

Mobile Structures: Dialogues Between Ceramics and Architecture in Canadian Art
MacKenzie Art Gallery January 27, 2007 to May 13, 2007

Art historians will some day designate the moment when ceramics saw itself as, and therefore became, art. While this event happened before *Mobile Structures*, the complexity and conceptual inventiveness of the works in this exhibition testify that the transformation has occurred and that, for ceramic artists, there is no going back.

When a material practice is not primarily functional or decorative or bound to ritual and engages (and questions and even undoes) its formal heritages (while still inhabiting it) and also engages worlds beyond its medium and métier, it is a particular expression of consciousness—it is art. While art is a special conceptual category, *works* of art are always manifested; they are inseparable from their material form and that medium's history. In fact, some of our most intense intellectual pleasures with works of contemporary art come from seeing how they engage their histories and meanings rather than how they are just composed by them.

Jeannie Mah's "Iznik Tiles and Portuguese Sidewalk" consists of three large colour inkjet murals of Ottoman Empire era Iznik tiles. Below these are three smaller inkjets of Portuguese tile sidewalks with patterns that echo those above. Hovering on brackets centered on the Iznik images are three Minoan inspired ceramic vessels decorated in homage to her two sources. Mah exceeds mixes media so she can speak from beyond the pot in order to speak back to the pot. These few signifiers trigger a wealth of information and ideas that originate in ceramics but also suggest a more expansive history and philosophy. The installation describes the exchange of visual vocabulary, materials and methods not only among the Turks and Portuguese, Muslims and Catholics, but also with the Chinese. Mah seems interested less in short term narratives of colonial oppression than in the long term fact of métissage, the rich and inevitable exchange, mixture and hybridization of everything in multiple directions. There is no sense of loss here, because the question of origins and authenticity are themselves questioned.

Ruth Chambers's filigree arches hover like ghosts. It is a spectral architecture, a return of the Modernist repressed: the feminine, the Romantic, abundance, nature. Chambers' ceramic architecture (rather than architectural ceramics) imagines a new ornamentality, but because it is offered in this drained and fragile form that literally depends from the host building, it appears less utopic than melancholic. Jeremy Hatch's porcelain cast of a tree house yearns for the moment when everyone designed and built their own shelters. This impulse is less nostalgic than it is human. His tender apparition recalls but protects a childhood memory; the artist has the pleasure of making the house but denies us the pleasure of playing in his fragile fortress.

Rory Macdonald has invented clever a portable kiln that can fire a glazed pattern on to a brick wall. The resulting tattoo reminds us of ceramics and architecture's once intimate liaisons: from ceramic tile on Islamic temples to art deco office towers. This relationship took a blow with the strain of Modernism that saw decoration as not just superfluous but as a crime (Adolph Loos). Macdonald's gesture, if actually performed, might actually be

criminal. His ceramic graffiti has a similar relationship to ceramic decoration that conventional graffiti has to murals. Both actions express a desire for aesthetic intervention, for decoration, for colour, for public participation in the design of the built environment. But there is also evidence of decay, loss and late-coming. Macdonald uses a Blue willow pattern that mumbles in translation: the design blurs and drips. Perhaps the kiln needs tinkering, or maybe the wall resists the application. In any case, the concept (desire) outstrips the design: the expression, possibility and inspiration is more important than the literal image.

If this show can be relied upon as a bell-weather, contemporary ceramics continues to be a hybridized activity. Most of the works in the exhibition mix ceramics with other media; most are non-functional or not only functional. And all seem to address not only another discipline (architecture) but also seem self-reflexive. Even though there is no architecture here for ceramics to dialogue with, if we take the exhibition's title seriously, what would a renewed dialogue look like? If ceramicists were to re-engage architecture as artists, the result should transform both fields. While Frank Gehry's architecture has been seen as a meeting of architecture and sculpture (strongly aided by engineering), it is a sculpture of some vintage. While art mediums and histories may be somewhat stable sources of inspiration, real collaborations with contemporary artists who are in flux about the identity and meaning of their practices would be much more dynamic. What would it mean to have architects engage with contemporary ceramic artists? I am looking forward to *Mobile Structures II: Architectural Vessels* or *Mobile Structures II: Takin' it on the Road*.