



*Against The Stream (detail). 2005.
Terracotta. 86 x 111.5 x 28 cm.*

Ian Johnston
Reverence

*Article by
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"It is often said that in today's modern and postmodern world, the forces of darkness are upon us. But I think not; in the Dark and the Deep there are truths that can always heal. It is not the forces of darkness but of shallowness that everywhere threatens the true, and the good, and the beautiful, and that ironically announce themselves as true and profound. It is an exuberant and fearless shallowness that everywhere is the modern danger."¹

– Ken Wilber

I HAVE BEEN TRYING TO WRITE ABOUT CANADIAN ceramic artist Ian Johnston for at least two years now. I start and then I stop. Then I take another approach and I start and then I stop and the cycle repeats itself. What makes this attempt different is the fact that I had beets and onions for dinner because it's February and it is cold, especially for Kansas and although I'm Canadian I've been living in the US to avoid temperatures like this, but tonight the weather will keep me inside and these grounding root vegetables are going to help me find my way to the heart of Johnston's work. The real problem has not been that I don't know what to write, but that there is too much to write about and I can never determine what is the most important facet of his artistic practice, and so I start and then I stop, but maybe not tonight. Maybe I'll write for hours fuelled by deep purple beet power, and electricity. The silver Apple straddling my cozy, warm grey lounging blanket promises to type for awhile before I need to plug it in, and from this vantage point of blankets and beets I can see that what I most want to discuss in regard to Johnston's work is his reverence and regard for the human condition.

Johnston is not making art because he wants an ego's worth of show credits and sales, but he is making art because he is passionate about addressing the serious and grave circumstances we find ourselves in at this time in the life of our planet. Johnston is not a flatlander, he knows the world is round and we are on it, and that just as you cannot take salt out of the ocean, or peel back the glaze from a porcelain cup, we are not going to sell our cars tomorrow as a result of seeing an exhibit of his works. At the same time Johnston is earnest in his efforts to make us aware that the qualities of human existence such as desire and love for the beautiful are intended for more auspicious purposes than a mechanism for driving consumer consumption. However, the paradox in his artwork is that the car and, in particular, something as mundane and irrelevant as a bumper, become one of the forms he uses to saw away at our apathy.

Johnston is not about ramming jargon down our throats and riddling our eyes with objects intended to make us feel any guiltier than most of us already do. We know the planet is in trouble, that global warming is with us, and that the real war being fought is not the one between countries, but the one in every heart where desire draws us into the new car lot, or the clothing store, or on to the plane, and then back to the gas station. However, the irony of my lifetime is that the feelings of remorse earlier generations experienced over lascivious temptations have been replaced by feelings of remorse over wanting a car with warranty or flying on a plane. I now cower in shame not because I've been out having illicit sexual encounters, but because I didn't recycle the newspapers this month, and the eggs I'm buying are from a chicken



Hip - m, Arm - m, Platonic Void. 2005. Glazed terracotta. 35.5 x 25.5 x 25.5 cm.

that has been tortured and enslaved so I can make an omelet. So it is no wonder I can't write about Johnston's work because while I'm trying to justify the purchase of protein from slave chickens he is asking me to consider the integral essence of every human being on this planet and to take some 'heat' for how I personally contribute to the 'heat' of global warming and environmental degradation. Not to mention that every time I consider the firm taut ceramic skin on any one of his forms I am driven to a paroxysm of jealousy because it doesn't seem humanly possible to make clay look like it was rolled from a bolt of fabric, sewn and then pressed into perfect forms, but this is what he does and these are the two things I will write about.

Suddenly under the spotlight of scrutiny paradox glimmers like the raven's five and dime treasure dangling from its beak, such is the artwork of Johnston. He takes the inscrutable dense mass of heavy thick wet clay and turns it into an open window where light pours through on to ideas and issues that henceforth lay in the shadow of subterfuge, ignorance or the unconscious, to reference the intense work of



Outbreak (detail). 2005. Glazed porcelain. 233.5 x 122 x 12.5 cm.

uncovering the 'shadow' in our psyche. Stephen Nachmanovitch in the book, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* writes "Artists often, if not always, find themselves working with tricky tools and intractable materials, with their inherent quirks, resistances, inertias, irritations. Sometimes we damn the limits, but without them art is not possible. They provide us something to work with and against. In practising our craft we surrender, to a great extent, to letting the materials dictate the design."²

Johnston's conceptual interest for this series *Tangible Shadows: Intersections* was to find the dialogue between the material and form so that he could express his fascination with the shadow. He writes: "for me shadows are in the realm between two and three dimensions. They make up a part of every visual experience we have. They are the proof of light, but like gravity they are intangible." Johnston's drape-moulding technique that he employed in this series is an exact example of what Nachmanovitch is referring to. The immutable aesthetic prowess in his

shadow forms is the way in which he has made the clay look weightless and paper-thin. The edges retain a razor sharpness that cuts into space with a definitiveness rarely seen in the ceramic tradition, perhaps because it is so difficult to do. And yet therein lies the essential visual feature of Johnston's work, in that while he achieves the impossible through a medium that prefers modulated texture to pristine luminescent planes, or slightly rounded edges to paper-thin curves, he extracts from the earthy, humble clay – the matter from which the first humans enjoyed the joy of making things – an object that emulates the aesthetic of the technology that is slicing away at our ecosystem. He reminds us that at the source of our energetic attempts to know the unknown and travel to the edges of the galaxy and extract from the core of our earth every possible resource, is a human body made of flesh and bone.

Johnston's work is about mass and matter, and the stuff of our world because he discovered while looking into the metaphorical shadows of human existence the shadow of desire and temptation manifest in the matter that drives us, like our cars and all the various forms of consumerism. Johnston has the intuitive antennae to ferret out the farcical display of prowess and power that is hidden in the bumper on every car. This somewhat helpless structure requires enormous amounts of energy to build or even recycle, and yet our culture demands them as we do every psychological buttress against things that threaten our sense of control. The plastic shields bent around our cars no more protect us from death (when we are moving at the speeds that most of us drive), than do multivitamins or brown bread. Johnston is quoted as saying, "these are completely cosmetic structures – things that have no use but energy, technology and resources go into making them, and if they get a hole they go into the landfill. For me, that is a clear reflection of our relationship to the material world that is out of whack. It represents the depth we have sunk to in terms of our respect for natural resources and materials".

In the work *Tangible Shadows: Intersections* Johnston invites us to watch how he works clay into a decisive and piercing tool of inquiry while he searches out reasons why our Western culture, and now all others by example, are confused enough to have lost the ability to judge what is of value and what is no longer serving anything good, true or beautiful, the three mainstays of any human existence. Johnston probes into the paradox of our time to understand why we have deemed our planet expendable, all of our great cultural and spiritual traditions obsolete and why for the most part we seem able to ignore all the warning signs of impending global cataclysm as irrelevant or nothing more than material for recycling bins and eco-magazines. How many of us are willing to make the signifi-



Bumper – I, Bumper – II. 2005. Glazed terracotta. 35.5 x 30.5 x 40.5 cm.

cant changes required to effect global restoration.

Johnston's current work, perched on the cusp of now, straddles back to the origins of creative endeavour and connects the two every time he touches wet raw clay. His clean polished edges cut into space with the precision of the architect he once trained to be, but the soft inert yielding clay is what reflects the essence of his heart as he asks us to honour where we as humans have come from and to not discard this for the temporary favours of materialism because of our interest in and attraction to the beautiful.

Our current environmental malaise is embedded in our human essence. Just as a fish swims because it is a fish, humans create because they are human, we just didn't know our creations would end up as deadly green house gas. Johnston's experience of clay, as all of us who work with it know, is a healing one. He touches the clay not because it will bend to his will, although he does that masterfully, but because the clay reminds him of his origins, of our origins, of the species we are as pure honest creators, and that is a

good, true and beautiful thing. Unfortunately what we have found out how to construct through the conduit of our creative intelligence is killing the planet with the same ballet of technology that is masterfully uncovering the way to extend individual human lives. The irony is that the ecosystem for our extended individual existence is rapidly dwindling.

Johnston lives in an area of Canada that easily remembers the First Nations, or native peoples of the region, as I think all Canadians do in a way they don't even realize that I see now after many years of being away. David Abram writes in the *Spell of the Sensuous*, "The omnipresent and yet invisible nature of the air ensures that the indigenous beliefs and teachings regarding this elemental mystery are among the most sacred and secret of oral traditions. Native teachings regarding the wind or the breath are exceedingly difficult to track or to record, for to give voice to them unnecessarily may violate the mystery and holiness of this enveloping power, this enigmatic presence (or absence) so obviously essential to one's life and the



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life of the land."³

I don't doubt that the wind blowing through the river basin and around the valley of Nelson, BC, where Johnston lives doesn't carry a message reminding him that his efforts are worthy. The spiritual nature of all creative endeavors is imbued with the quest we are all on to understand our origins and be prepared for our end. The implication of artistic practice is to exercise the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual levels that humans are capable of.

During the past three decades, we have witnessed a historical first; all of the world's cultures are now available to us. In the past it was possible to spend your entire life in one culture, within one small village, in one house, "living and loving and dying on one small plot of land".⁴ But today people are geographically mobile, and we are able to study about every known culture on the planet. "In the global village, all cultures are exposed to each other."⁵

Johnston's concern with global issues is his life's work and before he taught himself to be a ceramic artist when he studied socio-economic issues. Then in 1990, after studying architecture at Carleton University in Ottawa, he taught interdisciplinary workshops around themes of urban renewal and public intervention at the Bauhaus Academy in Dessau, Germany. In 1996, he

along with his partner Stephanie Fischer opened their Nelson BC studio of functional and sculptural ceramics. However Johnston's current interest in China and his upcoming residency in the city of Jingdezhen China where out of its million and a half residents 900,000 people are directly involved in the ceramics industry, is about much more than learning how to make more ceramics. Johnston's interest in China has more to do with his need to see the history and transformation of a place with a cultural story grounded in ancient tableaux and then mixed with the current Communist taboo, not because the Chinese are so different from Johnston, but because he recognises that they are so much the same in their human creative desires.

Johnston's desire to travel to China extends beyond an obvious interest in this country being the birthplace of the ceramic traditions that we love. Johnston's integral perspective is more focused on attending to the way the ancient vessels of China speak about the always present and ongoing common biological reality of every human's need for food and water more than it is about looking at ceramic forms, although of course he will do that too. But tracking the sameness among all people is more important to Johnston than tracking the difference and the trajectory of his life's interests confirms this.

Carol Gilligan quoted in *An Introduction to Integral Theory and Practice*, a theory and practice inspired by contemporary philosopher Ken Wilber, that there are four stages of moral development that in many ways describe the layers of information Johnston is traversing in his quest through the ages looking for a form that will enlighten our world.

Gilligan found that Stage 1 is a morality centred entirely on 'me' (hence this pre-conventional stage or level is also called egocentric. Stage 2 moral development is centred on us, so that my identity has expanded from just me to include other human beings of my group (hence this conventional stage is often called ethnocentric, traditional or conformist). With Stage 3 moral development my identity expands once again, this time from us to all of us or all human beings (or even all sentient beings) – hence this stage is often called worldcentric. I now have compassion, not just for me (egocentric), but also for all of humanity, for all men and women everywhere, regardless of race, colour, sex or creed (worldcentric). And developed further at Stage 4 moral development, what Gilligan and Wilber call integrated, is where the highest level of moral development is expressed.

The *Introduction to Integral Theory* goes on to explain that the I, we and its dimensions of experience refer to: art morals, and science or self, culture and nature. If you leave out science, or leave out art or leave out morals, something is going to be missing,



Oxygen Art Centre – installation view. 2006. Back wall: **Bumper Crop**. 2005. Vinyl bumper covers, acrylic paint. 3.5 x 9 x .5 m.

something will get broken.⁶

Johnston's new work, *Refuse Re-Skewed* is born from his most recent body of work, *Tangible Shadows: Intersections*, that focused on the Hispanic folk culture's votive offerings of *Milagros* the Spanish word for miracle. These forms generally shaped as body parts are created and then offered by people seeking cure through prayer and talisman for their loved ones. *Milagros* are a living tradition and Johnston's *Milagros* are his forms offered on behalf of healing our broken planet.

Self and culture and nature are liberated together or not at all. What Johnston sees and why he continues to marry clay to his touch and through his being, is "unless self and culture and nature are liberated together" nothing can be saved and that until human consciousness can come to see that the cosmetic illusions of our modern world are not truly beautiful our ravenous addictions will eat the planet. Again, the irony is that our propensity for beauty and our love of it are innocent and pure in and of themselves, however without the simple common sense we want for any addict, the fire for our future is burning out. With that in mind Ian Johnston is determined to traverse a mountain of clay shards, through ages piled on ages looking for a form that will enlighten our world in



Hip – f, Platonic Void. 2005. Stoneware with terra sigillata. 30.5 x 48 x 45.5 cm.

such a way that the desire for global health becomes a standard formidable and formable enough to craft a new attitude that will become the mould for sustainable life practices.

REFERENCES:

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3. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 228
4. *Introduction to Integral Theory and Practice* www.integralnaked.org, p. 2.
5. *ibid*, p. 2.
6. *ibid.*, p. 15.
7. *ibid.* p. 30.

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