

# ceramics

M O N T H L Y



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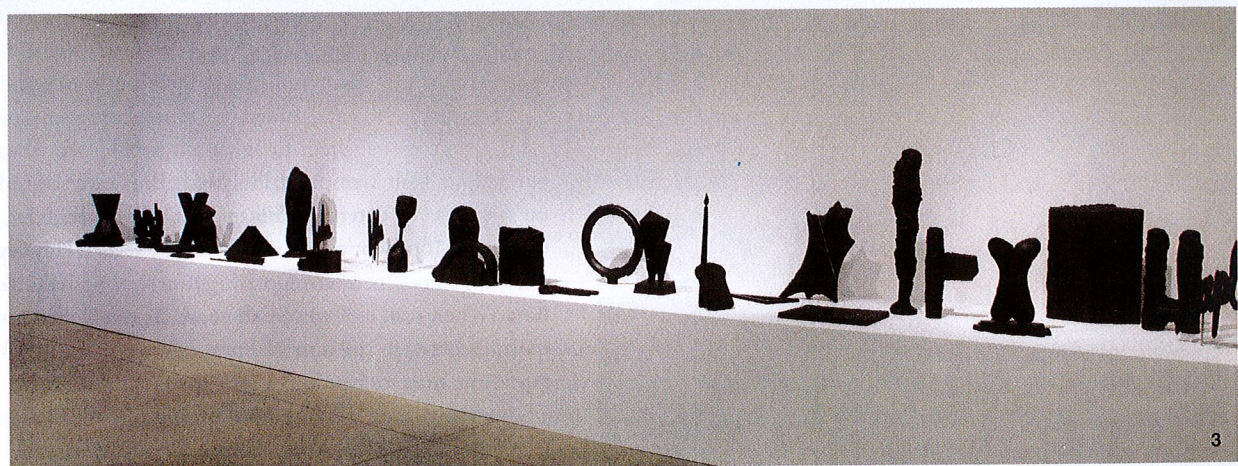
# Out of Necessity

Contemporary Ceramic Interventions

by Owen Duffy







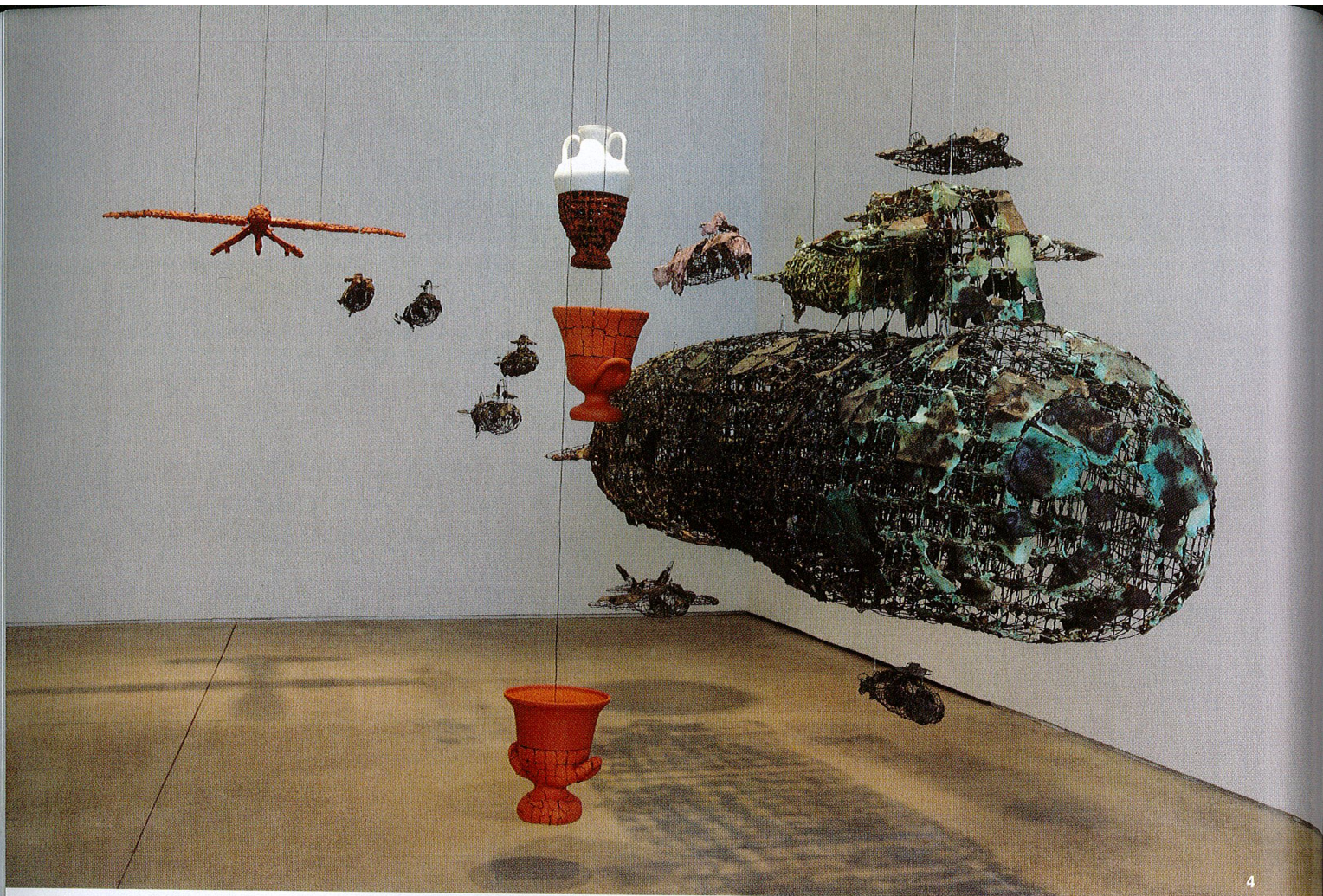
1 Sin-Ying Ho's *One World, Many Peoples No. 1*, *In a Dream of Hope No. 1*, *In a Dream of Hope No. 2*, to 5 ft. 9 in. (1.8 m) in height, porcelain, hand-painted cobalt pigment, high-fire underglaze decal transfer, glaze, 2010. 2 Exhibition view. Foreground: A. Blair Clemo's *Endless Urn*, porcelain, gold luster, wood, 2013. 3 Mathew McConnell's *What it Means to Move*, dimensions variable, earthenware with bone charcoal and graphite, 2013.

Ostensibly, “Out of Necessity (Contemporary Ceramic Interventions)” at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond (<http://visarts.org>) in Richmond, Virginia, offers viewers an engaging survey of ceramic art’s more recent innovative developments. However, after further investigation, the show cohesively demonstrates the potential of clay—a humble material with a rich tradition and history—to address a comprehensive range of present-day global issues. Curated by Jason Hackett, an assistant professor of craft and material studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, *Out of Necessity* assembles several prominent and emerging individuals

from across the field of ceramics, including A. Blair Clemo, Sin-Ying Ho, Mathew McConnell, Adam Shiverdecker, Linda Sikora, and Stan Welsh.

Upon entering the gallery, viewers are greeted by Ho’s three, human-sized porcelain vessels, *One World, Many Peoples No. 1*, *In a Dream of Hope No. 1*, and *In a Dream of Hope No. 2*. Their ornate surfaces are gingerly hand-painted with cobalt pigment—a technique popularized in Ming Dynasty China. Ho’s work deviates from tradition when one examines the surface details in greater depth. The wrought patterns reveal themselves to be a surreal mixture of foliage; cacti,





4 Adam Shiverdecker's *The Banquet of the Leviathan*, dimensions variable, nichrome, porcelain, earthenware, oxides, glaze, steel, 2009–13.  
 5 A. Blair Clemo's *Mantelpiece*, porcelain, gold luster, wood, 2013. 6 Stan Welsh's *Mustang*, ceramics and mixed media, 2010.



ambiguous fruit trees, and lily pads effortlessly commingle on the objects' exteriors. Silhouettes of people, filled with the phrase "one world, many peoples" in several languages or images of stock market reports, appear amongst the vessels' flora. When read as a whole, these works could allude to the tensions between the honored past and the disruptive socio-economic interconnections of the global present.

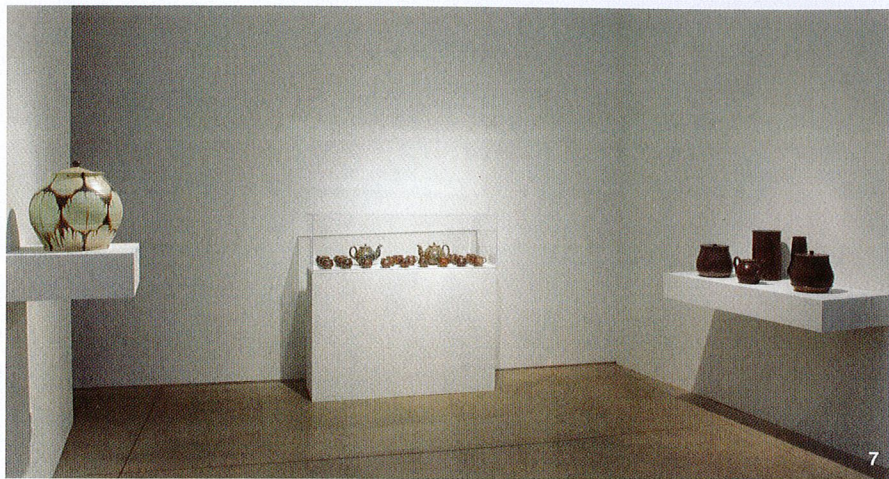
Adroitly installed opposite of Ho's vibrant pieces is Mathew McConnell's foreboding, *What it Means to Move*. McConnell's earthenware sculptures are coated with a patina of bone charcoal and graphite, thus providing them with a weighty and serious presence. At first glance, the arrangement may appear to be delightfully haphazard and random, but each object, according to McConnell's statement, references another work of art, be it that of a modern master or the artist's own. Consequently, one can identify such familiar forms as Brancusi's *Endless Column* and a Mesopotamian ziggurat. The elongated installation and presentation of *What it Means to Move* allows its diverse visual components to act like a segueing flow of discordant information. Thus, questions about the relationships between the individual elements are sure to playfully arise as viewers make their way from one end of the display to the other. Somewhat like surfing the web, one is able



to navigate the work's apparently random visual information. *What it Means to Move* conveys a palpable level of currency, especially considering contemporary society's over-infatuation with the digital and its vast, arbitrary flows of data and images.

In the adjacent room, one encounters the work of A. Blair Clemo and Stan Welsh, who both wryly utilize the histories of specific ceramic objects to engender a broader political dialog. For instance, Welsh deploys porcelain figurines in such works as *Yonder* and *Mustang* to interrogate a subject's present-day relationship with the natural world. The lone cloaked figure of *Mustang* confronts a black void of oil enamel paint, which is conjoined to a photograph of rippling, gleaming water, which is adorned with a found emblem of the legendary Ford muscle car. Bearing the works' materials and subject matter in mind, *Mustang* subtly insinuates the all-too-frequent human caused oil catastrophes that plague environments throughout the world. In a similar approach, Clemo implements and alters the decorative urn to engage commodity culture in *Mantelpiece* and *Endless Urn*. A striking focal point of the gallery, the inverted monumentality of *Endless Urn* alludes to the relative use-value of material things. Several shellacked terra-cotta urns are amassed vertically, paradoxically supported by an ionic column's plaster capital. By literally turning these classical pieces upside down, Clemo alludes to the urn's historical transformation, from ritual object to flowerpot to work of art. Likewise, the lustered porcelain urns in *Mantelpiece* complicate attributions of "handmade" and "mass produced." Made from press molds, the urns honestly express their process of serialized fabrication; yet they each evince personalized characteristics created by the artist's hand. Clemo has consciously left flashing from the mold seams and other overt imperfections on each trophy-like work, but their golden handles (or lack thereof) facilitate a clever conversation about how *Mantelpiece* was made.

Sikora's meticulously glazed pottery and Shiverdecker's ambitious installation, *The Banquet of the Leviathan*, round out *Out of Necessity* in the gallery's back room. Shiverdecker presents viewers with a wonderfully absurd proposition by imagining what would occur should an entire military be thrust underwater. The decaying skeletons of a modern militaristic arsenal, including submarines, jet planes, a drone, and a tank, are suspended alongside half-crumbling/half-finished amphorae. When one considers America's bellicose 21st-century foreign policy, *The Banquet of the Leviathan's*



7 Installation view of works by Linda Sikora. 8 Linda Sikora's *Faux Wood Group* (group detail), to 9.5 in. (24 cm) in length (teapot), stoneware, polychrome glaze, wood/oil/salt fired, 2012.

thematic relevancy coheres with the work of Clemo, Ho, McConnell, and Welsh. In several ways, then, Sikora's stoneware *Faux Wood Group* and porcelain jar seem entirely out of place in *Out of Necessity*. However, the pottery's laborious glazes and skilled construction ultimately serve as a reminder of ceramic art's important histories and thriving traditions. These histories and traditions, it should be noted, are all referenced by the more unconventional interventions of Clemo, Ho, McConnell, and Welsh.

*Out of Necessity* thoughtfully showcases how contemporary artists are appropriating, reconfiguring, transmuting the long-standing traditions, tropes, and techniques of ceramic art. In tandem with Hackett's considerate curation, such veterans to the ceramic world as Ho, Sikora, and Welsh have proven themselves once again, while the emerging talents of Clemo, McConnell, and Shiverdecker have demonstrated their potential in the field.

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