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REDUCE REFUSE REPURPOSE

by Susan Andrews Grace

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Fall/Winter 2009 Cover



Artist Ian Johnston



"Swimming Upstream in the Comfort of: Homage to Yves Klein"



"Tangible Shadows"



"Just This Side of Dust"

REDUCE REFUSE REPURPOSE

Gallery 2 Art and Heritage Centre

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Architect and sculptor Ian Johnston models his latest installation on the endless multiples of consumer culture.

BY: Susan Andrews Grace

Ian Johnston looks deeply into the transience of physical substance — if matter was a river, it's one into which he's stepped, both as architect and artist. Johnston's inspiration is materiality, and he's fascinated with how and why things break. His new exhibition, *Refuse Culture*, balances between his biography and his inspiration.

Since 2007, Johnston has worked as resident artist in key locations in North America, Europe, and Asia, studying the making of things that become refuse or detritus. The result is three dimensions and eight installations, a beautifully executed, subtly ironic representation of consumption. His processes and work sites mimic societies that produce and consume and speak to the seamlessness between them. The 432 slip-cast porcelain vessels in "Bag Suite in 4/4 Time" were made for him at the Pottery Workshop Experimental Factory in China during his residency there. The vessels are formed like plastic bags, Johnston conceived of them, and the Chinese potters made them, just as most of our manufactured imports.

Refuse Culture examines "refuse" as both noun and verb, and subtly exhorts the viewer to look at what becomes refuse, using the vernacular of the culture. At the same time the work quietly asks us to refuse to participate. Johnston has said that withdrawal is all that's needed for consumer culture to end. He also considers that refusal to be quite simple, once we notice the manipulation behind consumption. Johnston's exhortation, through the installation, is like jazz improvisation — visual riffs that fascinate the viewer as consumer culture mesmerizes with its marketing extravagance. *Refuse Culture* seduces, intrigues, and mimics but doesn't sell. And that refusal to sell a ready-made idea is the heart of Johnston's visual thinking.

Johnston's work recycles three icons of consumer culture — single-use plastic bags, fluorescent light bulbs, and cell phones — all objects that resonate for a global audience. The fluorescent bulbs in the installation "Just This Side of Dust", made in Denmark at the International Ceramic Research Centre, are multiples from a single mold, subtly mocking mass production. The bulbs are used in a chandelier that incorporates "shades" from plastic lettuce boxes, ubiquitous in Denmark, and blue plastic cord— a nod to Danish consumer culture, where extension cords are blue.

Unlike real bulbs, these porcelain and clay ones obliquely reflect Johnston's concern about their disposal. Fluorescent bulbs contain trace amounts of mercury and, in China, enter the food chain because garbage dumps there are accessible, both to humans to salvage, and to chickens to scavenge. The installation filled a big room at the Kootenay Gallery in Castlegar, and its sheer size and the non-uniformity of the bulbs, gave a sense of the waste potential of this one small piece of consumer culture. In the seamlessness of global retail, where product and waste are separated by continents, what happens on one side of the world resonates or reverberates in unforeseen manner on the other. This is the heart of *Refuse Culture's* statement about the structure of global marketplaces.

Installed in the Gallery 2 in Grand Forks in May, Johnston's *Machine for Singing* is an interactive piece occupying two rooms. When you step onto a slightly askew mat in the hallway (which appears not to be part of the exhibition but part of the gallery's art rental program), pressure-sensitive switches send electronic pulses that "ping" reproduction Song Dynasty bowls in the other room. The bowls are exquisitely arranged on shelves and seem to do nothing but look attractive, in an empty-consumerist fashion. With movement and sound, the chiming is hauntingly like a global marketplace, calling out to potential buyers. That its attack is so oblique may be both the charm and a fault of the work. That sculpture can be so profoundly a part of experience, on the other hand, gives it authority.

After graduating from Carleton University with a Bachelor of Architecture, Johnston instructed at Bauhaus Dessau, Germany's Interdisciplinary Academy in the early 1990s. While there, he made architectural interventions with found materials, which considered their nature and re-use. Johnston welcomed engagement with tactile materials, free of the abstraction of architectural drawings.

He and his partner, architect Stephanie Fischer, maintain JohnstonFischer Ceramics in Nelson, B.C., producing hand-built objects marketed in gallery shops throughout North America. Through his practice he's learned precisely how and why clay materials break, and this year Johnston was awarded the first-ever North West Ceramics Foundation's Award of Excellence, in recognition of his technical breakthroughs.

In 2005, Johnston produced *Tangible Shadows: Intersections*, sculptures made of raw porcelain draped over, among other things, automobile bumper covers and then fired. The bumpers continued to fascinate Johnston and so reappear in *Refuse Culture* in "Swimming Upstream to the

Comfort of: Homage to Yves Klein". The bumpers are painted in International Klein Blue, a pure blue pigment, exhibited this summer at the Kelowna Art Gallery in stunning simplicity as part of the Gallery's *Module* group show.

In a complex understanding of materiality, Johnston's art knows that potsherds in middens are ancient evidence of culture and *Refuse Culture*, among its higher ambitions, wants to preserve the safety of garbage dumps for humans, chickens, and the future.

Parts of Refuse Culture have shown at the Vernon Public Art Gallery, Gallery 2 in Grand Forks and Kootenay Gallery and will move to Touchstones Art Gallery in Nelson, B.C. in March 2010, and Kelowna Art Gallery in December 2010. Johnston will also have a group show with Robert Davidson at the Surrey Art Gallery in April 2010.

Tags

Cover Story, Fall/Winter 2009 issue, Gallery 2 Arts and Heritage Centre, Susan Andrews Grace, Ian Johnston, Kelowna Art Gallery, Kootenay Gallery, Refuse Culture, Surrey Art Gallery, Touchstones Art Gallery, Vernon Public Art Gallery

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