

The Highlights - Decorating the Void: On Clay and Dirt on Delight



I went to Philadelphia to see *Dirt on Delight: Impulses that Form Clay*, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. The show consists of work by twenty-two artists, most of whom use clay as their primary medium.

My interest in the show sprung from the fact that I know what clay feels like, and I know how easy and how hard it is to do something good with it. I have been studying and looking at ceramic art for a while, and since 2003, I have been making ceramic sculpture in addition

to my principal activity, painting. I began working with clay furtively in my studio and then in a ceramics studio in New York, where I work collectively with a bunch of other people. Having no experience in clay or sculpture made me fearless in how I approached it. I began small with Sculpey, making very rudimentary forms in bright colors, and later switched to ceramics. Playing with basic geometric shapes and having no preconceived notions, I worked from a place of trust and innocence.

I am constantly amazed by how my work in clay has influenced my painting, and vice versa. My paintings had begun to look like fictitious structures-things that could, in fact, exist if someone was crazy enough to make them, so I wanted to try doing that.



Images courtesy of Joanne Greenbaum

Creating forms inspired by the paintings, I noticed that the sculptures almost always had bases, and I started to incorporate this format into my two-dimensional work by making paintings that had a base or table to enclose or hold up the painted structures.

The fluidity and open working time of clay offered a new way to think about oil painting, as well. Because of its malleability, clay allows for an incorporation of changes or mistakes into the final result of a piece. This integration of deleted moments in the work was a concept that I also started to use in my painting. When it was time to remove a passage on the canvas I did not like, the blotting out of the area became the next stage in the work.

Dirt on Delight has many artists who cultivate destruction in this way. Lucio Fontana

destroyed his paintings by cutting into them, and he treated his ceramic work similarly, making pieces and then razing them, with the result becoming a hybrid of ruin and recovery.



Joanne Greenbuan's studio.



The work of Arlene Shechet.

Clay lends itself to a natural impulse to make a vessel, maybe because this is one of the first things we are taught, since it can seem (falsely) easy. The pieces in the show that worked with the idea of a vessel and its functionality were the ones I was drawn to most. Arlene Shechet makes vases, cups, or bowls that become sculpture with little relation to functionality. Her clay pieces are volumetric and are constructed with coils. She uses the clay to build forms in an organic process, allowing the pieces to evolve into something unplanned. Her surprising works, with their handmade ganglia of arms and trunks, are personal without becoming sentimental.

Beverly Semmes works with corrupted vessels; commonplace items that become vehicles for her sculptural concepts. Her color choices, usually bright pinks and reds, contribute to the definition of form as color. The color is the form and the form becomes the color, not merely decorative or descriptive, but part of the communication between the two.

Most pieces in the show are installed on large platforms. I have always been fascinated by still life as a subject, and the intimate architectural space created by objects on a table. This presentation format worked well for some artists, but not all. In this context, the works of Ron Nagle were difficult to view up close, which I wanted to, as their surfaces are delicately glazed and painted. Kathy Butterly's work, on the other hand, is perfectly presented, in a glass cabinet alongside pieces by George Ohr.

Ohr (1857-1918) made work that transcended its utilitarian origins. He would begin a cup or a bowl on the wheel, and then manipulate or destroy it by crushing or folding the clay, turning it into something else that, paradoxically, still functions as a vessel. Butterly's pieces build on the traditional vessel as well, but go into fantasy and surrealism, making delicate whimsical statements. Butterly references the history of ceramics, using stereotypes of past styles to create hybrid period pieces that are idiosyncratic and very funny.

Because of its ability to erase and retain memory within its pliant forms, clay lends itself to continuous editing and recreation. The works in *Dirt on Delight* revel in clay as an ideal material for realizing a process of interdependent creation and destruction.