

The New York Times September 7, 2007

Art Review / 'Makers and Modelers'

It's Just Clay, but How About a Little Respect?

By Roberta Smith

Necessity may be the mother of invention, but it is also the grandmother of that staff of life called art. This is especially clear with ceramics, the medium at which nearly all cultures excel, spurred by the basic need for things in which to carry water, store grain, serve up victuals. From meeting such needs, all else apparently flowed: abstract painting as much as bathroom fixtures. Ceramics has one of the richest histories in the world, more than can be absorbed in a lifetime. We all have our favorites, be it Greek vases or Fiesta ware, Tang courtesans or cookie jars, Edo tea bowls or Southern face jugs, Wedgwood or Russel Wright.

But, perplexingly, the mainstream art world's appreciation of contemporary ceramics remains a capricious, on-and-off, up-and-down thing — even when, as now, it seems to be in on/up mode. The latest symptom is "Makers and Modelers: Works in Ceramic," a sprawling, ebullient season opener of works by 31 artists at the Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea.

This show tries to position ceramics in the mainstream by ignoring just about anyone who hasn't more or less achieved high-end acceptance, a snobbish ploy. "Vessels are so over" is the apparent subtext of this potpourri of the figurative, abstract and installational.

But you have to admire a show that can keep its dignity while ranging from the cool-handed late-Conceptualist Sam Durant (plastic lawn chairs cast in porcelain with delicate chinoiserie glazes) to the neo-Neo-Expressionist Jonathan Meese, with his supposedly wild and crazy busts. The show's stylistic and physical scope defines ceramics as a commodious, seductive medium with fairly firm limits. But it is also a great leveler of aesthetic differences. And within those limits, it seems as hard to fail as it is to make something that surpasses generic competence and appeal. The frequency of mushy little figures here confirms this. (Ceramics accommodates so many levels of skill that the statement "My 5-year-old could do that" has an unusually high rate of accuracy.)

The elder statesman here is the great Ken Price, whose résumé reads like a flowchart covering the last four decades of ceramics' shifting fortunes. His bulbous, suggestive undulating blob, aglow with color, presides over the main gallery like a quiet, compact king in a noisy young court. (The bright, variegated patterns of a monster head/flower vase — in papier-mâché rather than clay, and filled with real lilies — by the Swiss art star Urs Fischer could almost be an irreverent homage to Mr. Price's fine-pored, jewel-like surface.) Also present is Rebecca Warren, a gifted British sculptor who works almost exclusively in fired clay, picking up where de Kooning's quivering bronze figures left off.

But this is not a stretch. Both Mr. Price and Ms. Warren are represented by Matthew Marks, another blue-chip Chelsea emporium. Less visible ceramicists do not make the cut, notably Ron Nagle, who is Mr. Price's contemporary and nearly his equal as an artist, and Kathy Butterly, a younger artist who makes abstractly erotic, decorative hybrid variations on vases and cups. Also overlooked are Lynda Benglis, who took up ceramics more than 10 years ago; Sterling Ruby, a young artist from Los Angeles who wreaks havoc with the medium; Nicole Cherubini; and Beverly Semmes. The Gladstone effort means business in every sense. It favors artists who fall primarily into one or more of three categories: veterans of foreign biennales; young and hot; represented by the Gladstone organization. It is also a little over half European which always adds luster.

Among the veterans, Thomas Schütte and Rosemarie Trockel, who have done extensive work in ceramics, stand out. Mr. Schütte contributes an eerie monumental severed head of a woman that is the color of blood but not bloody. Even more intriguing is Ms. Trockel's white-on-white modern daybed with glazed ceramic cushions. Its usual function thwarted, it serves as a pedestal or extended frame for a large black and white photograph of a 19th-century bronze of a black man's head. The contrasts are unexpected, arbitrary yet inseparable: black and white, academic and modern, art and design, purity and otherness.

Certain artists seem to shine in ceramics, among them Anish Kapoor, who counters his usual sleekness with a striking roughness reminiscent of the Abstract Expressionist work of Peter Voulkos. Liz Larner's large, faceted polygons in unglazed cast porcelain on irregular bases covered with black rubber are among the best things she has ever done. (They start a lively conversation with the Trockel daybed that is joined, from an adjacent gallery, by Manfred Pernice's white, lecternlike evocation of Giacometti.)

Paloma Varga Weisz's reticent little figures, usually in carved wood, are stronger in clay with rich, rusty glazes. Like Kai Althoff's version of a Tang courtesan, they seem presaged by the work of Anne Chu, who weighs in here with life-size figures called Hellish Spirits. Their velvety smoke-fired surfaces live up to the name; they evoke transcultural court jesters and have an affecting psychological presence. In other instances, including works by Mike Kelley and Sarah Lucas, the results are pleasantly routine. (Bo knows ceramics.) So is Elizabeth Peyton's wax portrait head, conventionally modeled and reminiscent of the British sculptor Jacob Epstein.

The show also includes works by Mary Heilmann, whose abstract paintings have always been paralleled by abstract ceramics, and Andrew Lord, a crossover ceramicist who has been an art world regular since 1981. Here Mr. Lord unveils a courageous new foray, forsaking his sculptural Process Art vessels for pairings of assorted heads, skulls, hands, limbs and more abstract body parts, as well as paintinglike plaques. Overlaps with [Jasper Johns](#), early Claes Oldenburg, Bruce Nauman and Robert Gober are hard to ignore, and create an odd sense of mastery and striving. The sensitive surfaces and grisaille glazes full of shadows, dating back to Mr. Lord's earliest works, may carry him forward.

The show's new faces include Klara Kristalova, a Swedish artist, who pushes the tradition of Meissen figurines toward larger scale and decidedly disturbing moments,

like the sinking, blindfolded head of a man in "Pond." The Romanian-born twins Gert and Uwe Tobias make suave assemblages that combine appropriated dishes and vases with ghoulish little hand-made figures to lighthearted effect. A Chicago artist named William O'Brien makes the show's biggest splash with a crowded tabletop menagerie of objects, mostly vessels, both ceramic and not. Wonderfully off-hand and slovenly in a way that brings to mind doilies and contorted cigar cleaners as much as amateur pottery, the piece owes something to the imposing clusters of vases and pitchers for which Mr. Lord was first known but has its own raucous D.I.Y. energy, and an air of inclusiveness that this show, ambitious as it is, might have taken a little more to heart.

"Makers and Modelers: Works in Ceramic" is at the Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street, Chelsea, (212) 206-9300, through Oct. 13.