bit as engaging as any survey of the field or prognostication of the future might have been.

The ponderous nature of clay as a material and the force of gravity that reveals that quality were everywhere emphasized in the collapsing, sagging, bulging, and slumping of forms. Nearly a quarter of the 50 works sported visible drips that drew the gaze downward with heavy finality. The physical impression of weight was matched by a psychological inertia enveloping most of the exhibition. Due partly to restraint of the majority of the pieces to a monochromatic or bichromatic palette and partly to a narrative-quelling restriction of the full human figure to only two works, this general sense of quietude obviously exerted its influence over visitors, who spoke in hushed tones. No doubt the inclusion of only one sculpture that could be called humorous (Paolo Porelli's *Pink Shout*), and few that invoked whimsy, encouraged the solemnity of gallery-goers. Also influential in this regard were the otherworldly sounds of the video portion of Vlad Basarab's *The Archeology of Memory_Large Book*, which, like the heavy bells of a Buddhist temple, seemed to consecrate the air with their strange resonance. A curious inverse pendant to Basarab's soundtrack, Jeffrey Mongrain's undulant clay-and-marble-dust *State of the Union Address December 3rd 1929 President Herbert Hoover;...returning to normal...* concretized sound waves in a weighty, immobile disk.



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1 Aaron Nelson's *Pixel*, 10 ft. (3 m) in length, up-cycled vintage porcelain plates, steel, rare earth magnets, digital decals, 2013. 2 Paolo Porelli's *Pink Shout*, 29 in. (74 cm) in height, stoneware, slip, 2014. 3 Jeremy Brooks' *Shinowear*, 8 in. (20 cm) in diameter, stoneware, slip, glaze, ceramic decal, 2014. 4 Eva Kwong's *Kermes-1*, 23 in. (58 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, 2010. 5 Donna Cole's *Regeneration II*, 17 in. (43 cm) in height, porcelain, stoneware, crystalline and ash glazes, oxidation fired to cone 10. 6 Zimra Beiner's *Grey Alphabet* (detail), 44 in. (112 cm) in length, glazed earthenware, 2014.



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The effect of fortuitous composition—a natural rather than planned disposition of forms—characterized most of the works, from Ned Day’s majestic pile of snarled clay ribbon, *Loopalooza III*, Katherine Taylor’s glassy, melting *Texas Land Body 6*, and Ginnifer O’Keefe’s pinched, sagging, skeletal *Bazket in Yeller* to Donna Cole’s speleothemic *Regeneration II*, Ling Chun’s painterly *Moving Landscape*, Joshua Clark’s dripping *Dayglo A Handle*, Karin Karinson Nilsson’s decomposing accretion *We Take a Deep Breath*, and

Andrea Marquis’ *Nightshade*, a dark and viscous quadruple trellis. Biomorphism gave the sense of natural composition to other works, among them Eva Kwong’s red-spotted *KERMES-1* which reared like a slick gastropod, Marissa Neuman’s *90 Degrees and Sunny*, in which a sky-blue glob languished on a doubled futon beneath a shading palm, and YunWook Mun’s installation *POOF 2.0*, composed like a black-and-white Joan Miró in three dimensions. Zimra Beiner’s *Gray Alphabet* felt vaguely surrealist in its abstrac-

tion as well, its array of pale, stone-colored forms, some jutting column-like above the rest, recalling the late paintings of Yves Tanguy.

Nearly half of the works could be described as plates or vessels, though these ranged from such invitingly functional pieces as Zac Spates' crusty trefoil-spouted *Firebox Pitcher*, Lorna Meaden's soda-fired and slip-inlaid *Shot Glasses*, Clay Leonard's attractively minimalist slab-built porcelain *Oval Nesting Bowl Set*, and Lauren Karle's twin Talavera-inspired covered bowls *Arroz con Leche with Adriana* to such sculptural vessel-referential forms as John Rohlfling's stunning untitled cubist composition, Brooks Oliver's *Wobble Vessels*, Raymond Rorke's evocation of partially unearthed antiquities in *Setting for Celadon I*, and Matt Repsher's intricately pierced *Arch Bottle*. Decals lent crispness of detail to the meandering parade of flies on Ivan Albreht's *Re-deconstructed Platter*, the encounter between 18th-century courtiers in Jeremy Brooks' *Coming Out*, the aerial menace in Thomas Lane's *Suburban Predators*, and the surfaces of Aaron Nelson's ambitious *Pixel*, a 12-foot square arrangement of plates, attached by magnets to a huge steel sheet, that formed a matrix code. Perhaps most memorable among functional forms was Jeremy Brooks' 8-inch dish *Shinowear*, which not only blended the pathos of human vulnerability with the intimacy of eroticism but also formed an interesting male counterpart to Misty Gamble's *Sunday*, a monumental spread of 49 enameled, beaded, and sequined pairs of slip-cast women's underwear that graced the wall of the gallery's atrium.

In addition to the aforementioned *Poof*, two engaging installations were included in the exhibition. Amiko Matsuo's *Pyrometric*, a reflection on the burn cycles of natural grasslands, compared earthenware caution cones hardened by brush fires in Southern California to the temperature-recording variety of cones



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7 Vlad Basarab, *The Archaeology of Memory_Large Book*, 3 ft. 7 in. (1 m) in length, unfired white clay, video, 2014. 8 Karin Karinson Nilsson's *We Take A Deep Breath*, ceramic. 9 Lauren Karle's *Arroz con Leche with Adriana*, earthenware, 2014. 10 Misty Gamble's *Sunday*, 12 ft. (3.7 m) in length, ceramic, rhinestones, pearl, enamel, beads. Photo: E.G. Schempf. 11 Amiko Matsuo's *Pyrometric*, 8 ft. (2.4 m) in length, clay, glazes, found ash-glaze, 2015. Photo: Brad Monsma. 12 Katherine Taylor's *Texas Land Body 6*, 18.5 in. (47 cm) in length, colored porcelain, glaze, 2014. Photo: Harrison Evans.



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13 Yun Wook Mun's *POOF 2.0*, ceramic. 14 Ned Day's *Loopapalooza II*, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain and stoneware, 2014. Images show a previous installation. 15 Ian F. Thomas' *18-Inch Lift*, 5 ft. (1.5 m) in length, slip-cast porcelain, gold luster, mixed media, 2014.

that slump predictably under the heat of the kiln. In Ian Thomas' poignant *18-inch Lift* a pair of stilts leaned expectantly near a rack of five ghostly white gym balls and one "odd ball" lying alone and deflated on the floor, accentuated in gleaming gold luster as if in honor of its heroic non-conformity. Non-conformity did not exactly rise to the level of an implicit theme in the 2015 NCECA Biennial, since a few of the pieces could quite reasonably have been mistaken for works by jurors themselves. At the same time, the jurors' partisanship, when forced into the kind of compromise necessary in a co-selection process, became a source of creativity that generated a distinctive and cohesive exhibition of slumping solemnity, quietly contemplative form and surface, and constant

emphasis of the physical nature of clay. If, as their catalog statements suggest, the jurors suffered some frustration in agreeing upon a final selection for this exhibition, their loss of domination proved in the end to be very definitely the viewer's gain.

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Subscribers can watch the video component of Vlad Basarab's installation in the Subscriber Extras section at www.ceramicsmonthly.org.

