

Curatorial Statement

Continuous Clay: Trends and Innovations

San Francisco Bay Area artists such as Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, and Peter Voulkos were part of an early cohort of pioneers who championed the materiality of clay while also elevating the medium beyond craft to a fine art. These artists widened the arena of opportunities for following generations of clay artists to work in innovative ways and expand the field. The nine contemporary artists presented here are outstanding examples: they are actively evolving ceramics, each on their own exciting trajectory. Like their predecessors, they realize that making something by hand is satisfying and convincing precisely because the results are so superbly imperfect. This creative approach is especially relevant now in our increasingly digitized world, where spontaneous “mistakes” are frequently autocorrected for us. The works on view investigate a range of provocative themes and innovative uses of the material. The makers are an intergenerational and diverse selection of artists from the San Francisco Bay Area.

Michelle Gregor, a San Francisco–based artist, is one of the most highly regarded figurative sculptors working in the Bay Area and one of the most important ceramic artists living in the United States. Her work *Odalisque* (2012) attests to her mastery of the medium and her painterly approach to glaze application. Two mid-career sculptors also reimagining clay in the new millennium are the South Bay’s Pancho Jiménez and San Francisco–based Tiffany Schmierer. A couple of works by Jiménez exemplify the artist’s long-standing interest in Mesoamerican architecture, for instance *Cara a Cara* (2015), with its carefully tooled surfaces. This piece became the catalyst for two more recent works, also on view, that provocatively address current events in contemporary culture. Schmierer’s conglomerate sculptures envisage a futuristic San Francisco–like urban environment; they visually carry us off on a roller-coaster ride bursting with vibrant colors and fantastic imagery.

San Francisco artist Tiffany Tang, who presents an installation of four moon jars, and Marin-based Brett Crawford, who contributes *Sperry Fingerprint* (2017), are two highly skilled potters pushing the medium conceptually. They use traditional vessel forms to convey deeper meaning beyond function, and the extraordinary surfaces push against traditional expectations of pottery. The installation *48 Years* (2015–21) by San Francisco's Jeannie Ichimura, the finished product of a larger interactive performance project titled *Nourish* (ongoing), hangs gracefully from the ceiling and considers domesticity, motherhood, sexuality, and aging.

A few of the artists explore more overtly social or political themes. Chilean-born, Oakland-based Maria Paz uses hand-rolled clay coils to make vessel-like sculptures that touch on family and the immigration crisis in the United States. Her stories manifest on the surfaces of her forms to bestow a sense of healing and empowerment. Two monumental sculptures, *Ephemera* (2010) and *Praise of Folly* (2012) by East Bay artist Mark Messenger, display a cast of characters derived from history, religion, mythology, and contemporary life. The skillfully modeled imagery depicts sociopolitical discord veiled in a satirical wit that sparks the viewer's interest to delve further into the artist's hidden narratives. Sacramento artist Shenny Cruces is an expert at porcelain slip casting, and makes her plaster molds from ordinary household things. Her work *Accumulations* (2015) is a massive collection of tiny white porcelain figurines spilling out on a gilded credenza. Their overwhelming abundance prompts us to question the meaning of objects in our lives while investigating topical issues concerning social class and sexual identity.

Each artwork in *Continuous Clay: Trends and Innovations* was selected for the exhibition to expand visitors' imaginations about what is possible with clay. Although the artists vary significantly in style, technique, and conceptual approach, they share one thing in common: an immense passion for this magnificent medium's deeply primordial and unforgiving nature.

—Jeff Downing