

Clay in the Bay: Breaking the Mold

By Allie Mitchell

In the de Saisset's most recent exhibit, *Clay in the Bay*, viewers will experience modern art from some of the Bay Area's finest creators. Challenging the notion that ceramics must serve a solely functional purpose, innovators like Peter Voulkos and Robert Arneson, began producing pieces outside the realm of practicality during the fifties and sixties. Now, some sixty years later, twelve artists from northern California have created a compilation of sculptures and mixed media pieces that remind the world of the efforts being made outside the realm of conceptual art. Open from January 18th through March 17th, the show features a variety of three-dimensional works emphasizing the playful, independent, and powerful nature of ceramics.

Pieces like David Linger's "Blue Boy" and "Pinkie" challenge viewers to synthesize their own stories when looking at two black-and-white screen prints on porcelain tile. Each work, made up of nine individual tiles, printed and inlaid with intaglio text, frames a shadowy, pixelated human form. In "Blue Boy," the figure faces the audience, subtly indicated by the subject's stance, while in "Pinkie," the subject's orientation is less obvious. Like looking through a rain-covered windowpane, the details of who or where the subject is remain unclear, but this is the beauty of Linger's piece. The textured surfaces and overlapping shades of black and grey spread across each one-of-a-kind tile, speaking to the complexity of the human form and its many facets. While the artist never delves into the lives of his subjects, by carefully placing their dark forms amidst a faded, nondescript background, Linger emphasizes the importance of each individual and the unknown story they have yet to tell.

In other works, like Bean Finneran's series of multi-colored cones, viewers observe three spirited creations made from the simplest of renderings. Fashioned from hundreds of hand-rolled rods of clay, Finneran's works miraculously interlock without the use of adhesive, creating distinctive grass-like mounds of clay. The three pieces, all varied in size and color, reflect the intricate nature of Finneran's energetic design, where no two pieces of clay are the same size, hue or shape. Each rod, painted a varying shade of orange, blue, purple or white, is then dipped in a different colored glaze, ranging anywhere from bright aqua to charcoal grey. Like Linger's multi-layered technique, Finneran conveys a depth and individuality within her pieces that speaks to the medium of her art.

Further into the show, more descript and recognizable figures emerge, but still demand reflection from the viewer. In Monica Van den Dool's two sculptures, entitled "Swans" and "Chunk," vividly colored apples, oranges and pears ooze glaze down sickening arrangements of dead game. Faithful to its name, "Swans" depicts two of the lovely birds hanging upside down, framing a morbid compilation of rotten fruit and lifeless animals. Similarly in "Chunk," a coarse wooden frame, topped with three ceramic mugs, resembles a kitchen shelf encasing another collection of rabbits, mice, chickens and small birds. The sculptures channel the still-life works of 18th century French painter, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, renowned for his genre paintings. Like Chardin, Van den Dool uses the classic models of fruit and wild game in her still life sculptures, but unlike the delicate approach of her inspiration, Van den Dool utilizes a much cruder style of drawing in her work, seen in the cartoonish features of her animals. But despite the grotesque, gargoyle-like creatures and expired fruit in both pieces, the presence of bright yellow canaries and wine-red apples reflects a pleasing contrast between the tortured figures and their uncomfortable arrangements. Like an

obstructed heart, or the final note in a symphony, the highlighted elements in each piece speak to the beauty and untimeliness of life and the death that follows.

Similar to pieces like “Swan,” “240 of Thousands” made by Marine veteran Ehren Tool, convey the diverse elements and opinions of war, as told by the artist. While one might assume Tool’s message on war would be clear, the hundreds of cups placed in stacked rows upon the wall remain heterogeneous, mixing imprints of skeletons and quotes like “I want to watch the world burn” with images of soldiers hugging their children and the swollen bellies of pregnant mothers. Although irony may lurk behind the juxtaposition of his images and phrases, Tool allows viewers to draw their own conclusions about war, even if they have not experienced the same vivid reality as he. Like the entirety of the works featured in *Clay in the Bay*, Tool’s pieces speak to viewers in a multitude of ways, a testament to the versatility of the medium.

The array of ceramics featured in the de Saisset’s latest show allows anyone with a passion for art and society to enjoy the exhibit. Whether discussing the beauty of life or the dilemmas of war and violence and the death that follows, pieces from *Clay in the Bay* exemplify the issues of today and the need for artists and individuals alike to acknowledge and express their thoughts. The exhibit, free to all, provides viewers with an opportunity to observe, reflect and discuss the ideas they find important, and maybe even inspire them to create something of their own. As this exhibit has clearly demonstrated, there are always new paths to explore and passions to pursue where inspiration is found.