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Art: Ceramic artists shape a medium

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



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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.

