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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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