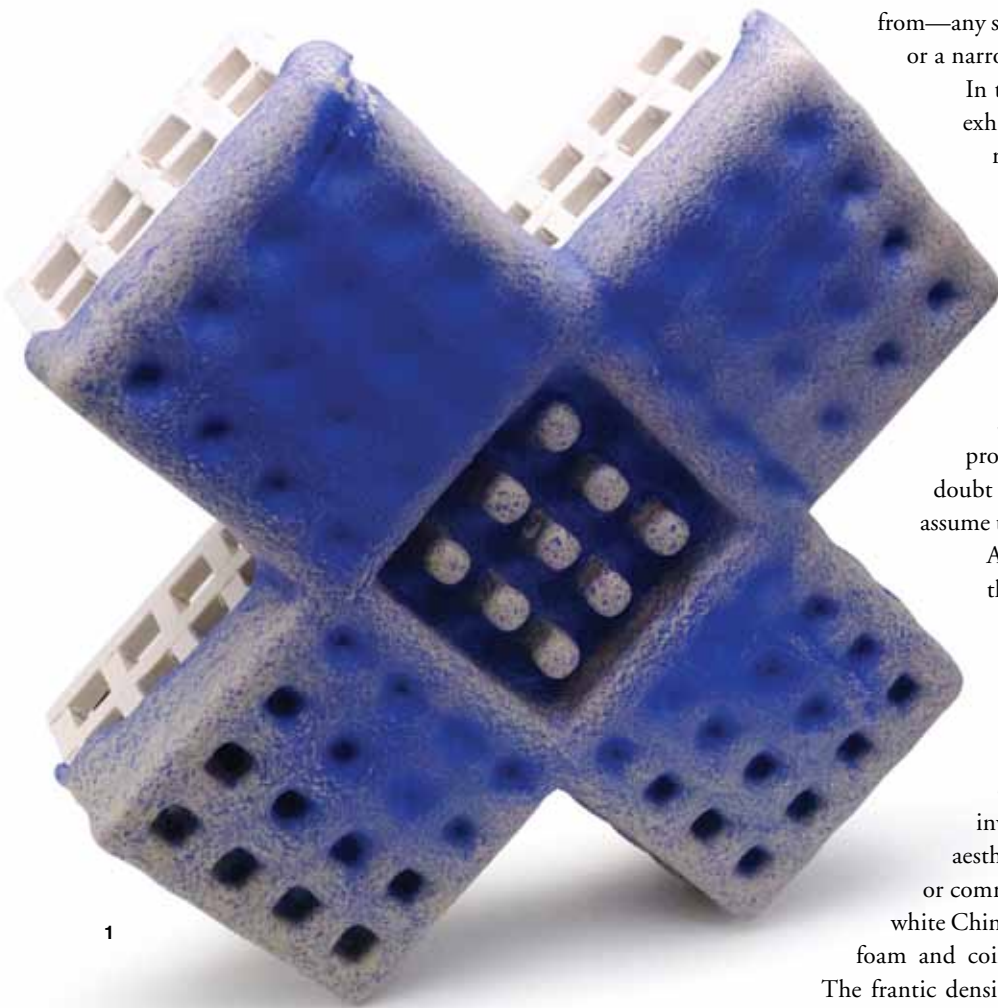


CERAMIC TOP 40 REVIEW

BY ANTHONY MERINO



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There is a bit of hubris in titling an exhibition “Ceramic Top 40: New and Selected Works,” a show that was recently on view at Gallery 224 (<http://ofa.fas.harvard.edu/ceramics/gallery224.php>) at the OFA Ceramics Program at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. We all have preferences we bring to viewing art, so no single exhibition could objectively represent the top 40 ceramic artists in the world. Given the near infinite combinations of clays, subjects, styles, and firing combinations available to choose

from—any selection is going to reflect the curator’s tastes or a narrower exhibition theme.

In this case, curator Leslie Ferrin intended the exhibition to focus on the top 40 innovative ceramic artists exploring contemporary trends.

This group included well-known, emerging, and under-represented artists. To the organizer’s credit, there were only a few pieces that seemed under par for such an exalted standard. Of these few pieces, the artists whose work I was familiar with have all done much stronger work. Again, in this small group of problematic pieces, I will give the benefit of the doubt to the artists who I am less familiar with and assume they have done much stronger works as well.

A few of the pieces in the exhibition engaged the viewer on a visceral level. This sampling was not only small, but also included some of the exhibition’s least engaging work. The exception was Linda Sormin’s *List*, 2013, a mad assemblage of texture, trimmings, gold leaf, and roughly made ceramic honeycombs and matrices. Sormin invests the work with a wonderful egalitarian aesthetic, every detail, no matter how precious or common—from gold leaf or shards of blue-and-white Chinese porcelain, to ridges of bubble-gum-pink foam and coiled sprigs of clay—has the same import.

The frantic density of surface, pattern, and shape created a perceived gravity, pulling the viewer into the piece. *List* unfolds like a fractal as the viewer peers into it, revealing more complexity and craziness.

The same gravitational effect was achieved far more economically in three of the exhibition’s other stand-out works. Sara Moorhouse’s exquisite geometric forms—*Large Pulse*, 2013 and *The Same Red*, 2013, both multi-colored bowls decorated with narrow banding, remained assertive above the densely packed exhibition. The artist generates a striking paradox in her work. There may be few ceramic objects more ubiquitous than a striped bowl and yet,

all of Moorhouse's pieces seem almost singularly original. The elevation of the almost hackneyed subject that Moorhouse chose adds to the originality of the pieces. This gravitational dynamic resonated in Giselle Hicks' *Wall Quilt with Floret and Stars*, a panel of nine tiles with patterns placed on indigo blue surfaces. While as simple as Moorhouse's work, Hicks' designs are far more delicate. This creates a sense of preciousness that undermines the economy of the work.

While Moorhouse's pieces stood out partly because there were really no other similar works in close proximity, there were several clusters of related works arranged throughout the exhibition, the most prominent of which featured several artists who incorporated traditional blue-and-white Chinese porcelain in their pieces. The most intriguing was done by Richard Shaw who blurs the line between subject in object in *Blue Willow Tea Set*, 2013, a traditional blue-and-white tea set placed on a *tromp l'oeil* book. Making a sculpture of a teapot out of porcelain provokes issues of authenticity and perception. In a strange way the work is a conceptual successor to Duchamp's Readymades like *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1964, a snow shovel leaned up against a wall. Both works force the viewer to consider how much aura is innate or invested into an artwork. This context gets magnified by the inclusion of Robin Best's *The Florida Vases*, 2014, and Paul Scott's *Scott with Cumbrian Blue(s), Fukushima*, 2013, both of which are contemporary reinterpretations of traditional styles and motifs and read as straightforward decorative ware. In contrast, by adding the book and broken cookie, Shaw completely alters the context of the work. Finally, the influence of blue-and-white porcelain on Stephen Bowers' work seems to have gone through manufactured china. He paints patterns and pictures on the top of two skulls in *Explorers' Skulls*, 2010.

In addition to a cluster of pieces based on blue-and-white china, the exhibition included a collection of small-scale figurative works. Bowers' work bridges these two groupings. These small figures were perhaps the most idiosyncratic works in the show. Almost all of these pieces sought to put their audience on edge. Sean Erwin mounts a head on a torpedo, the nose cone of which is covered by underwear, thus changing the connotation in *Pervert II*, 2013. Léopold Foulem alters kitsch porcelain figurines to create a sexually explicit scene in *Trio Flower Patch*, 2012. Foulem plays against the cultural association their contemporary audience brings to slip-cast porcelain figurines—which are more closely associated with *Precious Moments*™ dolls or historical tableaux than erect penises. He is perhaps also referencing the ways in which these historical groupings figurines were sometimes used to convey coded messages regarding sexuality, for example



1 Peter Christian Johnson's *Blue X*, 16½ in. (42 cm) in height, ceramic, 2014. 2 Giselle Hicks' *Wall Quilt with Floret and Stars*, 30 in. (76 cm) in length, slip-cast porcelain, 2012. 3 Sean Erwin's *Pervert II*, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, polished porcelain, glaze, luster, red oak, steel, starched fabric, oil paint, resin, 2013. 4 Ron Nagle's *Snuff Bottle*, 2013. 5 Sara Moorhouse's *Large Pulse* and *The Same Red*, to 18 in. (46 cm) in height. Both pieces are white earthenware, underglaze, glaze, 2013.



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through the placement of beauty marks on the faces of the figures or inclusion of certain animals in the tableaux.

Like Foulem, two artists, Michelle Erickson and Alessandro Gallo make pieces that mine the association people bring to kitsch imagery to generate irony that helps to convey their intended meanings. Erickson uses the ways that people understand and respond to kitsch objects to comment on different topics with her ceramic figurines. In *Green Squirrel* and *The Second Amendment Squirrel*, both from 2013, Erickson depicts two squirrels, one holding a threaded metal nut and the other a gun that is pointed at the first squirrel. The animals are rendered in a sentimental, unreal and slightly silly manner. Erickson combines these connotations with ideas suggested by the objects the squirrels are holding to effectively mock gun control debate rhetoric. Gallo depicts a tarantula on a leash held by a hybrid human/animal figure in a winter jacket who's seated on a park bench and is mundanely tapping on a touchscreen in *Scripta Elegans*, 2011. The surreal work

parodies the tradition of making animal figurines that are cute, fluffy, and almost completely devoid of naturalism.

The most consistent subgroup of work in the show included artists who merged both control and fluidity (or the illusion of it) in their work. Ron Nagle's *Snuff Bottle*, 2013. In this small, pink, heart-shaped bottle, Nagle shows off his mastery of subtlety and illusion. Two details entrap the viewer's attention. First, what appears to be glaze drips half way down the base like melting chocolate, while the bottom edge is lined with bright red. This dripping-glaze effect is created through a combination of the shape of the form, and underglazes, glazes, and paint or overglazes, adds a seductive sensuality to the work. Second, the bottle is slightly tilted. This detail creates a sense of temporariness and fragility. The connotations swirl into a bittersweet cacophony in the viewer's imagination. Three other artists used the same device of juxtaposing the fluidity of glaze on highly structured works. Robert Silverman's *4 Versions of Red (1)*, 2012, Peter Christian Johnson's *Blue X*, 2014,



and Steven Young Lee's, *Cup Panels (red)*, 2013, all engage the viewer using this device.

Ceramic Top 40: New and Selected Works presents a specific collection of the most innovative artists working with clay. While this casts the exhibition as subjective, it has to be, as no selection of 40 artists could be a true cross section. This does not diminish the overall impact of viewing the show however, as the majority of the work in the exhibition is both unique and engaging.

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6 Robert Silverman's *4 Versions of Red (1)*, each 12 in. (30 cm) in height, re-fired commercial porcelain tile, 2012. 7 Michelle Erickson's *The Second Amendment Squirrel and Green Squirrel*, each 8 in. (20 cm) in height, indigenous clay, copper glaze, 2013. Photo: Robert Hunter. 8 Alessandro Gallo's *Scripta Elegans*, 15¾ in. (40 cm) in height, ceramic, acrylics, mixed media, 2011. 9 Léopold Foulem's *Trio in a Flower Patch*, 20 in. (52 cm) in height, ceramic and found objects. Photo: Richard Milette. 10 Stephen Bowers' *Explorers' Skulls*, 5¼ in. (13 cm) in height, slip-cast ceramic, oxide stains, underglaze, clear glaze, 2010. Photo: Grant Hancock. 11 Linda Sormin's *List*, 23 in. (58 cm) in length, earthenware with found shards, figurines, 2013. 12 Steven Young Lee's *Red, Blue and White* (detail of red cups), 50 in. (1.27 m) in height, porcelain, copper inlay, cobalt inlay, white slip, glaze, glass shelving, aluminum, 2013. 13 Paul Scott's *Scott with Cumbrian Blue(s), Fukushima*, 17¼ in. (44 cm) in height, inglaze decal collage on partially erased earthenware platter, 2013. 14 Richard Shaw's *Blue Willow Tea Set*, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, glazed porcelain with overglazed details, 2010.