

# Overthrown Clay Without Limits,

Kim Dickey. *Mille-Fleur*. 2011. Aluminium, glazed terracotta, silicon and rubber grommets.  
Courtesy Kim Dickey and represented by Rule Gallery, Denver.

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 ghettos. 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

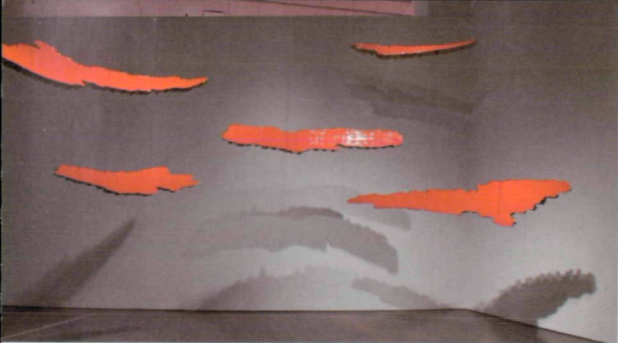
Block Artspace, Kansas City, 2002 – to name only a few examples.

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.

## A Review by Glen R Brown

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.

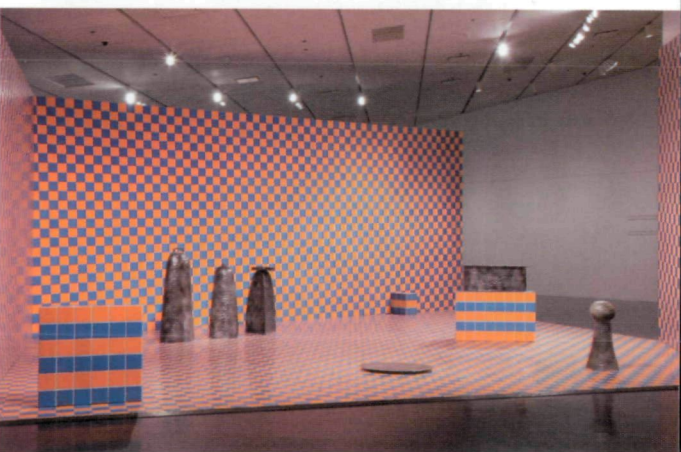
These aspersions were no doubt cast unconsciously. The exhibition itself, after all, was more of a showcase for outstanding contemporary ceramics than it was any kind of attempt at polemics about the field. In fact, through its inclusion of at least two examples of work that few would consider particularly 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



Left: Neil Forrest. *Flake*. 2011. Stoneware, automotive lacquer, lead glaze, urethane fittings and stainless steel cable. Assisted by Andy Brayman with thanks to Dave Fredrickson and Yusef Dennis, Nova Scotia Tourism, Culture and Heritage and the Canada Council for the Arts.  
Right: Del Harrow. *Wedgewood Black Hive/Hole*. 2011. Slipcast black porcelain.  
Above photos by Jeff Wells.



Left: Tsehai Johnson. *To Dust She Returns*. 2011. Porcelain, feathers, paint and hardware. Courtesy of Plus Gallery, Denver.  
Right: Walter McConnell. *Itinerant Edens: Hermetic Garden*. 2011. 4,800 pounds of moist clay in plastic enclosures, plywood, polystyrene, figurines and light. Assisted by students from the University of Denver and the Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design.



Left: *Installation Case at Overthrown*. Various Artists.  
Anders Ruhwald. *Like the New Past*. 2011. Glazed earthenware and mixed media. Courtesy of Gregory Lind Gallery, San Francisco.

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



Left: Clare Twomey. *Collecting the Edges*. 2011. Red clay dust. Site-specific project for the Denver Art Museum supported by Jana and Fred Bartlit.

Right: Jeanne Quinn. *You Are The Palace, You Are The Forest*. 2011. Porcelain, glaze, lustre, wire, electrical hardware and paint.

of a Martha-Stewart-meets-Bridget-Riley interior design. Set atop a tiled counter, a roughly fashioned, elongate gray vessel – part washbasin, part sink, part bathtub – recalled the humble utilitarian character of the vast majority of ceramic objects of the past 10,000 years as well as ceramic fixtures in contemporary domestic kitchens and bathrooms.

Modularity and multiplicity (two characteristics central to ceramics since the earliest moulded vessels and plaques of Mesopotamia but only introduced as theoretically

significant to contemporary art in the latter half of the 20th century) were thematic in Del Harrow's *Wedgwood Black Hive/Hole*. Evoking through their shape the glazed hexagonal tiles used frequently in Islamic architecture and referencing through their material the distinctive Black Basaltes vitreous stoneware introduced by Josiah Wedgwood in the 18th century, the modules of Harrow's sculpture implicitly reflected 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, *Overthrown* 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 *Overthrown* 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.

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 behaviourist implications of "ornamentation and context of a space". Johnson's elegant forms, deployed to create tendrill patterns on the gallery walls, recalled, among other historical examples of ceramic architectural ornament, the Buen Retiro garlands of the 18th century Porcelain Room at Madrid's Palace of Aranjuez.

Jeanne Quinn's intricate, illuminated *You are the Palace, You Are the Forest* suspended amid a torrent of glistening wires, revived the elegance and intricacy of 19th century Meissen porcelain chandeliers, (such as those at Schloss Linderhoff) and recalled millennia of flickering lights on pottery oil lamps illuminating the world's interiors before the modern age. Connections to ceramics in more recent domestic interiors were pronounced in Anders Ruwald's *Like the New Past*, an orange-and-gray-checked environment that vibrated optically in the jarring aesthetic

Glen R Brown is a Professor of Art History at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, US.

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All photos by Jeff Wells provided courtesy of the Denver Art Museum.

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