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Earth Matters



A Review by Glen R Brown

Aislinn Caron. *Harvest*. 2009. Slipcast and handbuilt Porcelain, wood and soil.
15 x 17 x 40 in. Photo by Aislinn Caron.

THE DOUBLE ENTENDRE OF ITS TITLE – A REFERENCE TO SUBJECTS generally relevant to the earth as much as a declaration of the earth's vital importance – gave the part-curated, part-juried NCECA exhibition *Earth Matters* a broad potential scope. This was prescient, given that few contemporary ceramists have explicitly addressed anthropogenic climate change (the most pressing environmental issue today) and even fewer have actually modified their artistic activities to reduce energy expenditure or otherwise pay more than lip service to sacrifice for the beleaguered biosphere and those future generations whose lot it will be to inherit an escalating threat of extinction. From an ethical point of view, *Earth Matters* was a necessary exhibition. Under the aegis of the largest ceramics organization in North America, it represented the kind of interrogation of collective conscience that would have been unconscionable to avoid much longer, given that North America has played a leading role in edging the earth ever closer to potential ecological disaster on a massive scale. *Earth Matters'* summation of recent activity among ceramists who are concerned by human impact on the natural world was an example of just the kind of service that an organization such as NCECA ought to provide through its sponsored exhibitions.

Since *Earth Matters* was constituted from a call for entries as well as a core of works specifically selected for their relevance to the theme, it is fair to draw from the exhibition some general conclusions about the response of ceramists at large to one of the most significant crises ever confronted by life on earth. In this context the first observation to consider is that most of the work in the exhibition was only of the earth-related type and little of the remainder could

accurately be described as activist. Even most of those pieces that specifically addressed issues of anthropogenic climate change seemed either philosophically contemplative or scientifically disinterested, forcing the conclusion that, on matters relevant to human impact on the biosphere, the contemporary ceramic artist in general is no more of an agitator, avid reformist or model of needed conscience than is the average North American. Overall, *Earth Matters* reflected a deficiency of urgency that may, to future generations, seem as perplexing and ironic as oblivion to the dangers of the inflated 1929 stock market does to us today.

This is not to say that *Earth Matters* was devoid of unsettling subject matter, a degree of alarm and even implicit call to action. Kate MacDowell, for example, emblemized ecofeminist ire through her white porcelain metaphor of deforestation, *Daphne* (a Bernini redux in which the fleeing nymph, having metamorphosed into a laurel tree to evade the relentless desire of the god of reason) has fallen victim to a frenzied chainsaw massacre. Grace Nickel's installation *Devastatus Rememorari*, in which stubble trunks of flayed trees jut forlornly from a desiccating plain of salt, imparted to the problems of deforestation and desertification an Anselm-Kiefer-like sublimity of holocaustic ruin. Christopher M Torrez's miniature porcelain *Infection* conjured the ruptured bliss of an Eden dragged down from idyllic daydreams by the weight of a sulfurous pool of glaze, a toxic pond of unnatural waters lying like a lesion on the body of the earth and implicitly indicting human impact on the environment. Even the most ardent prophets of anthropogenic hell and high water would have found these works sufficiently fumed with the brimstone



Top: Gudrun Klix. *On the Table*. 2008. Ceramic, red desert sand and wooden table. 37 x 75.5 x 33 in. Photo by Gudrun Klix.
 Above: Dennis Lee Mitchell. 2008. *Under My Skin #9*. Welded Clay. 28 x 29 x 8 in. Photo by Eric Young Smith.

Top: Jae Won Lee. *Frail Hope, Internal Distance: Object IX*. 2009. Porcelain, monofilament, bead and aluminium pin. 40 x 30 x 9 in. Photo by Jeff Traux.
 Above: Susan Beiner. *Artificial Selection*. Ceramics and mixed media. 23 x 64 x 18 in. Photo by Darien Johnson.

of admonition. If the late 21st century should in fact gaze retrospectively across scorched inland wastelands and deluged coastlines seeking signs that its early decades were not wrapped in oblivion, surely these are the kinds of works that will save our age from the stigma of absolute naiveté.

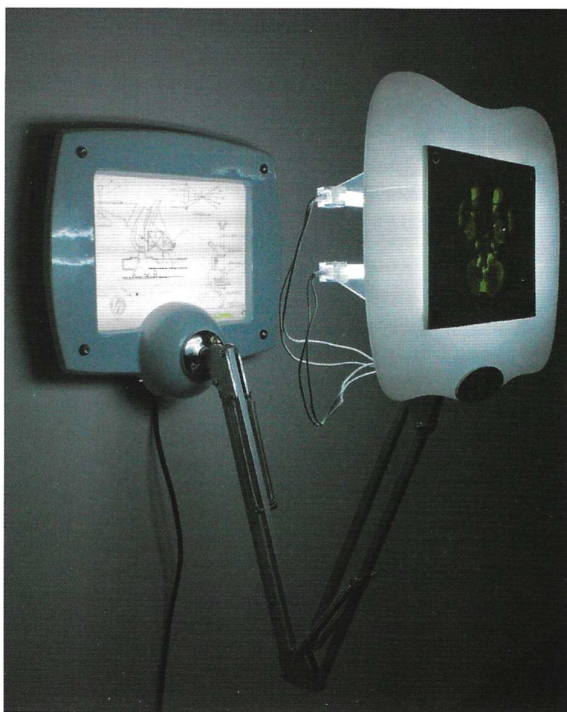
There is, of course, a broad middle ground between fervour and denial on the subject of global warming and the majority of *Earth Matters* works engaging that issue could be said to have occupied the less tangible, more heterogeneous territory of quiet concern, inquisitiveness, contemplation, ethical self-review or even irresolution. John Williams' *Commodities Series* wedded ice-slick porcelain slabs with a gleaming gold miniature oil well, wind turbine, pair of nuclear cooling towers, gas pipeline, photovoltaic panel and electrical transmission tower – all of these suggestive of tokens from a Monopoly game of economic empire and supply-and-demand exploitation but ultimately left open to a range of other interpretations. Paula Winokur's *Calving* invoked glaciology and its recent contributions to the data of climate change

but reflected equally on the grandeur of glaciers and the natural process of iceberg formation. Nan Smith's monumental mixed-media installation *Garden* formed an introspective allegory on nature, humanity and time. Jae Won Lee's *Frail Hope, Internal Distance: Object IX* evoked the beauty, fragility and mystery of organic multiplicity. Dennis Lee Mitchell's *Under My Skin* sculptures, with their *trompe l'oeil* tree-bark allusions to torsos, seemed to murmur a 'deep ecology' mantra of human-and-ecosystem integration. Justin Novak's *Icarus Junior* merged ancient mythological musings on the tragic consequences of hubris with the look of contemporary *anime* to reflect on the puerile conviction that paternal technology will in the end protect us from the results of our excessive self-indulgence. All of these works at least implicitly acknowledged the increasing dangers of the enhanced greenhouse effect.

Earth Matters incorporated a number of other noteworthy works – for example, Brian Czibesz's *Diagnostic: Myopia*, Susan Beiner's *Artificial Selection*, Aislin Caron's *Harvest* and



Above: Nan Smith. *Garden*. 2010. Earthenware and mixed media. 144 x 96 x 120 in. Photo by Allen Cheuvront.
 Below: Bryan Czibesz. *Diagnostic: Myopia*. 2009. CNC, cut translucent porcelain, clay, glaze, steel, aluminium, acrylic, rubber, cold cathode light, mixed media drawing on mylar. 28 x 26 x 24 in. Photo by Bryan Czibesz.



Gudron Klix's *On the Table* – that reflected on the ominous implications of human manipulation of nature in pursuit, ironically, of alimentation and health. Genetic engineering of foodstuffs, the impact of technology on the body and the perils of irresponsible irrigation practices are all significant 'earth matters' but one could not help but note that among concerned ceramists (as among environmental advocates in general) the crusade for the ecosystem has not yet coalesced under the banner of a single crucial cause. Far more troubling than this diffuseness, however, was the insinuation imparted by the cartoonish witticism of a number of figural one-liners in the exhibition, that invoking the problem of global warming may be, for some, largely a convenient means of injecting contemporaneity into their work. Most disconcerting of all, the lack of evidence that any green technologies, processes or materials were deliberately employed in creating any of the works in the exhibition inevitably raised the question of how many contemporary ceramists have indeed embraced the conviction that truly and above all other considerations, earth matters.

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