IN THE EARLY 1980S, WHEN POSTMODERN DECONSTRUCTION of the avant-garde began to look like something more than merely a Dadaesque diversion from the main impetus of art and more than just another dialectical turn within the avant-garde itself, the New York art world indulged in an early effort to resuscitate artistic novelty as a value. This was no naïve attempt to resurrect the modernist dogma of originality and progress; rather, an effective substitute for the avant-garde, a pseudo vanguardism propped up by primitivism, was sought entirely outside of the official art world on battered subway cars and the grimy walls of real-world ghettoes. Graffiti Art became the new ‘new’ – something that at least looked revolutionary, despite the demise of revolution in art; that seemed to escape the deconstruction of originality because it was not just tendentiously original; and, most important, that fulfilled the need of dealers, curators and critics for something on which to hang a proprietary shingle.

Is contemporary ceramics destined to become the graffiti art of the early 21st century? By adopting a title evocative of the Rive Gauche in the 1920s or Tenth Street in the 1950s, the Denver Art Museum’s Overthrown: Clay without Limits made that question unavoidable. For anyone familiar with contemporary ceramics over the past 20 years, the exhibition’s implications of things overthrown was clearly overblown. While the exhibition gathered some of the most important figures in contemporary ceramics, their works – mostly large installations – were not categorically different from anything seen years ago in exhibitions such as Cooled Matter, Columbus College of Art and Design, 1999; Beyond the Physical: Substance, Space and Light, University of North Carolina Galleries, 2001; or Material Speculations, H&R Block Artspace, Kansas City, 2002 – to name only a few examples.

Why the need to conjure avant-garde clichés just because contemporary ceramics were on display in a museum of art? No doubt to some degree the evocation of revolution was just a standard showman’s strategy: a stand-by of what the critic Harold Rosenberg once characterised as a “vanguard academy, placeless and timeless and inspired by the fiction of continuing revolt and novelty”. In the context of ceramics, however, some disturbing implications are invoked by such a strategy.

The suggestion that some kind of avant-garde or its functional equivalent exists in contemporary ceramics, when the rest of the art world laid that modernist ghost to rest more than 30 years ago, betrays a primitivist vision of contemporary ceramics, as though ceramists practiced their craft in the jungles or urban wastelands beyond the pale of art-world events. Moreover, through the truism that the exception proves the rule, a rhetoric of revolt applied to contemporary ceramics, caricatures the field in general as hidebound, restricted by limits that only good, museum-worthy ceramics can overthrow.

These aspersions were no doubt cast unconsciously. The exhibition itself, after all, was more of a showcase for outstanding contemporary ceramics than it was any kind of attempt at polemics about the field. In fact, through its inclusion of at least two examples of work that few would consider particularly new in style, form, or genre, the exhibition at least did not entirely undermine contemporary ceramists’ own understandings of their field as one that expands rather than progresses, that keeps alive everything from the past, both recent and distant, even as it absorbs and utilises new technologies, materials and ideas. It is ceramics artists’ conceptions of a living history of forms and a continuity of materials and techniques that makes them ceramics artists, not the amount of clay that they might or might...
not include in their work or the degree to which they might choose to utilise new technologies and materials or engage new genres.

When ceramics artists such as Sadashi Inuzuka (not represented in Overthrown) and Walter McConnell began producing unfired-clay installations more than a decade ago, the field in general responded positively to the material and technical aspects of their work and readily embraced the concept of raw clay as ‘ceramics’. Like McConnell’s contribution to the Overthrown exhibition, Itinerant Edens: Hermetic Garden, Clare Twomey’s Collecting the Edges, a site-specific installation of red clay dust deposited over lintels and in corners of the Denver Art Museum, implicitly acknowledged that...
ready embrace. Collecting the Edges implied the capacity of ceramics infinitely to reconfigure itself physically and conceptually, despite the consistent connection to a material. On a less abstract plane, the installation emphasised the long and intimate relationship between ceramics and architecture.

This was the case with other works as well. Neil Forrest’s colossal red-lacquer coated Flakes, suspended from the ceiling by stainless-steel wire, drew inspiration from the tree-boring habits of ants and the evolutionary sociobiology of myrmecologist E O Wilson but also, significantly, from Islamic architectural ornament, particularly glazed-ceramic tiles. The legacy of ceramic architectural ornament permeated the DNA of Kim Dickey’s impressive freestanding wall, Mille-Fleur (the title of which evoked the horror vacui patterns on the most sumptuous Ching vases) and also inspired the decorative porcelain units of Tsehai Johnson’s To Dust She Returns, an installation/performance reflecting on the historical production of ceramic multiples in both workshop and factory. Similarly, Heather Mae Erickson’s modular Rail & Track vessel set, while blending elements of Scandinavian modern design with a Miró-like biomorphism, conjured the long evolution of industrial dinnerware manufacture from the days of Wedgwood’s Queen’s Ware. In fact, echoes of historical techniques, materials and aesthetic and utilitarian forms reverberated throughout the galleries, confirming the continuity that persists at the heart of contemporary ceramics discourse and practice even as ceramics artists eagerly embrace new techniques, forms and materials.

It would have been more accurate - and fairer to the work and the field of which it is a part - to emphasise this continuity rather than pump up a deflated rhetoric of vanguardism and invoke the stereotypes of convention and radical innovation that such resurrection entails. Nevertheless, Overtrown could in the end be called a significant exhibition for what it revealed about contemporary ceramics as a field. Happily, the sculptures, installations and vessels composing the show, most of them superb examples of contemporary practice, seemed in little danger of succumbing to stratagems imposed upon them. If Overtrown was a reliable indication, contemporary ceramics are not likely to conspire anytime soon with the vestiges of a ‘vanguard academy’ or acquiesce in a role as the graffiti art of the early 21st century.