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ART REVIEW | 'DIRT ON DELIGHT'

Crucible of Creativity, Stoking Earth Into Art



Dirt on Delight A bowl by George Ohr (around 1895-1900), at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

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PHILADELPHIA — On a surprisingly regular basis, the tiny Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania here mounts exhibitions that make the contemporary-art adventures of many larger museums look blinkered, timid and hidebound. The institute's current show is a lively case in point, never mind the ungainly, uninformative title: "Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay." Only the last word hints that this convoluted syntax might signal an exhibition of ceramic vessels and sculptures.

When this show is seen in person, it is unmistakable that it is wildly, exuberantly, yet quite cogently about things of a ceramic nature, many different things: large and small, abstract and representational, glazed, unglazed and painted, old and new.

The show's determination to integrate ceramics into the art mainstream is nothing new. But its refusal to do so simply by slipping some universally agreed-upon ceramic exceptions into a show of painting, sculpture and so forth is close to groundbreaking.



Putting all its eggs in one basket, "Dirt on Delight" argues for ceramics as a more than worthy subject. It reminds us that the art form incorporates quite a bit of painting and sculpture, thank you, and has one of the richest histories of any medium on the planet. Ceramics also plays well with all kinds of artistic ideas and needs no propping up by supposedly serious fine art or, incidentally, by much in the way of explanatory labels.

In addition, the sheer visual force of the show, with its saturated colors, varied surfaces and inventive forms, foments a fond hope: Perhaps sometime soon the religion of Minimal-Conceptual-Relational art (important as it is) will finally wither away, and more and more curators of contemporary art will regain full use of their eyes and thus their brains.

I was not the first to ask about the show's title, and was told that dirt meant "the latest word," "the lowdown." These days the word sounds kind of negative, even without the definite article. Perhaps the all-over-the-place title should be taken as the show's rambunctious id, or at least be chalked up to the curators' excitement at having such a rich area of endeavor largely to themselves.

In any event, Ingrid Schaffner, the institute's senior curator, and Jenelle Porter, its associate curator, have organized their exhibition with almost palpable glee. Their selections range over more than 100 years and mix art-world, crafts-world and crossover talents. Postwar figures like Peter Voulkos, the multitasking Lucio Fontana and Beatrice Wood are on hand, along with current exemplars like Ken Price and Arlene Shechet. Crossovers include Kathy Butterly and Betty Woodman. Although perhaps Ms. Woodman should cross over some more; her glazed surfaces are as interesting as her forms are not. She might do better just painting with glaze on flat pieces of clay, like Mary Heilmann and Joyce Robins (either of whom could have been in the show).

Nods are given to some of the art world's youngest and hottest users of clay, but also to artists with little art-world profile, like Philadelphia's own Jane Irish and Paul Swenbeck or Jeffrey Mitchell of Seattle. The show even has an outsider artist: Eugene von Bruenchenhein, better known for his sweetly (mostly) erotic photographs of his wife.

The earliest artist here, however, is the brilliant George Ohr (1857-1918) — the First Modern, or Jackson Pollock, of ceramics. Ohr, whose work was rediscovered in the early 1970s, saw the malleability of clay as Pollock saw the fluidity of paint: both qualities were not only central to the process; they could also be thrillingly self-evident in the end results. Ohr threw (on a potter's wheel) small, eggshell-thin pots and then, while they were still wet, twisted or pushed them into curling, collapsing, asymmetrical forms. Treating clay as clay, he made it a highly personal record of thought and movement, like Pollock's dripped paint.

The show is installed more by affinity than by chronology. Some works stand on the floor or on individual pedestals that are often part of the works. Most are arrayed on three multileveled pedestals the size of small icebergs; this invites comparative viewing and cuts down on fetishization.

The Ohr pots, including one whose pink-and-blue patterns indicate Ohr's Art Nouveau beginnings, are grouped with the equally delicate, often twisted or crumpled forms of Ms. Butterly (born in 1963) with their vibrant colors, unexpected details, sly body English and knowing references (decorative arts, sports, flesh). Also nearby is a new work by the revered Mr. Price, one of the medium's legends. It consists of two piles of sausagelike forms that coil toward each other with amazing abstract magnetism, a little like Michelangelo's reclining nudes, "Night" and "Day."



As with an exhibition of painting, the show is a series of overlapping debates about technique, style, the nature of invention and the role of history. Mr. Price's and Ms. Butterly's work can have the exquisiteness of fine jewelry, as can Adrian Saxe's high-style amalgams. His commanding "Sweet Dreams" is a vaguely Chinese-influenced lidded jar with ormolu handles and a rock-crystal finial that, in a kind of scholar's-rock touch, sits on what appears to be a large, multitiered fungus.

Other historicists in the show include Ann Agee, who riffs on the Rococo figurine in white-glazed porcelain dainties, but shows them on a rough-hewn display table based on one of Ohr's. Ms. Irish decorates gilt-edged, Sèvres-like vases with images of Vito Acconci's performance pieces or from the Vietnam War.

Next to Mr. Saxe's pieces, Ron Nagle's small, cuplike forms continue the exquisiteness, alternating between geometric and organic, hard-edged and floppy, blushing tints and blaring colors. These works should simply be called very richly colored sculpture. They look so replete that Mr. Nagle's greatness itself is one of the show's most valuable lessons.

Contrasting visibly with the lapidarian approach is the range of relatively relaxed methods of Ms. Shechet, who builds by hand bulbous, genielike forms with multiple spouts; or of Rudolf Staffel, whose translucent porcelain vessels are pieced together as if from scraps; or of Sterling Ruby, who revels in skeletal pieces that seem to have survived fires — which they have. Jessica Jackson Hutchins's large "Convivium" combines a real kitchen table and plaster ganglia collaged with seed-catalog flowers that culminate in platforms for intriguingly crude vases and bowls. It may be a comment on family life.

Nicole Cherubini's all-thumbs approach yields large, rough, self-important vases of porcelain, terra cotta and stoneware that are encrusted with rings, feathers and even watch chains. Beverly Semmes's lumpen approximations of jars and pitchers have wonderful glazes and an almost animalistic life of their own.

Unfamiliar works have been sought out. Viola Frey's "Pair of Figurine Trees" masses all kinds of conventional ceramic clichés, although my favorite part is the tall stool, glazed yellow and brown, on which it sits. An enormous sculpture of a rose in shades of gold-green luster turns out to be by the ceramics master Robert Arneson. It was made in 1966, perhaps before his cackling bravura rigidified.

Mr. Arneson, who died in 1992, may be responsible for more bad ceramic jokes than any 20th-century artist. As testament, the show includes a string of savage little self-portrait busts and "John Figure," a large installation sculpture of a toilet Surrealistically in use.

There are many, many other artists from either side of the fictive art-craft divide who could have been here, both past (Picasso and Miró) but mostly present (Lynda Benglis, Thomas Schütte and the porcelain abstractionist Eva Hild). On the other hand, there were artists who declined to be in an all-ceramics exhibition. (Does that qualify as self-hating?)

According to the catalog essay by the critic Glenn Adamson, these included Andrew Lord, Rebecca Warren and Grayson Perry. The absence of Mr. Lord — who brilliantly adapted Cubism and then Process Art and Performance Art to ceramics in the 1970s and early '80s — is especially unfortunate.

It can't be said enough that the art-craft divide is a bogus concept regularly obliterated by the undeniable originality of individuals who may call themselves artists, designers or artisans. But this timely, satisfying show proves it once more. It also suggests that while ceramics is just another art medium, there is no art medium quite like ceramics.

"Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay" continues through June 21 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, the University of Pennsylvania, 118 South 36th Street, Philadelphia; (215) 898-7108, icaphila.org.