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# Coincidentia Oppositorum

## The Ceramics of Susan Beiner

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*Nailed. Teapot. 2001. Porcelain. 24 x 31 x 18 cm.*



*Pear Bottom Teapot. 1999. Porcelain. 23 x 33 x 19 cm.*

IN HIS RECENT BOOK TITLED *BOBOS IN PARADISE*, *Washington Post* columnist David Brooks outlines his new theories with regard to contemporary American culture. Using his unique form of self-described 'comic sociology', he argues that much of contemporary American life is concerned with the reconciling of opposites. Brooks also defines a new social class that he calls *Bobos*; they are the new American bourgeois bohemians. With this term, he is referring to a generation of baby boomers, including himself, who have successfully merged the mainstream bourgeois sensibility with their 1960s' bohemian values. According to Brooks, reconciling of

opposites is a common Bobo activity. Their reconciliation of culture and counterculture permits these Americans to live affluently while at the same time appearing free spirited and rebellious, thus allowing all of the consumption without any of the guilt.

As a Californian-based sculptor, Susan Beiner parallels the course of the American Bobo in her efforts to reconcile opposing forces in her artwork. According to Beiner's artist statement, she is interested in exploring "the union of opposites that gives birth to new ideas".

Interestingly, this idea is not new; in fact, it is historically supported in both Eastern and Western culture. In Eastern culture the concept of harmony of opposites can be found within Eastern Taoist philosophy and the writings of 6th century Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tse. Taoism suggests there could be no love without hate, no light without dark and no male without female. Within Western culture, the theosophical concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* or a coincidence of opposites is a condition originally defined by 15th century Christian Mystic, Nicholas of Cusa. A *coincidentia oppositorum* is described by H. Lawrence Bond in *Nicholas of Cusa: Selected Spiritual Writings* as "a unity of contraries overcoming opposition by convergence without destroying or merely blending the constituent elements".

With this definition of *coincidentia oppositorum* in mind, an interesting comparison can be drawn between Beiner's previous work that was created while living in Detroit, Michigan, and her most recent sculptural work that she is currently producing while living in Redlands, California. Her previous work consists of cast functional forms encrusted with slipcast ceramic replicas of specific implements of industrial production such as screws, nuts and bolts. In this work, the artist has obsessively and lovingly constructed layers of metaphoric and symbolic meaning that are suggestive of function but serve as sculptural objects. In her newer work, Beiner is using her previously adopted signifiers as inspiration yet she is carving a new path for herself in her pursuit of a body of work that is simultaneously intellectually stimulating and tantalizing to the eye.

This work beckons you closer and then seizes you with a swift double-entendre. For example, screws, nuts and bolts are common in Beiner's older and





*Encrusted Field*, 2.85m x 2.85m x 20cm.

newer ceramic works. While the word 'screw' may promote snickering in some people, as a visual symbol the screw form is a phallic image. If one takes the concept of the merging of the nut and the bolt a step further, an obvious sexual narrative emerges. In her previous functional work, the title often reinforces the sexual reference, such as *Nailed*, 2001. Yet these fasteners carry a second metaphoric meaning because they can be interpreted as the symbolic essence of Beiner's Detroit experience. Detroit, Michigan, is best known as the Motor City and the home of Berry Gordy's Motown Records. It is a place that is recognised by many to be the heart of American industrial production. Generally speaking, it is a city that can be characterised by a blue-collar mentality and as the birthplace of many significant companies and ideas that have had a tremendous impact on American culture. Henry Ford's invention of the automobile and the advent of the assembly line in Detroit made the mass production of consumer goods possible. Consequently, it has distinguished itself geographically as a place where new ideas are born.

It was Beiner's Detroit experience that was the impetus to the character of the teapots and functional forms she created there. Beiner lived in Detroit from 1994 to 2000. During this time she was an assistant professor at the College for Creative Studies, a studio artist and an active participant in the vital and intense underground Detroit art scene. In September 2001, she was offered a teaching position as assistant professor of Art at California State University, San Bernardino, and she relocated to Redlands, California, for a new job and a new life. Interestingly, this life transition altered the nature of Beiner's artwork in ceramics.

In stark contrast to Detroit, Southern California and particularly Los Angeles, is the centrifuge for American popular culture and arguably the American centre of what is hip and happening. As home to Hollywood and the film industry, Los Angeles is often stereotyped for its superficiality and agonising traffic and many think of LA as glitzy and glamorous. The entire region is known for its Mediterranean climate and awe-inspiring Pacific coast. Located about 60 miles east of LA, the landscape and lifestyle in Redlands is less





*Encrusted Field*, detail. 2.85m x 2.85m x 20cm.

urban; a place characterised by desert canyons and tropical foliage. Generally speaking, Southern California is a place of bright colours, sunlight, audaciousness, short sleeves and extroversion. It is within the obvious polarities between Detroit and Southern California that we are reminded of Beiner's condition of *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Beiner's latest piece, titled *Encrusted Field*, 2002, was exhibited as part of the 2003 Scripps 59th Ceramic Annual in Claremont, California. Taking more than a year and a half to complete, this work consists of approximately 196 modular components that comprise a wall-mounted field of ornament and activity. In this work, Beiner has chosen to present her piece on the wall in a modular relief format. Additionally, she has adopted, by nature of her new environment, the Southern California palette that is indicative of many ceramic artists of the region. When comparing her previous work such as *Pear Bottom Teapot*, 1999, to her large-scale work, *Encrusted Field*, 2002, it becomes obvious that the change in her physical location has had a direct impact on the focus and direction of her work. While in Detroit, the perpetual grey of the winter sky influenced the choices she made as a studio artist, evidenced by the monochromatic, metallic surface of her teapot forms. Conversely, her approach to colour, form and function is decidedly different in California. Yet with close examination, the viewer can discover the same miscellany of screws, nuts and bolts interspersed within the sculptural form that were frequent in the Detroit produced functional objects.

As the viewer's eyes attempt to connect the colours and follow the directions of the chaotic assembly of forms, amorphous and organic objects are revealed, leading the viewer to understand that what they are seeing refers to the natural world. This reference suggests that, in Beiner's experience, nature and industry can coexist harmoniously.

Another compelling juxtaposition is created when we analyse the effect of Beiner's experience of living in

close proximity to the ocean in a Mediterranean climate compared with her experiences in Detroit's harsher climate. For example, the quality of light of Southern California has been translated into a vibrant use of colour. The surface of this sculpture oozes with a seductive quality that Beiner has likened to "a slick like oil on a rainy day". The luscious and voluptuous leafy forms are simultaneously suggestive of foliage, sea creatures and tongues.

The scale of the wall work invites the viewer to an intimate examination similar to the way in which one would explore a beach or field looking for lost treasures; memories of beachcombing for sea glass comes to mind. The fact that this work is mounted on the wall suggests that the artist wants us to examine this work closely and experience it personally. Also, this form of presentation yields itself to the notion that some 'treasures' are out of reach, only available for observation and study from a distance. Beiner states: "The encrusted nature of the work is comforting to me. It is like I am safe within the chaos. I think there is an element of softness in the piece and I want to lie down within it and let it envelop me." The tension and vitality in this work is unified by a cohesive obsessiveness that yields order out of chaos. The tactility and texture of this work is indicative of the energy required to produce it.

*Encrusted Field* represents the amount of physical labour that is indicative of Beiner's commitment to artistic exploration and yields the creative discoveries that hard work in the studio and life experience can provide. As these experiences have gestated and are re-presented, the result is that her work has been transformed by her new sense of place. In conveying this story of Beiner's transition from Detroit to Los Angeles, one is reminded of a Hebrew saying, *Meshane Makom*, *Meshane Mazal* which translated to English means, 'change the place, change the luck'. This phrase suggests that if one makes a major life change that one's luck will change as well. Reviewing the recent course of events in Beiner's life suggests that her *mazal* is improving. Obviously, with this new sculptural work, Beiner has succeeded in her quest to assimilate the coincidence of opposites. The work has evolved to include specific former elements but a new body of work has emerged from a change in her living environment. Beiner's work as an artist has been transformed; influences of the past and present have been assimilated. Her new work creates a harmonious space in which the categorically opposed domains of Motor City versus Hollywood, industry versus nature, the monochromatic versus the colourful and the ordinary versus the fantastic can be united, creating the paradox that is *coincidentia oppositorum*.

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