

Curatorial Statement

*Continuous Clay: Trends and Innovations*

July 24 – September 5, 2021

Contemporary artists who work with clay as their primary material are living in an interesting time for the medium. Following in the footsteps of pioneering Bay Area artists such as Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, and Ron Nagle, who championed the materiality of clay and elevated the medium beyond the realm of craft, the work of the nine artists presented here is on an unspecified trajectory, evolving into something entirely new and exciting. Like their predecessors, these artists realize that to make-by-hand is a satisfying and convincing argument merely because the results are superbly imperfect. This exhibition, investigating a range of provocative themes and innovative uses of materials, includes an intergenerational selection of diverse artists from the San Francisco Bay Area who do just that.

Michelle Gregor, a San Francisco-based contemporary figurative artist, is one of the most highly regarded second-generation sculptors of the Bay Area Figurative Movement working today and one of the most important women ceramic artists working in the United States. Her work *Odalisque* attests to her mastery of the medium and her painterly approach to glaze application. Two mid-career sculptors re-imagining clay in the new millennium are South Bay artist Pancho Jimenez's work *Cara a Cara* and San Francisco based artist Tiffany Schmierer's *Interconnection*. Jimenez's *Cara a Cara* and Schmierer's *Interconnection* are examples of works more worthy of an illuminated position in the broader history of sculpture.

San Francisco artist Tiffany Tang's installation, a series of four Moon jars, and Marin-based Brett Crawford's piece, *Sperry Fingerprint*, represent work from two highly skilled emerging potters who are making thought-provoking work that pushes the medium even further conceptually. They use traditional vessel forms as a means for conveying deeper contextual and experimental approaches to surface and meaning. Similarly, the installation *48 Years* by San Francisco's Jeannie Ichimura (the finished product of a larger interactive performance project titled *Nourish*), suspends gracefully from the ceiling and considers American female identity by investigating concepts of domesticity, motherhood, sexuality, and aging.

Some of the artists on view push the boundaries of the medium through works exploring overt sociopolitical themes. Chilean-born, Oakland-based artist Maria Paz makes hand-coiled sculptures depicting concepts of family and the unending tragedy surrounding the immigration crisis in the United States. Her stories manifest on the surfaces of her forms as an opportunity for those to find healing and empowerment through the work. Two monumental sculptures, *Ephemera* and *Praise of Folly* by East Bay artist Mark Messenger, display a cast of characters derived from history,

religion, mythology, and contemporary life. The imagery intricately carved on the surfaces depicts an undercurrent of social-political discord veiled in a sardonic daftness. Sacramento artist and slip-casting expert Shenny Cruces' large installation *Accumulations* is a mass collection of tiny white porcelain figurines spilling out on a gilded credenza. In the words of the artist, the work “exposes the underlying issues of class, sexual identity, memory and the meaning of objects in our lives.”

Taken as a whole, the artworks in *Continuous Clay: Trends and Innovations* were selected to expand the viewer’s imagination about what is possible with clay. Though all the pieces included in the exhibition vary greatly in style through a broad range of conceptual approaches, unconventional materials, and techniques, all share one thing in common: an immense passion for the deeply primordial and unforgiving nature of the magnificent medium of clay.

Jeff Downing