

EARTH MOVES

Shifts in Ceramic Art and Design

BY SHANA ANGELA SALAFF

The large group show “Earth Moves: Shifts in Ceramic Art and Design” at the Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities (arvadacenter.org) in Arvada, Colorado, took place from September 12–November 10, 2013. This was the third collaboration between the Arvada Center and the National Council on Education for the Ceramics Arts (NCECA). As the title suggests, much of the featured work attempted to move away from traditional notions of ceramic art.

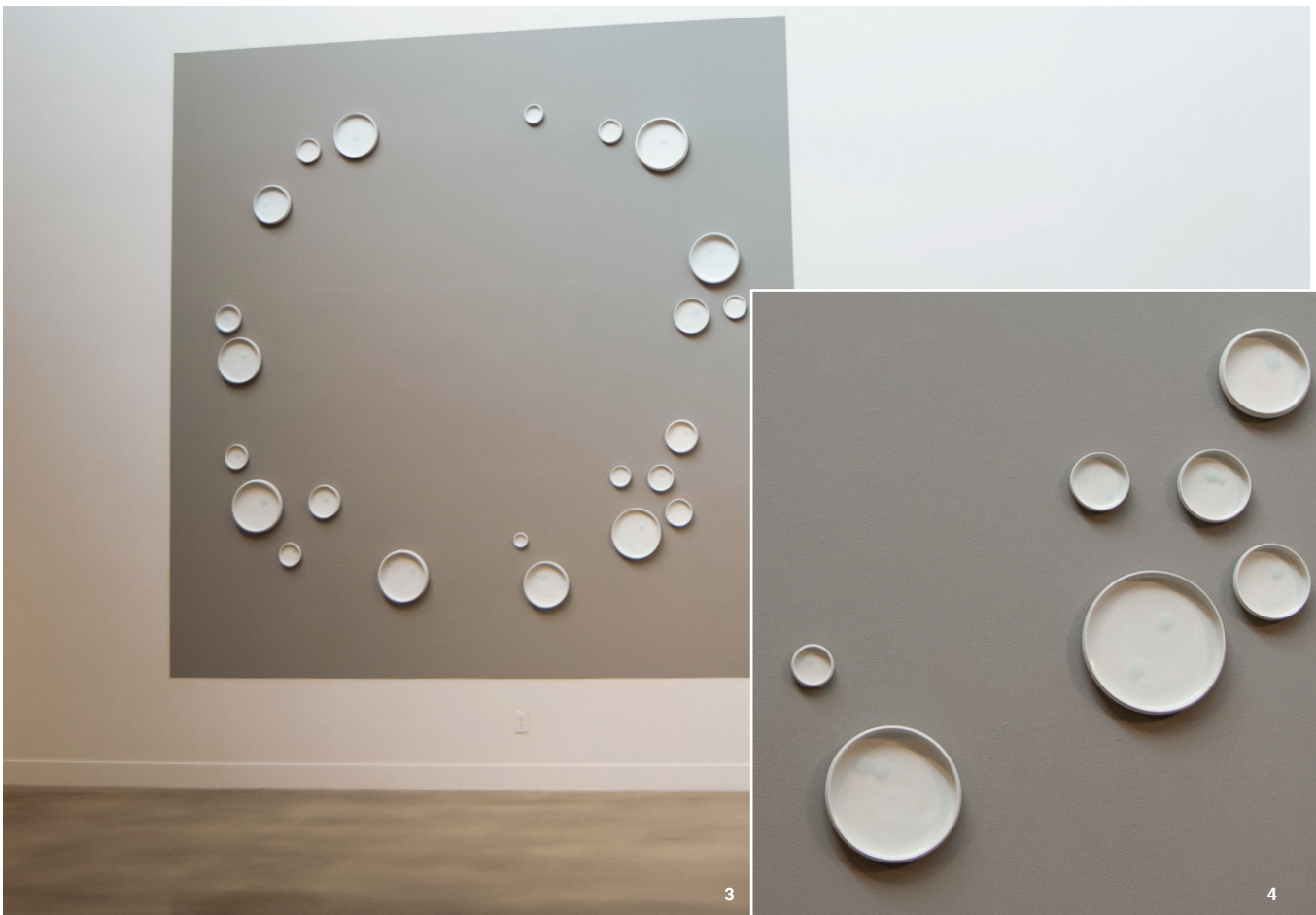
The prospectus for Earth Moves stated that the curators “sought out dynamic, contemporary ceramic works addressing creative responses to current shifts in the artist’s world and work.” With such a broad mandate, the curators were able to showcase a large number of works covering a wide range of techniques, materials, styles, and scale. Most pieces were sculptural in intent, but there were also a few functional works. The diversity of ideas,

techniques, and media made for an exciting and wide-ranging show, albeit with a slightly unfocused quality. The presence of supporting media such as audio, a printed book, and an eBook enhanced the viewer’s experience and helped to integrate the diversity into a more cohesive whole.

The arrangement of rooms at the Arvada Center’s main gallery divided the show into sections that seemed only partially grouped by theme. Unfortunately, most of the works with lights or projected images were tucked into a very small area where the lighting could be more controlled. What felt like the show’s signature piece, *Saccadic Domestic Conglomerations* by Dylan Beck, Adam Hinterlang and Dr. Melissa Beck (1–2), was given significantly less space than it needed to breathe. In this work, small slip-cast porcelain airplanes formed a kind of global map with concentrations of airplanes at



1–2 Dylan Beck’s *Saccadic Domestic Conglomerations*, (overall and detail) 15 ft. (4.5 m) in length, bisque porcelain, digital projection (digital animation, created in collaboration with Adam Hinterlang, is derived from saccades or eye movements collected by LSU psychology professor, Melissa Beck), 2013. Photo: Wes Magyar.



3–4 Amy Smith's *One*, (overall and detail) 20 ft (6 m) in diameter, porcelain, white glaze with accent glaze, fired to cone 10. Photo: by René Atchison.
 5 Lesley Baker's *Ft. Knox*, 35 in. (89 cm) in width, recycled plates, digital decals, 2011. Unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy of the Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities, Arvada, Colorado.

cities with the most air traffic, similar to the type of airline routes map found at the back of all airplane magazines.

Added to this were small blinking LED lights (whose pattern was based upon human eye movements called saccades) that referenced landing lights, Morse code, and other mechanized systems that we use for directing and tracking movement and direction. The overall effect was an artwork that finally moved the focus away from material (clay) and instead placed it firmly in the realm of ideas. The piece *One* (3–4), by Amy Smith in contrast, located on the largest wall of the gallery was somewhat of a disappointment. In Smith's piece, white, simply-thrown, flat-bottomed plates were arranged on the wall in a loose circle. Each plate had a small blue circle glazed randomly on the base. Although embracing a worthy sentiment (togetherness), the individual components were much less imaginative than works such as the *Saccadic Domestic Conglomerations*.

Most of the pieces had a consistency, a palpable sensation of an almost studious calm. Dim lighting and the large gallery



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space added to the hushed feeling. Even the light-media and video/projected works proceeded at a slow, steady pace with audio at a low volume. If the premise was that ceramic artists are responding to change, then these responses were measured, rhythmic, deliberate. *Ft. Knox* by Lesley Baker (5), which featured digital decals on cut, found porcelain dinner plates, contained layered imagery that hinted at different types of visual information. One of these layers, of scrollwork in Chinese blue-and-white style blue, provided a framing device for the grouping that was cleverly fragmented as though hinting at the missing edges of the plates beneath. This fragmentation created a visual movement that only somewhat offset the frozen quality of the arrangement.

The general absence of human physicality also contributed to the show's sedate quality. The majority of the artworks were divested from the actual physicality and warmth of the creator's body that is often present in ceramic work of all genres. Such signifiers of human movement as throwing lines, fingerprints, or remnants of process were absent. My overall impression was of a clean, crisp world with clearly defined edges, divorced from the dirt and messiness of the human body (and of course the ceramic studio). The one piece that came closest to this messiness was the collaborative work *Synaptic Lab* by Donna S. Webb and Jean M. Hartman, an interactive laboratory-type room that featured

actual soil and clay samples along with artworks that highlighted their clay source (11).

The invisibility of the makers' body movements in the majority of pieces also suggested that they were not created by an artist-maker, but rather had been designed by the artists and fabricated by a mechanized production method. This is perhaps what led to the overabundance of white, black, and primary-colored glazes. One example of this, Jonathan Kaplan's piece *roy g. b(i)v* (16), was so well executed it appeared to have been machine-made. Resembling oversized button candy, this grid of rainbow colors presented our new access to the full spectrum of colors—one of the shifts alluded to in the prospectus.

The few exceptions to this lack of human presence—e.g. Del Harrows' *Coil Typologies (Whiteness)* (7) and the Michaela Valli-Groebacher's *Helen*—drew attention to this lack in most of the featured works. Making the vessel-as-metaphor-for-the-human body connection, *Helen* (6) was one of the few pieces that emphasized the human body's physicality. In this case, quite literally, as the vessel created by the elderly human figure grows from threads drawn from the material of its maker's dress.

In Harrow's *Coil Typologies (Whiteness)*, we are presented with a round ball, a frame-like structure that looks as though it were made of just coils and a third with a geometric form made of worked-together



6 Michaela Valli-Groebacher, *Helen*, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, ceramic, paint, encaustic, Photo: Jim Turner. 7 Del Harrow's *Coil Typologies (Whiteness)*, 48 in. (1.2 m), handbuilt stoneware, glaze and terra sigillata, cone 6 oxidation, 2013. 8–9 Jessica Knapp's *Divide*, (overall and detail) 10 ft. (3 m) in length, handbuilt porcelain, fired to cone 6 in an electric kiln, aluminum panels carved with a CNC router, steel wire, insulating foam, wood, 2012. Photo: Adrian French. 10 Teri Frame's *Self-Portrait with Porcelain Facial Prosthetic IV*, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, ink-jet print, 2013. Photo: Doug DuBois.



(flat) coils—line, plane, and sphere. These three basic types of coil-made forms were white, like a blank slate waiting for the chalk-mark of human direction, personality and intent. Even in this piece, the evidence of the pinching of the human hand was more a signifier of uncompleted-ness rather than of human motion.

There were quite a few mixed-media pieces, and these tended to keep the materials separate, clearly delineated and finished but unpainted. There was a machined quality to many of these. One piece that successfully combined clay and metal elements was Jessica Knapp's *Divide* (8–9). *Divide* achieved a delicate harmony between the human-made (handbuilt flowers) and the machined (cut aluminum). The ceramic flowers “growing” in the crack between metal slabs were similar to the small flowers that grow out of any available moisture in cracks in the sidewalk, a metaphor for growth, change, and the potential triumph of the natural world over the man-made. Ironically, the flowers in Knapp's piece were fired clay, and thus seemed almost to have been changed into mineral form by their encounter with their metal barriers. In this case, the machined industrial world has won out in the end. The bursting forward of life, however, hints at the potential for the changing of this reality.

One example of the cool, calm, and collected quality observed in the show as a whole, Teri Frame's *Self-portrait with Porcelain Facial Prosthetic* (10) and its companion pieces, although representations of a human form, were shielded from full view by the

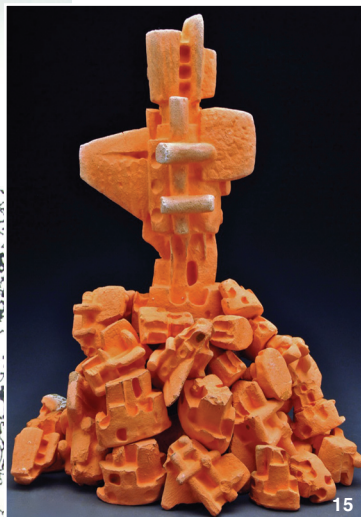


mechanism of the mask. This was a clever series of works that addressed the reflection, the representation, and the difference between who is seeing, and who is being seen. I enjoyed the contrast between contemporary modes of representation and those of the past, (the digital process versus the daguerreotype) that many in the series referenced.

While mechanization was one unifying theme, another was an intellectual approach, a focus on meaning rather than physicality. Judging by this show, there is a trend towards cool, measured, conceptual works that represent the mind rather than the body. There were exceptions; quite a few anomalies that contributed a welcome light-heartedness to what might have been an overly serious show.

I found one piece in particular, *Altar of Record* (12–13) by David Kaufmann to be hilarious. There was a tall pyramid shape that referenced the Rosetta stone and was covered in different “glyphs” generated from the movement of a finger across a touch screen. Held up at the apex was a black tablet in the shape of an iPhone or iPod. There was also a second piece by Kaufmann, *Glyph* series with six or eight of those invented glyphs. These were all the size of iPads, displayed exactly as they would be if seen at an Apple store.

John Balistreri’s companion pieces *Recursion Collision #1* and ceramic 3D-printed scan of *Recursion Collision* (14–15) read almost as a primer on 3D printing as both



11 Donna S. Webb and Jean M. Hartman's *Synaptic Lab*, 12 ft. (3.6 m) in height, 2010.

12–13 David Kaufmann's *Altar of Record*, ceramic, water, acrylic, epoxy, 2013.

14 John Balistreri's *Recursion Collision #1*, 5 ft. 10 in. (1.7 m) in height, stoneware, glaze, slip, salt-fired, gold lacquer, 2011. **15** John Balistreri's ceramic 3D-printed scan of *Recursion Collision*, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, stoneware, slip, 2012.

16 Jonathan Kaplan's *roy g. b(i)v*, 12 ft. (3.6 m) in length, 216 half spheres, slip-cast polychrome earthenware, sprayed glaze, 2013.

copying and creating method. Balistreri has obviously scanned his large sculpture, but “printed” it out after altering and simplifying the form, illustrating on one hand the ease at reproducing work, as well as its current limitations in terms of scale and variety of surface treatments. It illustrates (or documents) how 3D scans can be manipulated and made into something new, an appropriate response to technology as well as encouragement to those who are hesitant to explore the creative potential of 3D scanning and printing technology.

To date, there are a number of ceramic artists who apply to their work the themes of a post-modern approach to ceramics—pastiche of techniques, cross-cultural juxtaposition of forms and surfaces, and overlay of ceramic decals intended to both challenge and obfuscate the content beneath. Although this work has encouraged us to look beyond the cultural values that we take for granted, a number of works in *Earth Moves* reach beyond this level of ceramic-based discourse and successfully shift. The flexibility of material and broad range of outlook found in *Earth Moves* directly opens a dialog between the often-exclusionary world of clay-based art and that of ongoing intellectual discourse on issues pertinent to us all. The environment, human health, the individual versus the whole, our perception of the world versus its reality, and many other important topics were approached in this show. Offering a dialectic approach to ceramic artworks, *Earth Moves* was an interesting and challenging show.

the author Shana Salaff lives in Fort Collins, Colorado, where she teaches at Front Range Community College in Fort Collins, and Aims Community College in Greeley, Colorado. She earned an MFA in ceramics from California State University, Fullerton. She has also written for *Pottery Making Illustrated* magazine. To see more of her writing and her artwork, visit www.shanasalaff.com, or check out her piece on page 18 of this issue.

Jessica Knapp, whose work appeared in this show and is discussed in this review, is managing editor for *Ceramics Monthly*.

