

REVIEWS



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1 Autumn M. Cipala's cup and saucer set, 9 in. (23 cm) in length, wheel-thrown cone 10 porcelain. 2 Charles Timm-Ballard's *Terra Incognita*, 16½ in. (42 cm) in length, ceramic wall piece. 3 David Linger's *Young Man, Moscow, 1969*, 13 in. (33 cm) in height, underglaze screen print and intaglio on translucent porcelain, 2010. 4–5 Steven M. Thurston's *Reinterpretations of Sächsische*, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, porcelain, fired to cone 10, 2009.

2011 NCECA Biennial *by Liz Howe*

This year's NCECA Biennial exhibition, held at the Tampa Museum of Art, delivered a veritable onslaught of styles, concepts, and technical approaches to work created, both tangibly and tangentially, in clay. Palpably different aesthetic ideologies and qualitative standards among the jurors combined with the cramped, museum shop style display produced a truly muddled show. Much of the work, taken so far out of any relevant association with the broader conceptual underpinnings of each artist's oeuvre, floated mercilessly in a hazy ether connected to nothing beneath or beside it. This should not imply that any specific flaws rest with the jurors' choices except for their heavy inclusion of established artists, without new bodies of work, in a venue where vibrancy is best achieved by showcasing lesser known work. The confused disorientation of the show however reflects the state of the field at large most accurately or rather, acutely. To quote Glen R. Brown's germane juror's statement: "If jurors who have accrued decades of experience critiquing ceramics can arrive at such different conclusions about what ought to be included, then notions of universal standards of judgment begin to appear as suspect as a ten-dollar iPod."

Meanwhile unaware or blatantly indifferent to authoritative standards, collapsing boundaries, and uncertainties, art still seems to be doing what it has always done. As has been well stated by critic Jerry Saltz, "Good art defies the laws of known physics by putting off far more energy than went into making it." He continues, "It is often made intentionally but always contains things beyond the artist's intentions. It often breaks all the rules it's supposed an example

of; has a quality of history and complexity; and provides context to things you already know." With only this in mind and dismissing any micro-categorizations or restricting qualifications such as style, utility, size, medium, method, technique, or trend, some work in this show simultaneously revealed and embraced a mysteriously larger gravitas than can even potentially be defined.

Lindsay Oesterritter's *Ingot* harmoniously connects past and present, neither revealing nor reveling in cleverness or trickery. Oesterritter uses wood firing to deepen and extend the period of animate existence for her handbuilt artifacts. Though the clean-edged and intentionally cut walls of this piece defy natural processes of wear, the resultant object maintains resonance. The artist's handling of commonplace objects as subject for her functional forms is refreshingly honest and straightforward.

Charles Timm-Ballard's work does for painting what bronze did for sculpture; solidifying and encasing the fleeting nature of expression into a more enduring material. The piece shown here seamlessly and impressively eliminates any perceived categorical borders between painting and ceramics. Working within a traditional, rectangular painting format, in a traditional landscape genre, with traditional ceramic materials, Timm-Ballard's work modestly elevates the whole lot; revering and broadening ceramics, painting, and tradition effortlessly and without a hint of presumptuousness. His work is an enduring amalgamation of form, content, and process that celebrates materiality right down to the stunning varnish of glaze that fissures and cracks like aging oil paint.



6–7 Edith Garcia's *Ugly Happy Scars*, 15 ft. (4.6 m) in length, drawings ceramic sculptures and custom vinyl graphics, 2009. 8–9 Kate Roberts' *Melanie*, 6 ft. (1.8 m) in height, slump body, wire, wood, metal stand, lace, once-fired to cone 6. 10 Lindsay Oesterritter's *Ingot*, 20 in. (51 cm) in length, handbuilt iron-rich stoneware, wood fired and reduction cooled.

Edith Garcia's *Ugly Happy Scars* was clearly a showcase piece in the exhibition, requiring the entire wall leading into the gallery. This installation of engaging figural interpretations continues the artist's investigation of "the tragedies of everyday life" in her darkly playful style. As the artist states, "The *Happy Ugly Scars* installation is a new series of drawings and sculptures that translate life struggles and experiences that have left us with metaphorical scars, be it happy, sad, or traumatized, all of which shape our development as humans." Garcia's imagined world is inhabited by scarred and altered child-like cyborgs, each owing his/her survival to implied mechanical/electrical dependence. One drawing, *A New Me*, portrays pre-adolescent hybridization, the multi-faceted meaning of which is not lost on this artist, through a lone boyish figure staring straight at the viewer. The lower section of his appendages has been replaced with an artificial limb or invented mechanical accessory while his detached, shyly crossed feet pose next to him in the open picture frame. Garcia's fresh, slipshod, cartoony, sci-fi aesthetic pulsates with sadness and irony, perfectly characterizing the inveterate toll of unnamed emotional scars and internal conflicts. The work challenges through shrewd playfulness, humor, and experimentation that neither shies from or overindulges in maudlin sentimentality.

Several other pieces in the biennial shone amidst the crowd. Among them were Autumn M. Cipala's beautifully designed and masterfully executed cup and saucer set, exuding simple elegance and austerity. David Linger's *Young Man, Moscow, 1969*, a wafer-thin underglaze screenprint and intaglio on translucent

porcelain, paid homage to the mysterious transience and fragility of memory. Kate Roberts' *Melanie*, the larger-than-life-sized dress based upon the roles of women in 19th-century southern society served, in spite of sentimentality, to draw the room to and through it. Steven M. Thurston's *Reinterpretations of Sächsische* offered a solid fusion of historical porcelain manufacturing reference and contemporary technological manufacturing process. Thurston says, "The nature of my work has always held a strong affection toward contemporary architectural systems and the industry of historical architectural terra cotta." In this setting the piece and museum architecture coalesced perfectly, serving to elevate both while echoing the artist's work.

In this time of rapidly changing input sources it follows that an exhibition of this sort exudes diversity, change, and uncertainty. And, although such flux is not easily pinned down, it often stirs up unprecedented innovation and bold creativity. Juror Julia Galloway stated, "The variety of work in this exhibition represents the current climate in the field." Indeed, in a field struggling to find contemporary footing and bound only by medium, the next phase is uncertain. Perhaps there is a space for the Biennial exhibition itself to transform, not just in location, invited jurors, and changing content, but in structure, concept, and context . . . at this moment, possibility is limitless.

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