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Art: Ceramic artists shape a medium

National conference proves clay is for more than making plates and cups.



By Edward Sozanski

Contributing Art Critic

If the national ceramics conference that wound up here Saturday proved one thing, it is that, as a medium, clay has firmly established itself in the main current of fine art.

This would be obvious to anyone who follows the field closely, but perhaps not to casual observers to whom the word *ceramics* automatically triggers an association with cups, plates, bowls, and vases.

Many clay artists still make such utilitarian ware, but many others have pushed ceramics emphatically into fine-art sculpture.

I conclude this having seen only a handful of the more than 90 exhibitions organized to coincide with the 44th meeting of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA). Those were chosen from among the shows that opened well before the conference convened Wednesday.

So while my sampling is necessarily minuscule, it is select. It includes the NCECA Invitational at Moore College of Art and Design, national and international in scope; a show of work by resident artists, fellows and guests at the Clay Studio, the conference host; and another national group show at the Community Arts Center in Wallingford, Pa., curated by Philadelphian Gail M. Brown.

In all, nearly 90 artists are involved (a few are in more than one show) and about three-quarters live outside the Philadelphia region. So it's reasonable to suggest that these three splendid exhibitions provide a plausible cross section of today's ceramic fine art.

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Although the shows diverge conceptually, they're strikingly similar in several respects. Hand-built sculpture predominates, although the Clay Studio and Wallingford include wheel-thrown objects.

The sculptural variety at each venue is amazing, as well it should be. Clay, infinitely plastic and capable of expressing refinement as well as mass, and with its capacity to carry a nearly infinite palette of colors, is a quintessential sculptural material.

Having noted that, much of the work in these three exhibitions is muted. Either the glazed and painted colors are soft pastels or earth tones, or the pieces are white or black. I was surprised to discover many porcelain sculptures, not only starkly white but inescapably fine art.

Another noticeable trend is the mixing of media. Like fiber artists, ceramic artists are incorporating other materials in their sculptures.

For example, John Williams, in his *Commodities Series* of miniature landscapes (at Moore and the Clay Studio), mounts tiny gold-plated emblems of energy generators such as windmills and solar panels, on stark white ceramic bases. At Moore, Bonnie Seeman combines elements of glazed porcelain and colorful glass fiber into effulgent organic forms; her integration of these materials is flawless.

The Moore show, "Earth Matters," explores environmental issues, sometimes alluded to indirectly, as in Paula Winokur's imposing *Glacier IV: Calving*, a sculpture that neatly expresses the fragility of even these massive structures under the influence of climatic pressure.

Kate MacDowell's sculpture *Daphne* displays the exceptional detail and narrative force that clay can achieve. Here, the nymph whose father transformed her into a tree so she could escape the pursuit of an amorous Apollo has been clear-cut, presumably by avaricious loggers. All we see are a raw stump, to which her lower legs are attached, a severed head, and a poignant scattering of leaves.

The NCECA invitational is a handsome and satisfying show that articulates its theme with restraint and pleasing contrasts of form and content. If you could see only one show among the 90-plus, the invitational would deliver the flavor of the whole.

So would "Dis/Arming Domesticity," at the suburban Community Arts Center. Curator Brown's theme is the domestic environment and domestic experience. This is abundantly evident in work such as Stephanie A. Rozene's *Simultaneous Contrast*, a wall display of a dozen porcelain serving bowls linked to presidents from George Washington to Barack Obama, each accompanied by a poem by Moriah L. Purdy.

Rozene's installation is enchanting, not only because some of the shallow, wide-rimmed bowls are conventionally beautiful, but because it straddles the divide that separates pure function from conceptual innovation.

Sarah Lindley achieves something similar with what might be the show's most unusual pieces, evocations of a 17th- and 18th-century Dutch furniture form called a "cabinet house." Lindley's pieces, in black clay, look like the skeletons of storage chests, without drawers or panels.

They reference domesticity historically - the Dutch originals weren't functional, but were fitted out as miniature rooms - but with contemporary elegance.

My only reservation about them is what Lindley gained by making them in clay. There isn't any intrinsically "ceramic" quality to them that I could discern. This observation applies to other works in all the shows I saw; for example, to Williams' *Commodities* landscapes, which would look pretty much the same if executed in plaster.

Once articulated, the question, "why is this art ceramic?" follows one around. It nudged me several times in the Clay Studio show, which includes work by more than 40 resident artists, Evelyn Shapiro Foundation fellows, and guest artists active at the atelier and school since 2000.

Perhaps I'm excessively purist, but I like ceramic art to tell me why it's made of clay and not plaster, wood, plastic, or metal. Extreme plasticity is one obvious virtue of clay used for sculpture. Another is expressive surface, especially the animated textures and intense, penetrating colors that glazes impart.

My impression from these shows is that ceramic artists are glazing less, which is understandable given the exacting labor involved and the chance that an otherwise perfect form can be lost in an imperfect glaze firing.

The Clay Studio exhibition contains more wheel-thrown pieces than the other shows, throwing being another distinguishing property of clay art. The Clay Studio's picture-book example, including its luscious glaze, is Shawn Spangler's ewer with saltcellar.

The Clay Studio show is the largest of the three surveys and stays up the longest. Like the other two, it's highly recommended. It's also convenient to other NCECA-related exhibitions nearby, at Rosenfeld, Wexler, and Snyderman-Works Galleries.

Collectively, these shows testify to the exceptional range of expression, which includes form, surface, color, and scale, being achieved in today's ceramics. It's no wonder that an event like NCECA can stimulate the display of so much exciting and memorable art.

Art: Clay Delectation

■ The NCECA 2010 Invitational continues at Moore College of Art and Design, 20th Street and the Parkway, through Saturday. Hours are 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays through Fridays and 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays. Information at 215-965-4027 or www.thegalleriesatmoore.org.

■ "Dis/Arming Domesticity" continues at the Community Arts Center, 414 Plush Mill Rd., Wallingford, through April 23. Hours are 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Fridays, and 9 a.m. to noon Saturdays. Information at 610-566-1713 or www.communityartscenter.org.

■ "Art of This Century" continues at the Clay Studio, 137-139 N. Second St., through May 2. Hours are 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays and noon to 6 p.m. Sundays, except 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. April 4. Information at 215-925-3453 or www.theclaystudio.org.