

frieze

Dirt on Delight

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Jane Irish, *Vase, Vito Acconci* (1995)

Sipping my tea, it has never occurred to me that beneath the cup's silky surface and pretty decoration lies hardened mud. Clay's potential for paradox and subtext is the crux of co-curators Ingrid Schaffner and Jenelle Porter's show, 'Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay', a gallop across contemporary ceramics with relevant historical figures lassoed in. Today's hipsters (such as Sterling Ruby) mingled with yesterday's hippies (Peter Voulkos) and kingpins of the European avant-garde (Lucio Fontana). All three, as it happens, share an affinity for gestural abstraction. That clay can feel at home in all kinds of environments explains its appeal to artists of many stripes.

Clay seems to be the last of the 'secondary' disciplines – coming after photography, crafts and, most recently, outsider art – to break into fine art circles. This broad cross-section of 22 artists spanning four generations is the first show I know of to survey clay's prevalence as a primary material within a thematic and historical framework. The only prerequisite here was that clay be central to the artists' core practices.

The levelling began with the installation. Most of the works were displayed on three white platforms the size of lap pools that put everyone on equal footing. Radiating like the prongs of a peace sign from the centre of the ICA's hangar-like main gallery, the immediate impression of the show was impressive. Ample floor space accommodated larger freestanding works and those with custom bases.

All of the works included seemed to be animated or in a state of flux. From Beverly Semmes' fluorescent red-orange, thigh-high 'Shinnecock Pots' (nos. 7, 9, 14, and 15, 2002) that are so thumb-printed they seem to shimmy, to Eugene Ion Bruenchenhein's open-work crowns and ewers (*Sensor Pot*, from c. 1950–80, and *untitled (ewer)*, c. 1960), wrought from leaf-shaped wafers attached end to end, the works come into being one piece, or pinch, at a time. The generative impulse easily gets out of hand, as in Jessica Jackson Hutchins' fanciful installation, *Convivium* (2008), which comprises a kitchen table sprouting a Flintstone-esque monorail in floral papier mâché upon which clunky earthenware dishes are perched.

Like an assemblage-ist's sundae, Adrian Saxe's exotica morph from their fecal or fungal bases into a fancy, high-fire, mid-section (such as a genie lamp in *Hi-Fibre Gyno-Monocle Magic Lamp* from 1997) with a quartz finial or, perhaps, a dangling dried botanical specimen on top. The piecemeal also appears where you would least expect it. In Ann Agee's tabletop display of rococo-style figurines, *Agee Manufacturing Co. (Winter Catalogue)* (2008), Pippi Longstocking look-alikes

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breastfeed five year olds and burn their bras. Look closely to discover cake decorator's squiggles and craft project cutouts holding the whole ruse together in shiny white porcelain.

From pot shards and amphoras to fine china and toilets, 'Dirt on Delight' explored how clay carries culture and history. Porcelain's royal ancestry is the target of Jane Irish's Sevres-inspired vases in marzipan greens and pinks, such as *Vase, Poverty* (2008), whose gilded cartouches feature not the traditional idylls but social realist-style paintings of cleaning ladies at work. Viola Frey's cast and painted accumulations of kitsch collectibles contributed to Pop-era debates about high and low, while her contemporaries Betty Woodman and Robert Arneson were insisting on ceramics as a medium for painting and sculpture. Ancient history is another natural reference point for artists in the show. One example is Jeffrey Mitchell's Asian-influenced ceramic compounds of Fu dogs, monkeys and other fauna in the midst of fruiting Bonsai trees. However, it is George Ohr's and Rudolf Staffel's modest cups and bowls that most simply embody the argument between baseness and beauty in play throughout the show. The former's early experiments denting and deforming his wheel-thrown tableware are well known, but few will be familiar with Staffel's otherworldly 'Light Gatherers' (c. 1967–96). In one, feathery strips and toothy bits of white porcelain coalesce – with what appears to be as little handling as possible – to form the flayed body of a small light-filled footed bowl. At once crude and confectionary, Staffel's works add the celestial body to clay's shape-shifting abilities.

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