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SOFA NY 2007: A Review

by Urmila Mohan

This review of SOFA (Sculpture Objects Functional Art) NY 2007 attempts to add to the discussion and debate over the roles of art and craft in ceramics, while providing a brief overview of the galleries and artists showcased this year. SOFA NY is an international event with galleries and artists from the USA, U.K., France, Denmark, Japan, and Korea. It is a three-day show and sale of figurative and abstract sculpture in various media including ceramics and glass, jewelry, folding screens and textiles, and was held at the Seventh Regiment Armory, New York, from June 1-3, 2007. Featured artists gave lectures about their work, artists gave informal talks and there were book signings at various exhibition booths. More information can be found at www.sofaexpo.org.

The world of ceramic art has, in the last couple of decades, seen huge changes, especially with the growth of galleries featuring 'fine art' ceramics by American and international artists. Through their decisions on which ceramicists to patronize, galleries like Garth Clark, Nancy Margolis, Ferrin, Joan Mirviss, Dai Ichi, Franklin Parrasch, Max Protetch, and the newer Dean Project have changed the way clay is viewed in the art world by collectors and curators.

The Post-Craft Movement

Setting the theme for this year's show, Mark Lyman, Director/Founder of SOFA, described SOFA artworks as "premier examples of a post-craft art movement...a further embrace of the abstract and sculptural over the functional, increasingly sophisticated intellectual content, and experimentation with new materials."

Ceramics moved from being a utilitarian to a sculptural medium in post World War II America. A recent exhibit which ran until September 3, 2007 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art titled 'One of a Kind: The Studio Craft Movement' was based on this topic. Just where the Studio Craft Movement ends and the Post-Craft Movement begins, is unclear. Ceramic artists like Richard Notkin and Bonnie Seeman are included in this show as well as being represented at SOFA NY. Robert Marquis' 1970 glass work American Acid Capsule Container although nearly four decades old would have fit in well with more contemporary works at SOFA NY.



Regardless, the intent is clear. The word craft is being phased out in favor of design. SOFA NY was started ten years ago at the behest of the 'Museum of Arts & Design', New York, which got its present name in 2002. Formerly the 'American Craft Museum', the museum now "explores objects created at the crossroads of art and design". The absence of the word craft in the name of the museum is also echoed in the title SOFA (Sculpture Objects Functional Art).

This use of the word craft can be traced back to William Morris' Arts & Crafts Movement. The word crafts became synonymous with everything that was not fine art, i.e. functional items. It also referred to the skill of execution of an object. Sherry Leedy of Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art Gallery, for example, regards craft as a given and expects all the work sold by them to be well crafted. (The gallery represents Jun Kaneko and was this year's best seller having sold ten major wall works by the renowned ceramic artist.) Beatrice Chang of Dai Ichi Arts tries to educate her customers by showing them that Japanese contemporary ceramics is 'not just craft.' Gallery owner, writer and ceramic historian, Garth Clark talks about the need for well crafted, beautiful items noting the 'breath-taking skill' in recent postmodernist art. While the word itself may soon be considered outdated, the concept of craftsmanship is definitely integral to the works sold at SOFA. The best works seemed to be the ones that were able to balance conceptual sophistication with a comparable level of execution.

And there was plenty of such work. Philip Eglin's *Peekaboo Madonna and Child* series was a solo show at Dean Project and dealt with the consumption of religion and sexuality. Tiny erotic postcards printed onto the Madonna's knees were lit from within – an oblique reference to red light districts. Made of plain white porcelain they are inspired by northern medieval woodcarvings, but are also evocative, to me, of Blanc de Chine figures of Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of compassion.



Margaret Keelan's figurative sculptures were on display at the Lacoste Gallery. Her works reference 19th c. dolls, Mexican 'santos' figures and folk art. Akiyama Yo held his first solo exhibition in the US at the Joan Mirviss Gallery. Student of celebrated Sodeisha co-founder Yagi Kazuo, his sculptures reflect the igneous nature of clay, made using methods that relate to this theme. At Loveed Fine Arts, Patti Warashina's sculptural sake set Fat Cat (part of her 'Drunken Power' series) provided a satirical commentary on today's political landscape.



Exploring Multi-Culturalism

Any ceramic trend, to be fully accepted and to be counted as a 'movement' has to be supported by collectors, curators, dealers, and writers. In his essay 'One Part Clay,' presented at SOFA NY in 2006, Garth Clark touched on the complex position that galleries like his find themselves



in, often having to take a more conservative position to stay successful as private entities. Displaying the more innovative work is according to him, a role for public spaces.

But how many public spaces and institutions actually fulfill their role in this regard, especially when it comes to cultural pluralism?

Dai Ichi (Japanese for 'first' or 'number one') Arts director Beatrice Chang feels that leading a trend can establish her as a visionary, but can also hurt her gallery because she is "five years ahead of the rest." In her experience, museums don't buy pieces unless a few brave private collectors do so first. In order to exert more influence, Beatrice has combined the roles of dealer, writer, educator, and curator. Dai Ichi Arts recently held a show at the Asian Arts Gallery, University of Towson, Maryland titled 'Contemporary Japanese Ceramics: Fired with Passion.' A book of the same title accompanied this

exhibition and a book signing took place at the SOFA booth.

Galleries like Joan Mirviss and Dai Ichi Arts have succeeded in marketing and selling post-world war II Japanese ceramics and can be, directly or indirectly, attributed the credit for nearly 60-70% of the works shown at the recent exhibit 'Contemporary Clay,' a show of contemporary Japanese ceramics held at the Japan Society, New York. Both galleries take special pains to cultivate and maintain relationships with artists in Japan, making frequent trips to the country. It is clearly the passion and determination of individual art dealers that ensures that artists based in another country or from a minority culture are shown and marketed in the US.

Greater numbers of minority artists do not automatically equate the production of (or) the acceptance of culturally diverse themes in the works themselves. So it was heartening to see the work of established Chilean artist Fernando Casasempere who was represented by Joan Bird Pottery, London. Socio-cultural concerns feature strongly in the work of Casasempere, who was born in Santiago and has lived and worked in the U.K. since 1997. His huge sculptures combine recycled copper mining waste with clay. During his interview he remarked on how the art history of South America was not like that of Europe with their tradition of 'Great Masters' and 'landscape paintings.' It is perhaps all the more fitting that Casasempere, (the only ceramic artist to be invited by the Henry Moore Foundation to take part in a project in Venice) made a ceramic piece titled 'Venice Landscape.' This is a subversive interpretation of the traditional landscape, evoking themes of the relationship between the colonizer and the formerly colonized.



Some works at SOFA NY dealt with the complexities of constructing identity within a multi-cultural society. American artist Emmett Leader's latest work 'Slonim Revisited' could be seen at the Ferrin Gallery booth. It is an installation of earthenware sculptures and panels inset within a recreation of an East European wooden synagogue. Through his art, Leader attempts to connect with his religious and cultural identity as a Jew who was born and raised in the US. This bicultural theme is continued in the sheep sculptures of Kitade Kenjiro, winner of the bronze prize in the 2005 World Ceramic Biennale Korea and represented by DF Art International. Kitade combines the forms of sheep heads with human bodies in his ceramic sculptures to convey the artist's Japanese-American identity and as a metaphor for human emotions.



The importance of the exposure and critical attention that minority and emerging artists gain from being represented in an international event like SOFA NY is clear. Ceramic artists of Japanese, Korean, and South American ancestry were showcased this year. However, conspicuous by their absence were ceramicists, whether established or emerging, of African ancestry. There are no African American-owned ceramic art galleries or galleries that specialize in contemporary African American ceramic art in the city of New York. Galleries answered my question about the lack of representation of African American ceramicists with variations of the statement that it was the work that mattered and that they were willing to represent any artist whose work was exciting.



Future Trends

One of the goals of ceramic galleries like Garth Clark, Nancy Margolis Gallery, and Dai Ichi Arts Ltd. was to make ceramics an important part of fine art. SOFA NY 2007 is proof that they are succeeding. In nearly every gallery exhibiting ceramics, I noticed that the trend was towards ceramic sculpture. The

works were mostly content based, and many used unorthodox treatments and techniques. Hinoda Takashi whose 'pop art' sensibility is influenced by Manga (Japanese comics and print cartoons) and Anime (Japanese animation), likens the process of coloring his works to spray painting a car. Kitade Kenjiro wished that people were more open to experimental work since ceramics for him was a 'free media' like any other sculptural medium.

Ceramic art is at a crucial turning point, moving in the direction of fine arts in general. The use of clay in mixed media works and the use of the term ceramicist for artists whose works use little or no clay has created a new dilemma, one that was anticipated at last year's SOFA with the special exhibit 'One Part Clay: Ceramic Avant-garde & Mixed Media.' As possibilities increase for ceramic artists, so will the need for them to become (or choose not to be) multi-media specialists. As fine art moves towards 'conceptual art,' artists have the freedom to combine virtual reality, performance art etc. with materials like clay. I hope that this broadening of the definition of ceramic art will be accompanied by a broader understanding and representation of minority and multi-cultural artists.

Endnotes

1 Mark Lyman, Craft or Post-Craft?, <http://www.sofaexpo.com/loop/?m=200705> (accessed June 8, 2007)

2 SOFA NY 2007 Catalog, Pg 6.

3 It could not have hurt that the cover of this year's SOFA NY catalog features only Jun's work and that The New York Times published a lengthy feature 'Giants of the Heartland', Jan 14, 2007, on his large scale sculptures.

4 Garth Clark and Mark Del Vecchio, One Part Clay, (New York: SOFA, 2006).

5 Althea Meade Hajduk, From Pantry to Pedestal: Collecting 20th Century African American Ceramic Art, unpublished thesis submitted for the MA in Museum Professions, Seton Hall University, May 2004, Pg 49. Meade Hajduk lists statistical data from major ceramic museums in the US showing the paucity of African American ceramists in their collection.

6 This work was not featured at SOFA but is included to reflect his oeuvre.

7 Meade Hajduk, "From Pantry to Pedestal," 53. The author concludes that by not representing African American ceramists, galleries set the agenda for collectors and mold emerging collections.

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