

# PLAYING WITH FIRE

CERAMICS OF THE EXTRAORDINARY

# CAROL E. MAYER

Alwyn O'Brien  
*A Matter of Shadows* (detail), 2017  
Courtesy of James Harris Gallery  
Photo: Ken Mayer

*Playing With Fire: Ceramics of the Extraordinary*  
Carol E. Mayer

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# INTRODUCTION

The eleven artists featured in this publication and the exhibition *Playing with Fire: Ceramics of the Extraordinary* have all lived or worked in British Columbia. Their works span generations and an abundance of art movements and ideas, and reach beyond British Columbia's geographic boundaries, bringing attention to issues and challenges undeniably global in nature.

Clay is their material of choice. Its malleable character enables each artist to wedge, coil, pinch, throw, cast, mould, sculpt and ultimately push the clay to the limits of its plasticity. The results speak to the intense relationship between maker and material, and between clay's transformative qualities and its deep historical references. The sculptural and installation works included here also challenge the notion that all things made of clay are required to be functional. Their selection was guided by our collective determination to wipe away any craft-based, little-brown-pot stereotypes that might still adhere to the ceramics medium.<sup>i</sup>

Drawing inspiration from pop culture, art history, humour, beauty, hope and nature, the artists bring fresh, playful and challenging commentary to ongoing debates and concerns about the world around us. Through their art, they offer insights into the paradox of the human condition.

Senior artists Gathie Falk and Glenn Lewis view their work as a veneration of the ordinary. They portray the world around them, transforming everyday objects from the mundane into the unexpected, capturing a specific ethos, time and place in Vancouver's history.<sup>ii</sup> Interestingly, Lewis' tongue-in-cheek installation of ordinary salt-and-pepper shakers was viewed as too suggestive to exhibit when he first created it for the 1970 Osaka Expo; the piece subsequently languished in storage for two decades. During the 1960s, senior potter David Lambert sought to create uniquely 'Canadian' hand-painted tablewares using Indigenous motifs as surface designs. Today, this work continues to appear in the art market, though with changing sensitivities it is now more likely to be seen as cultural misappropriation, because the motifs interpret clan-owned crests.

Supreme craftsmanship and artistic vision reveal the presence of nostalgia and a sense of loss in Jeremy Hatch's and Bill Rennie's exact replicas of places and things that once were, but are no more. The instability of the laws and wisdom that hold up our society and ourselves is apparent in Alwyn O'Brien's vessel-based sculptures that wend their chaotic, evasive, fragile, yet brilliantly controlled journey upwards and outwards

Some works are autobiographical in their exploration and reinvention of identity. Brendan Lee Satish Tang mixes Asian and pop-culture motifs in his glossy renditions of Chinese blue-and-white ware 'birthing' robotic arms. Ying-Yueh Chuang's exploration of cultural hybridity is expressed in her creation of hundreds of beautifully executed, minute combinations of fragile forms found in nature and her own imagination. In contrast, there is nothing fragile about Judy Chartrand's powerful and unsettling installations that expose and condemn racism, poverty and social injustice as she sees it in the world around her. Because the works are often visually appealing, we are drawn in—only to be confronted with the effects of colonialism, forced relocation and mass immigration.

Forced relocation and religious oppression are the foci of Debra Sloan's sculptural works, as she reacts to themes she detects in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ceramics displayed in MOA's Koerner Gallery of European Ceramics. She installed repetitions of small amorphous figures throughout the gallery as a strategy to bring historic events into the present. Ian Johnston also uses repetition in his installation of hundreds of tiles that both celebrate significant inventions and critique the immense scale of mass production and, consequently, the massive waste left behind.

Together, these artists draw you into a conversation that cannot be entered with words alone. Daring, contemplative, humorous and visionary, they are creating extraordinary works by playing with fire.

**CAROL E. MAYER**



# IAN JOHNSTON

Ian Johnston is an architect-turned-sculptor based in Nelson, BC. As an architect, his interest in urban renewal and public intervention stems from working, during a time of cultural transformation, at the Bauhaus Academy in former East Germany, post-Berlin Wall. As a sculptor, he uses ceramics and mixed media to investigate opportunities that present themselves in the experimental process, and that result in inventions. "Today," he says, "we are a culture that views invention and science as panaceas. Optimism and denial coexist and mask the stark reality of a highly unstable global condition." *Antechamber* presents four installations of hundreds of ceramic tiles that are installed in grids, hung like roof tiles, overlapping one another, creating oscillating amounts of visual disturbance as the viewer moves within the space.<sup>ix</sup>

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I think of my work as an object for facilitating and engaging audiences to explore, examine and reinvent their relationship with the environment. I create archival documents and spatial experiences that engage the senses and the desires that advance consumption, as opposed to a stick-waving exercise of admonishment. In *Antechamber* I present four installations that explore the other end of the consumption process: the invention. By referencing multiples of important nineteenth- and twentieth-century objects of invention that feed the cycle of consumption, my intent is to transform the euphoric anticipation and naïve optimism of invention/consumption into a vertiginous state of imbalance.

Ian Johnston  
*The Antechamber*, 2013  
porcelain, stoneware, terracotta  
installation: 375 cm x 1280 cm  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo: Alina Ilyasova

IAN JOHNSTON









Left:  
Ian Johnston  
*The Antechamber* (detail), 2013  
left: *Between the lines (Light)*, 2010  
stoneware  
right: *Between the lines (Red Deer)*, 2011  
porcelain  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo: Alina Ilyasova

Right:  
Ian Johnston  
*The Antechamber* (detail), 2013  
porcelain  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo: Ian Johnston

Johnston created the individual ceramic elements in *Antechamber* by a vacuum-forming process of his own invention. Originally developed to open up new opportunities for his art practice, this process led him to experiment with mass castings of everyday objects: a 1950s Dutch tabletop telephone, a 1940s GE streamline kettle and an incandescent light bulb. Johnston presents these in a relentless repetition that evokes the massive scale of consumer goods manufacturing today—production that feeds an ever-growing demand while ignoring the inevitable: that all will eventually become detritus.

# NOTES

- <sup>i</sup> Laurence, Robin. "MOA show Playing With Fire blows away ceramic stereotypes." *Georgia Straight*, 27 November 2019, [www.straight.com/arts/1330391](http://www.straight.com/arts/1330391). Accessed 30 November, 2019.
- <sup>ii</sup> Amy Gogarty, "Playing With Fire: Extraordinary ceramics engage with contemporary issues." *Galleries West*, 2 January 2020.
- <sup>iii</sup> Amy Gogarty, "If this is What You Call 'Being Civilized', I'd Rather Go Back to Being a 'Savage'." *An Open Book*, Surrey Art Gallery, 2008, pp. 1-15.
- <sup>iv</sup> Beth Carter, Judy Chartrand and Lumlamelut Laura Wee Lay Laq, *Judy Chartrand, What a Wonderful World*. Bill Reid Gallery 2016, p. 36.
- <sup>v</sup> Chuang credits one of her early teachers, Don Hutchinson, in enabling her to understand vessels as persons, with character, shape and shadows.
- <sup>vi</sup> Gathie Falk with Robin Laurence, *Apples, etc. An Artist's Memoir*. Figure 1 Publishing, Vancouver, 2018, p. 17.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 206.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*, p. 99.
- <sup>ix</sup> Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery, *Tree House: Jeremy Hatch*. Exhibition catalogue, 2006.
- <sup>x</sup> Ian Johnston, "The Antechamber," in *Reinventing Consumption*. Esplanade Arts & Heritage Centre, 2013, p. 26.
- <sup>xi</sup> Between 1955 and 1967, Walter and Herta Gerz, BC Ceramics, commissioned designs from First Nations artists that were applied to their souvenirs and housewares.
- <sup>xii</sup> [www.studioceramicscanada.com/david-lambert/](http://www.studioceramicscanada.com/david-lambert/). Accessed 13 January 2020.
- <sup>xiii</sup> David Lambert, *The story of west coast designs on hand-made pottery with 40 authentic stories & myths of the Coast People*. 25pp, ill. 1959ff, n.d. (ca. 1960).
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Scott Watson, Naomi Sawada, Jane Tyner (eds), *Thrown: British Columbia's Apprentices of Bernard Leach and their Contemporaries*. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, 2009, p. 141.
- <sup>xix</sup> Matthew Kangas, "Alwyn O'Brien: Astride the Bucket." *Ceramics Monthly*, March 2015.
- <sup>xx</sup> Liane Davison, "Introduction," *Hot Clay: Sixteen West Coast Ceramic Artists*, Surrey Art Gallery, 2004, p. 6.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Amy Gogarty, "Where I was Brought Up: 4949 Harris Road." *An Open Book*, Surrey Art Gallery, 2007, p. 4.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Unpublished manuscript, 2005.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> [www.debrasloan.com/artist-statement](http://www.debrasloan.com/artist-statement). Accessed 23 January 2020.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ronnie Watt, "Interlinked Themes, Multiple Meanings - The Oeuvre of the Canadian Ceramist Debra Sloan." *Ceramics of Southern Africa*, Vol. 16.1, Winter 2018, pp. 11-13.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, *The future is already here* (exhibition catalogue). Surrey Art Gallery, 2013.

# POSTSCRIPT

When planning the exhibition *Playing with Fire: Ceramics of the Extraordinary*, I selected artists who had chosen the medium of clay to express ideas and critiques about the world around them. I took a risk and focused on the political, cultural and personal issues they examine through their work, plus their use of humour, beauty, fragility, nostalgia, controversy and even anger to make the case. My intent was to move the conversation away from vessel to sculpture, from functional to interpretive, from passive to involved.

All exhibitions involve curatorial risk. Once installed there is no way of predicting how visitors will interpret what they see, or whether their experiences will mesh with curatorial intentions. How invisible is the curator's vision, and how much of her energy permeates the space?

During a recent staff tour I asked, "What will you take away from this exhibition?" The responses were both surprising and very telling for me. "Whenever I come here, it always makes me emotional—yet I keep coming," commented one. Another said, "It seems to be a place to think about loss and grief—perhaps a place to work through these things." Their impressions, though not intended curatorially, remind me about the very power of art to achieve what this exhibit did intend to do: offer insights into the paradox of the human condition.

Carol E. Mayer  
February 26<sup>th</sup> 2020

