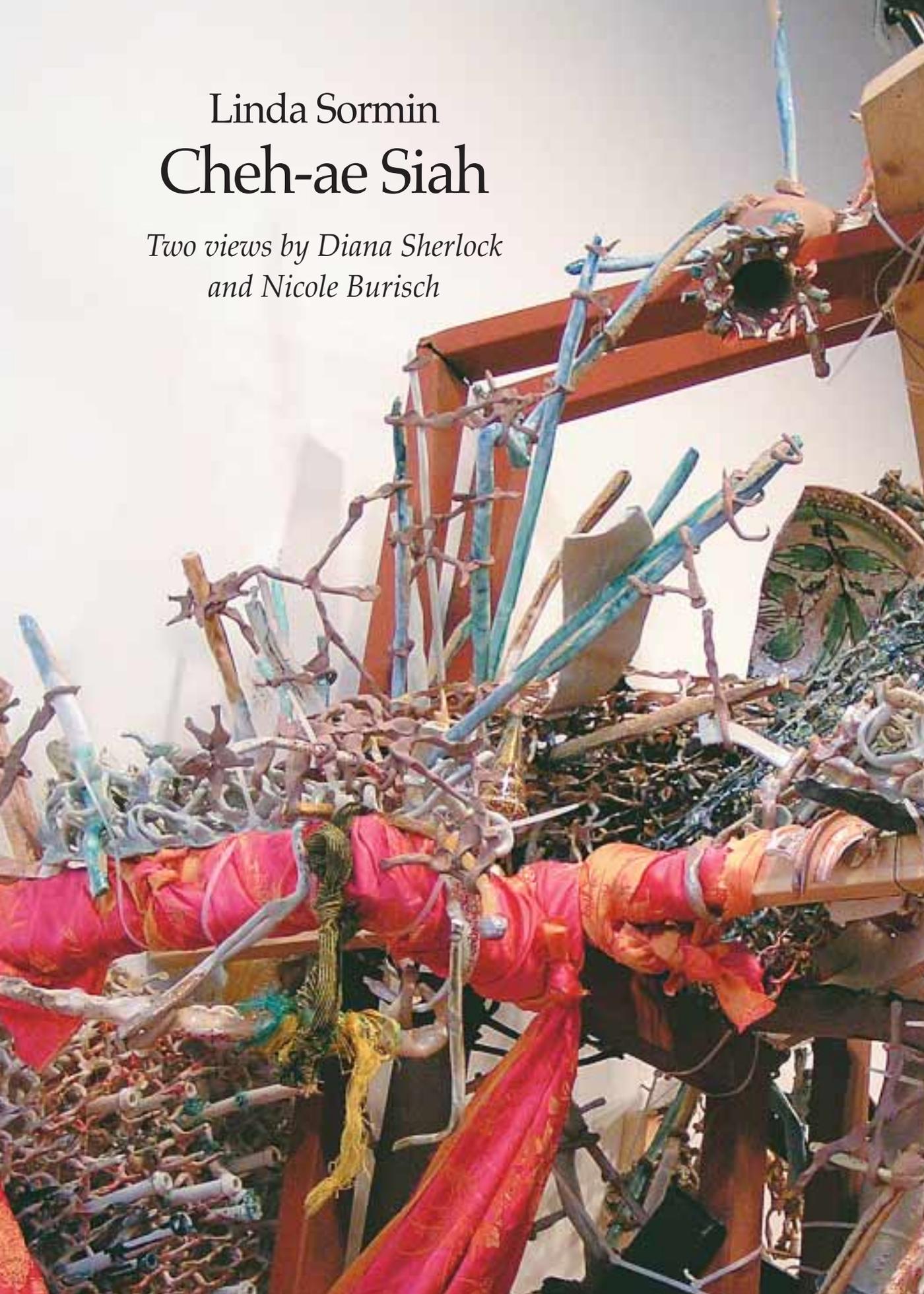


Linda Sormin
Cheh-ae Siah

*Two views by Diana Sherlock
and Nicole Burisch*





1. ARTICLE BY DIANA SHERLOCK

AS IF OVERFLOWING FROM THE TOWER OF BABEL ITSELF, Linda Sormin's 2006 exhibition, *Cheh-ae Siah*, offered the language of ceramics to audiences at Stride Gallery in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Born in Bangkok to an Indonesian father and a Chinese mother who grew up in Thailand, Sormin was raised in Southeast Asia and South Western Ontario. Her ongoing interest in language as a site of cultural identity is informed by her family's hybrid cultural heritage and her childhood memories of creating a private language that blended Malay, Thai, Cantonese and English. The exhibition's title – *cheh-ae* is drawn from a Southeast Asian dialect (Karen) for 'to giggle,' and *siah* is 'to lose' in Thai – montages cultural references to continue this playful exercise. *Cheh-ae Siah* foregrounds the precariousness of our lives and values things born from hybridity, absurdity and a loss of control.

While working for a humanitarian agency in Laos during the early 1990s, Sormin reconnected to the idea of community and the physical investment that goes into handmade objects. Following this experience, she began using unpredictable ceramic processes as a metaphor for the precarious and shifting nature of life itself. Sormin quickly realised the refined vocabulary, idioms and colloquialisms of ceramics could be restructured, like language itself, to reinvent familiar forms like bowls, cups and figurines and create new meanings. Moment by moment, Sormin began writing her story in clay or, as she says, "pinching the narrative".

Sormin borrows literally and figuratively from the language of ceramics to build a sculptural catalogue of references to ceramic histories and traditions. Described by Sormin as "driven by appetite", her 2006 ceramic architectures – hand-built grids, roaming extruded structures – devour salvaged

ceramic fragments and cannibalise commercially produced kitsch objects and souvenirs. Objects are fused to forms and forms are built on top of objects, but there is no obvious underlying structure. From a distance these constructions give the appearance of large abstract sculptures concerned with form and materiality. On closer inspection, one discovers narrative connections between the smaller juxtaposed elements that might reference the history of ceramics, Sormin's travels or any of a number of other cultural narratives.

Sormin's new works follow a similar premise, but function in reverse. At Stride Gallery she began with found, self-contained and self-supporting metal scaffolds reminiscent of modernist formalist sculpture on which she grafted salvaged remnants of porcelain, stoneware and earthenware objects. Hand-built, altered, found and reconstituted ceramic grids and shards are attached with pinched wet clay coils, gluey slips, colourful cloth fragments and, perhaps a few too many, plastic zap straps. Each towering, topiary-like construction is based on a familiar ornament – a Blue Mountain Pottery ceramic deer, a white ceramic swan, and a celadon-glazed elephant – yet the final result is alien in its excess and frivolity.

At times the underlying structure is totally encrusted with ornaments, glitter, glazes and foil leaf that blur the line between form and decoration. Here, surface drips, sprays and splatters are highlighted as fetishes of the ceramic process. The works evoke a wonder more suited to vine-encrusted ancient Buddhist temples, colourful festival floats, museum curiosity cabinets or infinitely repeating products on department store shelves.

Sormin's postmodern constructions always seem on the verge of collapse. By continually resorting the ceramic lexicon, Sormin means to explode cultural



2. ARTICLE BY NICOLE BURISCH

and aesthetic categories. These works pose questions: What are bad ceramics? What is bad taste? What values comprise these aesthetic judgments? More importantly perhaps, Sormin interrogates how these value judgments inform our identities and social, political and economic ways of being in the world.

The idea of becoming or knowing who we are in the world is largely formed by our interactions with others and the material world. To date Sormin's installations have been process-oriented, labour-intensive and performative, but solitary. *Cheh-ae Siah* is the first time Sormin has relinquished control and actively worked with a team of collaborators to produce the work. For Sormin, collaboration continues her process of personal and social reinvention; "I like to unbalance myself in my practice, throw new loops into the game." Responding to Sormin's overall objectives, volunteers brought their individual skills and aesthetic biases to a collective environment and created works in the spirit of an elaborate exquisite corpse.

There are no discreet, cohesive or authentic identities within Sormin's extreme ceramics. Each material, process and maker melts into the other – entangled in a hybrid where form and surface become one. The works are physically and conceptually provisional and unstable. Here creativity is about potentialities, a speculative utopianism that embraces chance, risk, failure and surprise.

Top: *Portal 2* (detail). Ceramics and found material.

Diana Sherlock is an independent contemporary art curator and freelance writer who works in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. A version of this article was previously published in the Arts and Books section of the *Calgary Herald* on April 8, 2006. Caption title page: *Blue Mountain Deer* (detail). 2006. Ceramics and found material.

IF SUCH A THING AS THE 'CERAMIC ESTABLISHMENT' could be said to exist, Linda Sormin's ceramic sculpture practice could certainly be viewed as working towards its reform – not necessarily towards its complete elimination – but towards a necessary re-evaluation of the systems and values that are at the core of contemporary ceramic practice.

Sormin's exhibition *Cheh-ae Siah* at Stride Gallery in Calgary April – May 2006, showcased her radical approach to the materials, processes, technique, collaboration and an aesthetics of clay. Over the course of several days, Sormin installed three new works in the Stride space, colonising the walls and floors with her large accumulative sculptural works.

The Stride space provided an appropriate venue for the installation of these works. The gallery's narrow space was interrupted by the protruding and seemingly unstable outcroppings of the pieces, forcing a conscious and almost intimidating navigation among the works. The sense of precariousness and unease was heightened by the fact that two of the works had been built up the walls of the gallery, with overhanging sections jutting up and out into the space above. Any approach to investigate smaller details of the work inevitably required being close to or beneath these seemingly precarious overhangs. This forced positioning highlighted the contrast between the distinct physical presence of the works and the small detailed narratives and objects hidden within them.

Sormin's sculptures are built using an array of processes and materials, cramming together masses of unfired clay with shards of discarded and broken ceramic remnants, found objects and metal supports. Delicately pinched lattice-like grids join and cover the assembled pieces of fired, re-fired and raw sections. The finished works present a complex, messy and



infinitely layered collection of surfaces, forms, and references.

By including examples from across the spectrum of ceramic materials, Sormin's work dispels any notion of a hierarchy amongst these materials. Fine china cups share a space with raw earthenware coils, and any object – regardless of its previous value or intended use – is eligible to be used as a component of the work. During her artist talk at the Alberta College of Art and Design, Sormin discussed the "obsession with material, and the fetishisation of a ceramic thing"⁷¹ that can be a focus among those involved with this medium. The re-examination and questioning of this 'romanticisation of material' is an idea that continually surfaces in her work, where it is enacted through her combined use of so-called high and low materials. Contrary to the typical practice of choosing one material and mastering its properties and applications, Sormin's works suggest an equal weighting of all ceramic materials and undermine any emphasis on purity and value.

A similar democratisation of process also exists in these works. No single technique is given precedence over another with wheel-thrown, slab-formed, press-moulded, pinched and mass-produced wares all co-existing within one piece. The tenets of mastery, craftsmanship and skill are questioned in these combinations: simple and accessible methods of forming, building and attaching are visually equated with labour and time-intensive approaches. Many of these simpler processes can be learnt and used by anyone, and (like the pinched components) employ recognisable repeated gestures that are easily understood by all viewers. Each process inherently carries its own vocabulary, history and traditional purpose; and when placed side by side, present an impressive array of recombinations and juxtapositions.

For the installation at Stride, Sormin invited volunteers and students from the Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD) to assist with the building process. While her previous works have often included

donations of broken or discarded ceramic pieces (a tradition that began with people leaving these 'gifts' outside her studio at Alfred), this was the first time that several contributors had been involved with building and assembling. Sormin admits that in some ways it was challenging and even "harrowing"⁷² to have other hands involved in the process. She explained that when she is constructing these forms on her own, she understands their structure and knows exactly how their parts have been linked together and thus has a better sense of how much can be added or altered. Often her sculptures are intentionally built up to the brink of collapse and, with collaborators involved, she may not have the same understanding of their stance or stability. However, she also insists that she would certainly try the collaboration again, saying, "I think it's possible to get too familiar with a material or process. I try each time to set up a new challenge or new experience."⁷³

The installation created in Stride incorporated donated pieces from students and local artists, as well as using abandoned welded metal sculpture projects from ACAD as structural supports for the works. Their inclusion created a subtle undermining of their original intention: transforming once-pristine formalist studies into functional structural reinforcement, covered over in dense and colourful ceramic embellishment. In some ways, the traditional functional role of ceramic vessels is referenced in this aspect of the works.

The inclusion of recognisable fragments from other ceramists' work presents an interesting 'ceramic in-joke' for those who know their makers, while also questioning the preciousness or exclusivity of artistic authorship. The new collaborative approach employed at Stride takes this subversion a step further. Rather than fetishising the distinct and solitary work of a single artist, this inclusive process included the hands and choices of more than a dozen contributors.

This collaboration is indeed a strong reworking of the framework of individual artistic practice, and



Sormin points out that the works at Stride would not have been possible without the help of the students, volunteers and hosts. While the stereotypical (and much-lauded) notion of a ‘strong ceramic community’ does factor into the making of her work, Sormin agrees that her practice might also hold a potential for disrupting this idyllic view of the ceramic scene. “There are... tensions and points of fracture within the so-called community. I would be interested in looking at those and letting them surface a bit. And visually that does happen in the work.”⁴

These fractured viewpoints are particularly present in Sormin’s inclusion of what might be considered ‘bad ceramics.’ Alongside the use of typical kitsch objects – trinkets, souvenirs, mass produced junk – she also encourages and explores technical faux-pas and structural mishaps. Glazes are allowed to pool and run over on to the kiln shelves, and sections of the work are pushed to the verge of collapse through repeated firings. It is in these ceramic misbehavings that the work shows its conceptual strength; communicating ideas about the messiness and precariousness of human existence and implying situations of risk, chance, chaos, failure, and surprise.

By pushing the limits of what is considered possible – structurally, technically and conceptually- Sormin suggests new and unconventional ways of reworking a ceramic practice. Her work presents a host of challenges to traditional approaches to the medium, while also using a vocabulary of processes, materials and references that can be understood by ceramic practitioners of all kinds and viewers from many backgrounds.

REFERENCES:

1. Sormin, Linda. Artist talk. The Alberta College of Art and Design. March 17, 2006.
2. Sormin, Linda. Personal interview. March 24, 2006.
3. Ibid.
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Nicole Burisch is writer on the arts from Alberta, Canada.



Top: Cygnalia Wing (detail). 2006. Ceramics and found material. Above: Celephant. 2006. Ceramics and found material.