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Top: "The Ming Sisters," to 32 in. (81 cm) in height, earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer and paint, 2003.
Middle left: "Etruscan Series Vase," 11 in. (28 cm) in height, stoneware, 1966.
Middle right: "Balustrade Relief Vase #97-15," 82 in. (208 cm) in height, earthenware, 1997.
Bottom: "Vase and Carpet Diptych" (two views), 32 in. (81 cm) in height, earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer and paint, 2003.
All pieces above by Betty Woodman.



Adelaide Paul's "Be(Witch)," porcelain, surgery table, skull, leather, taxidermist mannequin; at SOFA New York, Seventh Regiment Armory, New York City, and Garth Clark Gallery, Long Island City, New York.

review:

One Part Clay

by Elizabeth Reichert

"One Part Clay: Ceramic Avant-garde and Mixed Media" was originally presented by Mark Dean of the Dean Project at the June 2006 SOFA (Sculpture Objects and Functional Art) show in New York. Subject of a compelling catalog essay by Garth Clark and Mark Del Vecchio, "One Part Clay" was later mounted in September 2006 at Garth Clark's Long Island City space. Here, Dean's show continued to garner an attention both excited and nervous, depending on which end of the spectrum one was watching from: that of the old guard, worried about the artists' material infidelities, or that of the vanguard, thrilled about a fresh generation finally taking clay into the mixed media realm, which, however common within the fine arts world, still has the ability to make of the ceramic art object something utterly revitalized and new.

Comprised of ten artists from the United States (Timothy Berg, John Byrd, Nicole Cherubini, Chad Curtis, Doug Jeck, Sinisa Kukec, Michael O'Malley, Adelaide Paul, Reinaldo Sanguino, and Julie York) and a team from the Netherlands (Liet Heringa and Marteen van Kalsbeek), "One Part Clay" shed light, at its best, on a growing trend among certain ceramists: reducing clay to one element in many so that the clay part in their work becomes just as dominant as their use of photography or taxidermy, video projection or Plexiglas.

At its worst, however, this same exhibition context managed to undermine its own challenges to the material-specific market of ceramic sculpture by placing some of its more innovative artists within that rather vexing conversation of why, how and wherefore the fine arts diverge from the crafts.

Such a conundrum is perhaps only par for the course as critics and curators attempt to label this increasingly sensible tendency among many young ceramists. (Nearly all the artists in this show are under forty and have been trained, or now teach at prestigious ceramic arts programs.) In the words of Chad Curtis, whose current work consists of wall-mounted landscapes that the viewer can reposition left and right, up and down, in much the same way that Google Earth scans near and far: "I am too young to be a pure modernist with a singular focus defined by craft, and yet too old to see everything as relative. 'One Part Clay' recognizes this peculiar problem

and, much like my own inclination towards a concoction of materials, sees the logic in this methodology."

While many bring to their work knowledge from such diverse fields as photography and veterinary anatomy illustration, all the artists here have some foundation in clay that they are subverting, redefining, and in some cases, outright rejecting. Kukec, for example, comes to his work through the shiny unhandiness of design. His "Lucid to the Point of Being Blind"—two split bean shapes placed in a video-projected color panel—is meant to lure the viewer into the experiential field of the object in much the way of countless contemporary art installations. Like Kukec, who made the clay part in his piece disappear into a component more plastic than porcelain, O'Malley's sculpture of blue foam plates hovering on bony trunks makes the clay an entirely spectral presence; indeed, there is no clay in O'Malley's piece; only its residue in the spindly coils that were cast and later filled with hydrocal.

While Kukec and O'Malley are the artists in the group most obviously circumventing clay, others are celebrating its mutability. Excepting Cherubini—whose wonderful vessels are the most firmly rooted in the handiwork traditions of clay and are, with their bling-bling chains and collared furs, the objects in the show most embraced by the mainstream art world (she has been in several New York sculptural shows)—many of the artists here are rendering their clay unidentifiable as such.

John Byrd, for example, covers his anatomical animal studies in a spray epoxy to suggest plastic, the effect of which renders the clay part in a piece like "Simple Anatomy, Slow Burn" even more artificial than it already seems when placed next to the uncannily alive fox head. Adelaide Paul sets skull next to porcelain to suggest flesh and bone in her masterly crafted and surprisingly beautiful red leather beast crouched on a chillingly cold examining table. And Reinaldo Sanguino evokes a material altogether new and rare in his jet-black crowns cushioned atop luxurious Tiffany boxes and later photographed on the heads of the collectors who buy them.

Like Sanguino's playful gesture to the collector who renders clay brand-worthy by purchasing it, Doug Jeck's slip-covered face singing in an RCA television set—with an ostensibly

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pretentious and Pathétique French title to boot—seems also to poke fun at the nature of art consumption, specifically within this clay-goes-avant-garde context. The set-up of the television-trapped artist is a familiar conceptual trope, and Jeck's use of an ancient TV atop an ancient trunk carries the message that such easy avant-gardism is old news. Moving then to his ill-armed Young Prince, I couldn't help but take the boy's dreamily closed eyes and stiff arms as a refusal to be anything one part this or that; the young prince would be only itself.

Alongside Jeck's prince, Cherubini's G-Pots, and Byrd's anatomy study, Julie York's "Sweep"—with its successive white shapes framed in Plexiglas and distorted under magnifying lenses—was the other object that seemed to transcend the multimedia context and command it be seen only as itself. While her work, when photographed, resembles the luscious fleshiness and modernist purity of the best of Ruth Duckworth, in real life it morphs and teases and literally sweeps up the viewer's sight reminding one that art does not have to mean anything; visual seduction is enough. Amidst a rather conceptual-minded group, this idea struck me as particularly satisfying.

Some, of course, will not find satisfaction here; they may see Dean's platform as a hopeful dance between ceramics and the mainstream, as gimmicky, as threatening even to ceramic traditions. As Garth Clark warned in his SOFA catalog essay: "the right wing of the medium will bemoan this growing trend and fret endlessly in *Ceramics Monthly* and other journals that these artists are joining the enemy (which is how many ceramists view the fine arts)." Let us not bemoan. Let us say that "One Part Clay" bears witness to what can happen when ceramists look beyond the craft-based idea of material as content. Let us say that these artists mark a welcome and divergent new beginning.

Gay Smith

Works by Bakersville, North Carolina, potter Gay Smith will be on display through November 3 at the Firehouse Art Center (www.normanfirehouse.com) in Norman, Oklahoma.



Gay Smith's "Petticoat Vase," 9 in. (23 cm) in height, thrown and altered porcelain raw-glazed and single fired to cone 10 in a soda kiln; at Firehouse Art Center, Norman, Oklahoma.

"These days I contemplate the relevance of living as a practicing artist in a world torn by conflict and exploited for resources," said Smith. "I am blessed to live where fireflies emerge on the first warmest spring night, where earth and weather miraculously transform seeds into food, where I live synergistically within an evolving globe of blue swinging wildly and delicately in a galaxy among galaxies. How does my work as a potter contribute? Working for many years as a potter seems to develop qualities which I believe are of benefit: caring attention, commitment, honesty, courage, passion, hard work, love of beauty and a willingness to get one's hands dirty."

Tomás Owen

"This Sensuous Earth," an exhibition of sculpture by Tomás Owen, will be on view through December 23 at Xiem Gallery



Tomás Owen's "Que Mango!," 31 in. (79 cm) in height, thrown, altered and assembled stoneware, fired to Cone 6, 2006; at Xiem Gallery, Pasadena, California.

(www.xiemclaycenter.com) in Pasadena, California. The exhibition will be complemented by a selection of Owen's utilitarian and decorative pieces in the gallery's retail section.

"The work in this show is sculptural—an exploration of the human form—yet I approach my work through the techniques of