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Claytime! Ceramics Finds Its Place in the Art-World Mainstream

BY *Lilly Wei* POSTED 01/15/14 5:00 AM

Versatile, sensuous, malleable, as basic as mud and as old as art itself, clay is increasingly emerging as a material of choice for a wide range of contemporary artists

Ceramic art, referring specifically to American ceramic art, has finally come out of the closet, kicking and disentangling itself from domestic servitude and minor-arts status—perhaps for good. Over the past year, New York has seen, in major venues, a spate of clay-based art. There was the much-lauded [Ken Price](#) retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as his exhibitions at [Franklin Parrasch Gallery](#) and the [Drawing Center](#). Once known as a ceramist, Price is now considered a sculptor, one who has contributed significantly to the perception of ceramics as fine art.



Ann Agee's installation *Super Imposition* (2010), at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, presents the artist's factory-like castings of rococo-style vessels in a re-created period room.

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At David Zwirner gallery, there was a show of early works by [Robert Arneson](#), a founder of California Funk, who arrived on the scene before [Paul McCarthy](#) did. “VESSELS” at the Horticultural Society of New York last summer, with five cross-generational artists ranging from [Beverly Semmes](#) to [Francesca DiMattio](#), provided a focused and gratifying challenge to ceramic orthodoxies.

Currently, an international show on clay, “[Body & Soul: New International Ceramics](#),” is on view at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York (up through March 2), featuring figurative sculptures with socio-political themes by such artists as [Michel Gouéry](#), [Mounir Fatmi](#), and [Sana Musasama](#).

A darkened terra-cotta globe, *Concetto Spaziale. Natura* (Spatial Concept, Nature), 1959–60, by [Lucio Fontana](#), was shown along with the artist’s baroquely curved stucco ceiling piece in the inaugural exhibition of the [Dominique Lévy](#) gallery this fall in New York. Fontana’s clay production, which merged painting and sculpture, began in the 1930s and was closely linked to his concept of “Spatialism,” whereby he’d slash or puncture works to bridge the illusionism of the artwork and the world beyond it. Fontana is included in an exhibition of early modernists who worked in clay at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, called “[Return to Earth: Ceramic Sculpture of Fontana, Melotti, Miró, Noguchi, and Picasso, 1943–1963](#),” up through mid-January. Another pioneering Californian, [Ron Nagle](#), was included in Massimiliano Gioni’s *Encyclopedic Palace* at the latest Venice Biennale; his surreal landscape of small, eccentrically shaped, neon-colored ceramics was a sensation.

Ceramics experienced something of a renaissance in California in the 1950s with [Peter Voulkos](#). It continued through the ‘60s and ‘70s, spurred by Arneson, Nagle, Price, and [Viola Frey](#). Before them, as patron saints of a sort, were two legendary ceramic mavericks, [Beatrice Wood](#) and [George E. Ohr](#). On the East Coast, Betty Woodman has long shown the art world what clay can do, or rather, what she can do with it; and sculptor [Charles Simonds](#)’s almost-hidden *Dwellings* (1981), set in the stairwell of the [Whitney Museum](#), is one of a signature series of miniature habitats that have both puzzled and delighted visitors for decades. Additionally, clay, as one material among others, is found in the repository of a surprising number of artists: [Ana Mendieta](#), [Rosemarie Trockel](#), [León Ferrari](#), [Gabriel Orozco](#), [Mary Heilmann](#), [Jeff Koons](#), and [Josh Smith](#), to name but a few.

Clay is a common material with an ancient history. Populist as well as elitist, its inclusive nature might be one reason for its current appeal. It has infinite versatility, from the purely formal to the functional. It is sensuous and malleable, a substance every child has played with, and it is responsive to the primal instinct to make things by hand. Clay allows the artist to create form in spontaneous and direct ways that other mediums do not.

In considering clay, we are also considering the status of craft in America today and how inextricable it is from art. From the first generation of modernists who worked in clay to contemporary practitioners, all have made breakthroughs: in scale, in single objects as well as expansive installations; in technical experimentation; in increasingly original formal resolutions from the abstract to the realistic; and in content, exploring issues about the body, identity, politics, history, feminism, domesticity, means of production, and beauty. Artists such as [Ann Agee](#), [Kathy Butterly](#), [Elisabeth Kley](#), [Joyce Robins](#), [Arlene Shechet](#), and [Semmes](#), followed by [Nicole Cherubini](#), [DiMattio](#), [Jessica Jackson Hutchins](#), [Julia Kunin](#), [Sterling Ruby](#), [Paul Swenbeck](#), and [Brie Ruais](#), have been influenced by traditional ceramic objects but they also defy them, taking on clay’s legacy in some instances, escaping it in others.

Agee, an installation artist who shows with [Locks gallery](#) in Philadelphia, produces near-life-size domestic interiors and other scenes and is known for her refined and fanciful porcelains. She says she has always been attracted to clay, but it wasn't until graduate school at Yale University that she began to think there must be something beyond the endlessly contemplated rectangle hanging on the wall. In the context of Yale in 1985, that something turned out to be clay. What appealed to her was the feel of clay. "I didn't look for clay because I had a feminist strategy, and I didn't recognize my use of clay as a radical thing at that time," she says. "Clay connected me to the world. I looked at everything in clay, from China and Africa to the Islamic world and Europe." Previously, she had "equated clay with the second class, the second sex, the stigmatized material of the lowly potter, the laborer rather than the manager." Now, as Agee acknowledges, "I also see clay's commonness and accessibility as an inherent strength, part of its expressiveness."

Butterly makes brilliantly colored, often palm-size biomorphic vessels of zany, voluptuous forms that she regards as a metaphor for the body. The artist, who is represented by [Tibor de Nagy Gallery](#) in New York, considers herself both a painter who works in three dimensions and a sculptor who paints with glazes. "Clay," she says, "requires touch. Your hands are the primary tool, and the process is very intimate. With the addition of glaze, the possibilities are limitless." While any medium involves time, she adds, "clay demands it. I've chosen to work small, which is not a limitation but sets me free to experiment. My pieces are fired between 15 and 35 times. They start off as a shell of a form, and then I approach the form as one would a painting or collage, never knowing where the piece will end up." Like some of the other artists working with the medium, Butterly thought that clay was a craft material for making functional objects, but that changed completely when she saw a Frey exhibition of massive sculptures and paintings. "I saw the potential of clay and glaze—I was hooked," she says.



Kathy Butterly's *Feast*, 2011, is characteristically biomorphic, zany, and voluptuous.

COURTESY TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY, NEW YORK

Combining abstract forms that are both elegant and ungainly, with expressive painterly, textured surfaces, Shechet's recent ceramic sculptures, shown at [Sikkema Jenkins & Co.](#) in New York, look perilously posed. In fact, she says, things do collapse while she's making them, but "I love working on that precarious edge." Very few artists were working in ceramics in 2005, she notes, and that was part of the attraction for her. It was marginal, and there was room for anything to happen. She tested glazes and used unconventional colors, disregarding traditional firing temperatures and techniques. But she also thought it was important to acknowledge clay's history and draw from its tradition, to recognize that it was not just abstract sculpture.

"I'm not a ceramic artist," Shechet insists. "I'm an artist who works in clay. I like working in clay because it is

very direct experience. I like the resistance of clay. It's a physical enterprise, and you can make anything out of it. It doesn't have a character until you give it one. It is also related to my interest in Eastern thought. Clay requires hollowness, and the breath of air is its armature, as it is in glass." At [Pilchuck Glass School](#) in Stanwood, Washington, when she was working in glass, "everyone would talk about breathing as you made the work. I think the attitude toward craft— toward clay—is changing. I don't want to be in the closed community of clay or glass. They are both part of the greater art world."

Kunin, a video artist and sculptor of intricate, lustrously glazed, baroquely grotesque animal forms, says she always looked to the decorative arts for inspiration. She is currently researching Art Nouveau pottery as well as work created in socialist Hungary and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, viewing the region's history, esthetics, and politics through its ceramic works, and has spent the past five years studying iridescent glazes in Hungary.



Sculptor Julia Kunin creates baroquely grotesque animal forms, such as *Double Portrait*, 2010.

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"Clay," she says, "gives me the freedom to create something intense, raw, over the top. It has allowed me to pile things up, break things down, play, and make mistakes." Kunin loves the immediacy of a material that is "as basic as mud," she points out. "I am addicted to the unpredictability and iridescence of the glazes I'm using as well as the range of their colors and their psychedelic qualities."

Kunin grew up in Vermont in the '70s, when the studio-potter movement was in full bloom. Later, she says, she rejected clay as a dull brown "craft" material but returned to it in 2003. She started exploring female sexuality and the body and began using octopuses for more metaphorical imagery. Frustrated by a series in cast glass, "I happened on an exhibit by the Chinese artist [Ah Xian](#), who creates busts painted in traditional Chinese porcelain patterns from Jingdezhen, China. That initial spark of an idea has kept me going now for ten years."

Cherubini, a sculptor of willful, sophisticated meldings of forms that are almost always based on the storied history of the medium, says "I think clay is

much more present these days, although it is still fetishized and I wait for the moment when no one is categorized as a ceramic sculptor, when it is just another material that is being used." Cherubini, who recently had a show at [Tracy Williams](#) gallery in New York, recalls, "I was a child who loved mud. I studied clay at the Rhode Island School of Design and learned how to use it technically. I have also learned that I love clay for the weird borderless space that it occupies, the space that Eva Hesse worked with so much. It exists between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional, between painting and sculpture. It is so sculptural and formal while building with it. Then you get this dry, funky thing out of the kiln and have to deal with the surface. I always think of clay and glaze as separate materials that make a whole," she says. "I worked with a lot of other

“As far as clay being a craft material,” she adds, “it blows me away that it is even part of the conversation anymore.”

A young artist of performance-generated work who uses clay in fresh, provocative, less-commodified ways, Ruais makes sculptures by engaging in specific activities, such as spreading out the equivalent of her weight (130 pounds) in clay on the floor, up a wall, into a corner, thereby directly incorporating her body into her work. As an encounter with, even a documentation of, clay’s material properties and states, from dry to wet to fired, the work explores the body, sexuality, and labor.

“I use clay because, as a malleable material, it can instantly hold whatever form it is shaped into,” Ruais says. “There is no need for tools or machinery to manipulate the material. The interaction is direct: hand to clay. I put it in the middle of my studio floor, for instance, and get on top of it on my hands and knees and spread it out with my hands in all directions from the center mass. It usually takes on somewhat circular shapes and is embedded with traces of fingers and fists, knee prints and footprints as I move about the piece. In that way, I occupy the site that becomes a terrain of the movements made upon it, a negative record of my occupation of it.”

As these artists and many others, frequently women, wrestle with a material deeply embedded in rules, craft, and tradition, they are widening its trajectories, spinning it into the art-world mainstream, into blue-chip desirability. They are waiting for the day, as Cherubini says, when clay—no longer synonymous with the counterculture, with hippies and vegans—is just a material like any other, and those who use it are not ghettoized as a ceramic artists.

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Lazy River, 2012, by Nicole Cherubini, who waits for the day when no one is categorized (or ghettoized) as a ceramic artist.

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