Espace Sculpture

Provocative Ceramic Vessel-Sculpture — in context
Céramique en rupture

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Les anomalies céramiques de ces enfants terribles, et cela est paradoxal, s’insèrent parfaitement bien dans les décors fastueux et bien-pensants des musées Everson et Marsil (situés respectivement à Syracuse et Saint-Lambert). Malgré qu’ils en sont une parodie, ces vaisseaux-sculptures viennent en fact de rehausser la qualité des décors muséologiques et cela, malgré qu’ils soulignent la “correctitude” culturelle et la suffisance propres à de telles institutions.

Bien que l’art de la céramique comporte ses propres historiographie, hagiographie, typologie et histoire culturelle, la critique

For the last decade or so, a series of confrontational vessel-sculptures with veiled subversive messages, by Collège du Vieux-Montréal ceramic colleagues, Jeannot Blackburn, Léopold L. Foulem, Paul Mathieu and Richard Milette, in the now defunct Ceramics Department, has been served up locally and at various points of the North American galleryscape, becoming idiomatic landmarks in both lay and clay communities alike.

To the unprejudiced eye, the ceramic anomalies of these enfants terribles paradoxically fit well as objets d’art into the very posh interior surroundings they parody, indeed even to enhance décors, all the while thumbing their nose at the smugness of the culturally-correct whose attitudes are implied by such settings. They propose that stereotypical cultural gendering lies at the heart of the sexual politics of taste.

They show that ceramics has its own historiography, hagiography, typology and cultural history; modern ceramics criticism still tiresomely addresses typology (function) alone. In the visual arts, ceramics literacy lags behind architectural and “fine arts” literacy. The agenda of Foulem, Blackburn, Mathieu and Milette is also to expose the status and rank of ceramics in the visual arts lexicon. If their art is artistic parody, it is never stealing. As Low-Tech Post-Modernism does, their art mirrors the schism between the non-snobbish and the elite choice object with Kitsh, Pop-Art, Funk, the Super-Object and Historicism as a cultural link between Modernism and Post-Modernism.

The shows at Everson and Musée Marsil split the works into two sites more or less arbitrarily. Everson, the more auspicious venue of the two, besides housing the prestigious American studio potter, Adelaide Alsop Robineau (1865-1929) collection, collects pieces selected from biennial Ceramic National exhibitions, an institution revived in 1987. Their American ceramics holding is the most comprehensive in the United States. It focuses on the twentieth century with nineteenth-century examples to provide context. Representative works from diverse ceramic cultures provide further background for the study of American ceramics.

Everson has even collected some examples of Canadian clay artists’ works: a Roseline Delisle (b. 1952) and an Édouard Jasmin (1905-1987) were on view in another international exhibition during Four Québécois in Syracuse. Fiction, Function, Figuration: The 20th Ceramic National ran concurrently with Four Québécois in Syracuse.

Everson, I.M. Pei’s (b. 1917) first museum commission, and new quarters for the museum established in the late nineteenth century, was endowed by the Robineau family and opened in 1968.
small, Brutalist, steel-reinforced concrete building was conceived as part of a civic plaza centre to revitalize downtown Syracuse. In 1979, with ceramics scholars Garth Clark and Margie Hughto, Everson produced an important ceramic exhibition and publication, *A Century of Ceramics in the United States, 1878-1978.¹*

To be shown at Everson was a privilege; the honour was reciprocal, judging by the Québec flags that hung next to the American Stars and Stripes, announcing the event. The Decorative Arts Gallery showcases displaying the Montréalers' works is situated on the main floor landing to the lower level.² It is the museum or gallery showcase-site to which these artists gear their works, and wherein they address their issues.

Jeannot Blackburn’s (b. 1959) sequential six Salades are interwoven handbuilt and moulded clay anatomical parts for anonymous personnages in ludicrous quasi-sexual postures which appear to form aquacades-vessels of synchronized swimmers. A matte luminescent moonrock-green transcends earthly naturalistic colour, creating an ambiguous relationship to conservative clay colour symbolism. This is not clay, Pop-Art, neon or commercial colour. The relationship of salad to bowl is uncertain. The changing positions of participants, alterations in their number and scale, refers to metamorphosis. This disturbing orgy of moribund, faceless interlaced and twisted male bodies for base and walls of bowls in a macabre ritual masque, is a joyless one. Like fertility goddesses, stylized faces conceal reaction to concentrate attention on archetypal sexual function. Crowded figures in cramped spaces might even refer to Early Christian/Medieval relief carving on sarcophagi.

There is coupling in the mechanistic sense, without differentiation of individuality in his Léger-like machine-part limbs. Proximity is without intimacy. The work is about death as limbo sans nobility or redemption. Clean cuts of the limbs in glossy red, at strategic artistic junctures are passionless amputations. The basket-woven anthropomorphic salad-bowl is more a grave-pit container than a nest. No comforting graduation of size or shape, as in nesting bowls, for example, common to utilitarian ceramics, consoles and reassures. Rhythms slacken, from crescendo to diminuendo and stasis, signalling Blackburn’s precautionary message in the time of AIDS. The artist is a witness, if not a prophet. His works are disturbing precisely because they have no proper context either in ceramics or in sculpture. Neither are they tactile qualities, especially those customarily associated with ceramics. Despite the obvious sexual metaphors, the series is never satire, since it is not moralistic. Neither is it pornographic, missing the necessary voyeuristic factor. The series plays on popular stereotypes of gay sexual mores and Judeo-Christian retributionary commentary.

From the early nineties, Richard Milette (b. 1960) has been concentrating on the ubiquitous Sevres vase to study ceramic morphology via one easily identifiable clay-body type (other clay models of hard paste continental or English porcelain could just as easily have been chosen) to show Sevres to have been nonfunctional even in its original context, as clay, if not as interior decoration.

This study of the posthumous develops into his theory of the history of appropriation of surfaces as veneer, and the glitz and glamour of beguiling glazes representing nationalistic iconography. His work is a parody of nationalistic narrative put to political ends. His works speak of the promotion and export of French culture via products that imply the superiority of French culture, elegance and good taste. In French aristocratic contexts, royal decorative goods like Sevres represent the ultimate in chic, comfort, convention and conformity, if not finally, utter banality. Sevres shepherds and shepherdesses and gambolling aristocrats in bower and boudoir, reproduced in Occupied Japan, have come, ironically to represent the quintessential tacky object.

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moderne continue de s'adresser à son seul aspect fonctionnel, c'est-à-dire à sa typologie. Le discours normalement dévolu à la céramique est bien loin de celui qu'on réserve pourtant à l'architecture et aux beaux-arts. La démarche commune des Foulem, Blackburn, Mathieu et Milette a d'ailleurs pour but de redonner à la céramique sa juste place au rang des arts visuels. Si cette démarche fait un détour par l'ironie, elle n'en demeure pas moins sérieuse et se situe en fait à cent lieues de la gratuité. À l'instar du postmodernisme "low-tech", leur art consacre plutôt l'écart entre l'objet usuel et le super-objet désormais consacré par les mouvements Kitsch, Pop et Funk.

La répartition des œuvres entre les musées Everson et Marsil relève d'un choix arbitraire. Le musée Everson tire son prestige du timestaking process, the nature of perfection and status of material. The idea of French culture is somewhat of a myth.

Milette deals with history as an abstraction, neither chronological nor highly conceptual, simply a flea market of collectibles. His themes are parody and perjury, legitimacy and discretion. His pottery-shard decals or hand painted shards recount ceramic history to modern-day times. If polarities in attitude to design can range from the conformist/traditionalist to reformist positions, Milette's is confrontational, between the polarities.

His titles relate to Sévres vase titles, and colour for clay bodies approximate Sévres colour. Shards on the bodies reflect upon variegation in the history of European ceramics in the cultural transformation that occurred with trade, when eastern porcelain and European pottery converged. Milette inverts the fetishes. Traditional bronze Rococo mounts for oriental or Sévres porcelain with floral, mythological or classical imagery have been substituted by mounts charged with personal, satiric, sexual or anecdotal innuendo. In Pair of "Vases à boulons" With Leather Garlands at Everson, the studded leather and garland mounts for handles, base and foot are associated with the double entendres and sexual overtones of sado-masochistic practices as a popularly-held cliché of homosexuality.

Sévres porcelain is about the hierarchy of beautiful objects, timestaking process, the nature of perfection and status of material. Milette actually used a low-fired white clay body to render his pots conceptually, trompe l'œil ceramics. Lids are removable, but the voids are filled in, to represent non-function and to differentiate the stereotype of craft (as functional) from fine arts (as conceptual) or vessels (craft) from clay sculpture.

With great flourish and presentation, Leopold L. Foulem (b. 1945) brings us his modern-day "line" of service pieces, five pieces each for Musée Marsil and Everson. In contrast to Richard Milette's great pretenders, Foulem's good earthenware is conceptually based, in part, on the homey promotional (feminine, naturalistic, ornament) Pyrex kitchenware and cookware casserole and divided serving dishes of the 1960's, with (masculine, structural) metal bases and wood handles, marketed for the female as primary consumer as Deluxe, Golden Leaf Casserole, Golden Pine, Empire Scroll, Royal Wheat, Zodiac, Gourmet, Cinderella New Buffet Twins, etc., titles associated with the "Good Homemaker" and suburbia. Another model he chooses to satirize is nineteenth- and twentieth-century silver-plated serving pieces engraved and chased with classical foliate motifs, as supports for glass inserts and food service. Alessi, the Milan design group, also investigates common domestic objects from a perspective larger than that of the rational International Style. Upheld by psychoanalytical and anthropological theory, Alessi and Foulem attempt to get at the human condition through sensorial experience and the enjoyment of objects beyond their physical function. Alessi produces Post-Modern metal containers with motifs or processes imitative of the silversmithy craft. Foulem's bases were made with found electroplated silver parts, re-soldered and re-plated to call attention as discarded containers with a newly-fitted ceramic "vessel" receptacle in place, representing the void as mass. His "wares" are not aristocratic; they speak joual; they speak of the kitchen and scullery as well as the chef's pantry.

Leopold L. Foulem's comic forte is Hegelian.

L’œuvre séquentielle intitulée Salades, de Jeannot Blackburn (né 1959), réunit six bols confectionnés à partir d'éléments moulurés ou faits main représentant des panneaux d'anatomie dont l'enchevêtrement à saveur lubrique rappelle certains exercices en nage synchronisée. D’une teinte mate qui évoque un vert lunaire, le matériau nous éloigne du symbolisme normalement associé au gris. La relation salade/bol est plutôt incertaine. Les positions variées des participants, leurs mutations en nombre et en dimension referent à la métamorphose. Cette orgie de nus masculins entrelacés, aux corps souvent atrophiés, évoque un rituel macabre dépourvu de toute joie ou satisfaction sexuelle. Telles des déesses de fertilité, les visages de la mort, une mort dépourvue de toute noblesse, de toute sensualité, sont stylisés de façon à faire porter l’attention sur l’archétype de la mortalité. Somme toute, elles sont souvent atrophiées, évoquant un rituel macabre dépourvu de toute joie ou satisfaction sexuelle.

Turning stereotypes inside out, he exposes the thin veneer of civility based on aristocratic, paternalistic models and high-cultural background in general: on class and gendered goods, specifically. They reflect upon the schism between the banal and the delicate object, the industrially-designed object, or the High-Tech object designed for a specific socio-economic group (the lower and middle class), and the one-off, limited edition delicate object whose qualities of the expressiveness of its materials imply different sets of cultural values. His work converges where the machine aesthetic meets the delicate aesthetic. He also points out that the French etiology of Art Deco, always in opposition to the antithetical International Style, is now an outmoded concept.

Paul Mathieu (b. 1954), under the ideas of French anthropologist and structural theorists, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault of the 1960s, argues for heterotopias (forbidden spaces reserved for individuals in reaction to mainstream society [utopias]). For Mathieu, narratives are historical and autobiographical and heterotopias mean pottery-cultural space and gay culture. His format is the place setting, whose individual serving pieces are unified by drawn imagery. He treats surfaces as support by means of continuous images. Three-dimensional images are drawn on two-dimensional surfaces, or volumes and perspectives are flattened with painted two-dimensional imagery. His lush floral imagery often recalls the decoration of Japanese potter, Kenzan (1663-1743).

In The First Summer of Lover (1992), the artist deals with social anthropology and material culture. The “open-stock” series of mass-produced components refers to the postmodern canon of wheel-thrown symmetrical pieces. When the six pieces in the place setting are stacked, the idyllic tropical California scene shows the artist’s apartment in Santa Monica in 1985-87. As the dishes in the sequence are manually separated, the viewer is invited on a special visit of the private quarters, a reference to Intimiste painting and voyeurism. When stacked, the drawn black rectangular frame refers to elaborately framed easel paintings. The frame unifies the disparate parts or viewpoints in an architectural setting. When unstacked, that frame successively breaks apart. On the bottom larger dinner plate there is no frame, the image now occupying the whole surface of the plate. In these porcelain renditions of virtual reality, trompe l’oeil swimming pool, waves and shadows, and the actual wells of plates are deliberately confused. Hackneyed notions of surfaces and volume particular to or “correct” for ceramics are convoluted. Mathieu explores haptic illusion and the kinetic and tactile interrelationship in ceramics. He always uses specific shapes to refer to typology and function.

Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein’s slip-cast moulded ceramic plate settings are sculptural entities with two-dimensional symbols painted on three-dimensional objects; Mathieu’s dinnerware works as individual utilitarian ceramic objects and as a sculptural group. Mathieu’s stacked dishes are not used as metaphors of pop culture, rather the reverse, as serious examination of artistic production or reproduction, a parody that is a recycling of elitist pretension.

Self-styled crusaders, the ceramists give voice to rage, taking different stances to mainstream sets of etiquette and cultural pretension. Their rage, however, has nothing to do with “gender war”. To mock the very institutions one seeks to patronize is the very delicate balancing act they perform. Their works skirt boundaries between what it is not rather than what it is. The audience for Canadian craft is small, but the art of these ceramists speaks mainly to the ethos of that culture. As counter-design it seeks a wider audience...
serve. Avec cinq pièces en montrant dans chacun des deux musées, Foulem nous ramène du côté pratique-pratique de la poterie. À l'inverse de Richard Millette, il trouve son inspiration dans les ustensiles de cuisine bas-de-gamme comme Pyrex, Deluxe, Golden Leaf, Golden Pine, Empire Scroll, Royal Wheat, Zodiac, Gourmet, Cinderella, etc. Sourire en coin, il nous replonge dans l'atmosphère béate et tout-continue d'une cuisine familiale des années soixante. Autre sujet de raillerie, les plateaux de dessert plaqués argent du 19e et début 20e qui servaient à recevoir verres, vaisselle et aliments. À l'instar du groupe design Alessi, de Milan, Foulem poursuit une réflexion sur les objets domestiques usuels par-delà leur fonction utilitaire.

On pourrait croire qu'il trouve son ironie chez Hegel! Investissant les stéréotypes, il expose la mineure de la couche de civilité qui recouvre nos modèles institutionnels. Il en expose les fondements paternalistes, les préjugés de classe, les déterminismes sexuels. Il trace l'évolution de nos modes de consommation et montre à quel point nos choix esthétiques sont déterminés par les paramètres sociaux et socio-économiques.

Paul Mathieu (né en 1954) s'inspire des travaux du philosophe Michel Foucault pour établir une distinction entre les espaces publics interdits - qu'il nomme hétérotopies — et les espaces publics ouverts, c'est-à-dire les utopies. Selon lui, la poétrie s'apparente au premier type (voir à ce sujet l'article que signe Mathieu dans ce numéro). Son travail porte sur le couvert de table dont les éléments trouvent leur unité grâce à une imagination dessinée à leur surface. On y trouve des images à trois dimensions qui recouvrent des surfaces à deux dimensions ou encore des perspectives et des volumes aplatis par l'usage d'une imagination bidimensionnelle. Sa riche ornementation florale rappelle, par certains côtés, l'œuvre du potier japonais Kenzan (1663-1743).

Dans The First Summer of Love (1992), l'empiècement de confections identiques sort de commentaire mordant sur les valeurs que sous-tend l'habituale production en série. Lorsque les six pièces du même couvert sont émplies l'une sur l'autre, on obtient une vue latérale de l'appareil que l'artiste a habité à Santa Monica de 1985 à 1987. À mesure que les plats sont enlevés, on a droit à une "visite guidée" des pièces qui le composent. Cela fait penser évidemment à la peinture intimiste, voire même au voyeurisme.

Par des techniques apparentées à la réalité virtuelle, l'artiste suggère des piscines trompe-l'oeil, des vagues, des ombres, où les références visuelles sont délibérément tronquées. Chez Mathieu, les plats à vaisselle sont autant des objets utilitaires individuels qu'un groupe sculptural dont la fonction est de parodier les prétentions elitistes des bien-pensants.

Nos quatre croisés de la céramique témoignent, chacun à leur façon, d'un sentiment de profonde révolution face à l'étiquette et aux conventions établies. Leur expérimental, c'est de réussir à se moquer de certaines institutions qui reçoivent leurs œuvres. Ils manifestent un équilibre constant entre le dit et le non dit. Au Canada, le public qui s'intéresse aux métiers d'art est restreint. En élargissant la portée conceptuelle de leurs œuvres, ils augmentent pour autant le champ d'attraction de la céramique, y mélangant même une nouvelle esthétique gai. Nos quatre franc-tireurs font partie d'un circuit autonome qui n'entretient aucune attache institutionnelle. Ils sont donc entièrement libres de continuer à décocher leurs flèches acidulées à l'endroit du... Grand Art. " Translation: Roch Fortier

Four Québécois in Syracuse
Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse (New York)
21 mai au 29 août 1993
Les vaisseaux d'art
Musée Marsil, S.-Lambert (Québec)
30 mai au 18 juillet 1993

beyond craft, design or decorative art and a niche for gay ceramics. This team of artists is autonomous within a clay community neither provincially or nationally well-defined, unified or directed, and with no identifiable constitution.  

Four Québécois in Syracuse
Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York
May 21 to August 29, 1993
Les vaisseaux d'art
Musée Marsil, St.-Lambert, Québec
May 30 to July 18, 1993

NOTES:
1. Morphological and metonymical and euphuistic terminology for book, catalogue or chapter titles establishes the wearisome task of establishing a truly universal generic terminology beyond the catch-all, "Post-Modernism." Perhaps Albert Lecle, Director of Industrial Design in the Faculty of Interior Design at the Université de Montréal, in his talk, "Le design du mobilier Italien depuis 1960 et le contexte historique", at the Design Symposium at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, October 16, 1993, put it best and simply when he acknowledged Memphis, the Italian design group, the major influence which would separate the International Style from the Post-Modernist style. Of course, centralized marketing and promotion and Italian communications targeted the educated art consumer/la nécessité d'accorder des titres aux livres, catalogues et chapitres entraîne celle de fixer une nomenclature universelle qui aille au-delà de la simple appellation "postmodernisme". Peut-être faudrait-il s'en remettre à Albert Leclerc, directeur du module de design industriel à l'Université de Montréal qui, au cours d’un symposium récent, situait le groupe design italien Memphis à la jonction des styles International et Postmoderniste.

2. The museum also has the Cloud Wampler Collection of oriental art (mostly Chinese ceramics); the Lake Collection (English eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ceramics), the Davidson Collection of early nineteenth-century American stoneware and slipware, and a small collection of Southwest American Indian pottery. La musée abrite également la collection d'art céramique chinois Cloud Wampler, la Lake Collection (céramiques anglaises des 18e et 19e siècles), la Davidson Collection (potières de grès du 19e siècle et pièces émaillées), ainsi qu’un échantillonnage de poteries indiennes américaines.


5. See also Garth Clark and Margie Hughto, American Ceramics 1876 to the Present (New York: Abbeville Press, c. 1987).

6. Other Canadian ceramicists in the/les autres céramistes canadiens dans la Everson collection are Bailey Leslie, Marguerite Baines, Mmes. R.M. Kay, Sergio DiPietro, Evie East, Silvyn Lautenthal, Ann Mortimer, Mary Rowlands and Mary Satterly. This information was made available to the author by Linda M. Herbert, Information Officer, with the use of Everson Museum archives.


8. The ceramics are represented/les céramistes sont représentés par la Galerie Barbara Silverberg, Montréal.