

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## The Meaning of Clay at the Whitney Biennial

by [Sarah Archer](#) on April 24, 2014





Installation view, works by Sterling Ruby from his 'Basin Theology' series (all 2013) at the Whitney Biennial (photo by Hrag Vartanian)

On the afternoon that I visited the [2014 Whitney Biennial](#), I caught sight of a high school group being led through the exhibition by an engaging young arts educator. I slowed down as our paths converged on three large ceramic sculptures by the Los Angeles–based artist Sterling Ruby. Each one is roughly the size of a major appliance, hand-built, and covered with bold, exaggerated finger marks. Every square inch is uneven, almost obsessively so. The color palette of the glazes ranges from brilliant copper red to soft black and army green. Forms that faintly resemble tools and pieces of wood, garage or workshop detritus, appear at the center of each vessel, as though partly submerged in mud and left to set. The group stared, intrigued, brows furrowed with puzzlement. “This is an artist who uses his mistakes,” the docent gamely suggested. I was so tempted to interrupt and ask the students what *they* thought about the pieces that I had to redirect myself towards the nearby Sheila Hicks installation before things got really awkward.

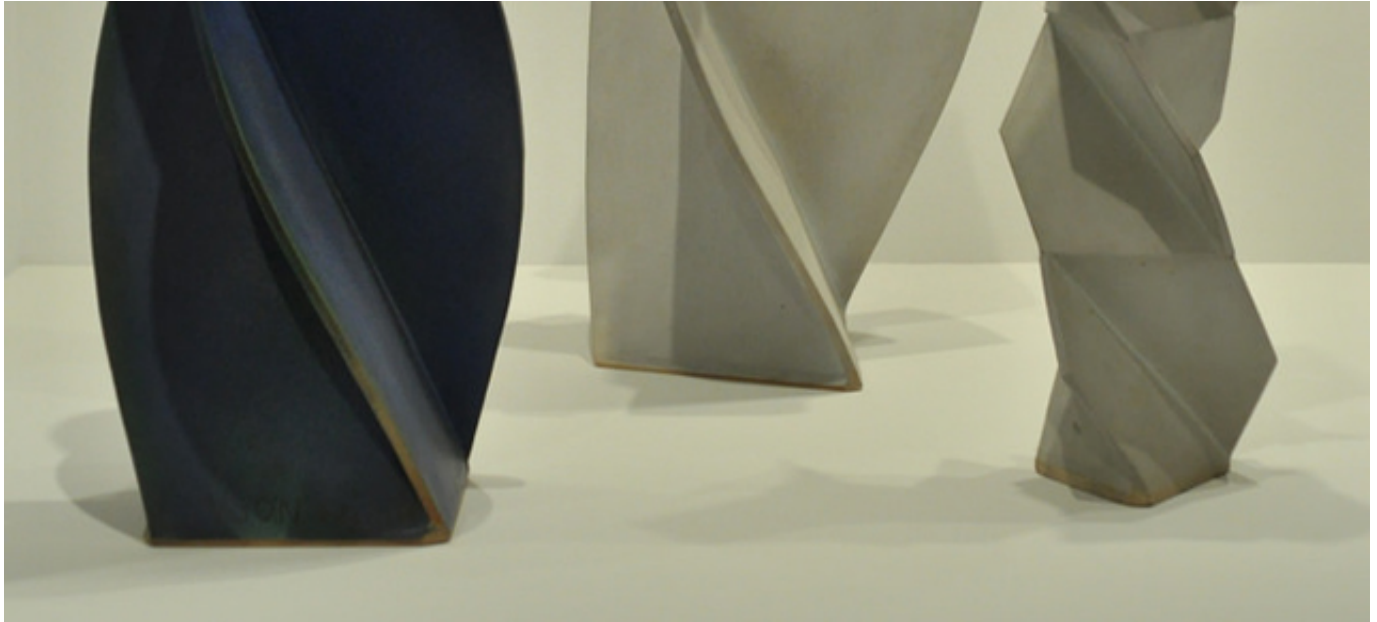
Then, I overheard a similar question posed to the group: “How do you use *your* mistakes when you’re making something in an art class?” As I listened, I thought about the varied and passionate responses I’d heard and read from ceramic artists when the biennial first opened. “Of course [the curator] is looking at how Ruby’s works fit conceptually with the other work being exhibited,” artist Anna Calhouri Holcombe, a professor of ceramics at the University of Florida, told Hyperallergic, “however, I cannot help but want there to be some craftsmanship and technique to be found in more than just a few pieces.” While the mainstream art press was busy embarking on its never-surprising skewering of the exhibition as a whole, ceramists were alternately rejoicing that there was so much clay in the biennial and expressing bafflement that works like Ruby’s seem to shrug off ceramic craftsmanship altogether.

I came away encouraged that this year’s biennial, particularly the fourth-floor galleries organized



by artist Michelle Grabner, where Ruby's sculptures are featured, appears to lay out the welcome mat for every material under the sun. Grabner described her curatorial approach to me as that of building a curriculum: every tradition and technique gets a voice. How will you express *your* ideas, young artist? What comes across powerfully is both a diversity of materials and an openness about what a given material, and craftsmanship itself, means in the life of an artist. Glenn Adamson, director of the Museum of Arts and Design, characterized Grabner's section as "an exuberant representation of contemporary artists' engagement with materiality, one of those materials being clay," adding that "one important achievement of her selection is that every material seems equally valid."





Works by John Mason at the Whitney Biennial, including “The Wall” (2010) in the background and various ceramic works in the foreground (1997–2002) (photo by Hrag Vartanian)

Grabner isn’t the only one opening herself up to ceramics. That the medium is enjoying an all-time high level of recognition in contemporary art quarters these days has become, happily, old news. What has received less attention is the array of responses to this phenomenon from the ceramics world itself. In a brief but incisive 2011 [review of the exhibition \*Paul Clay\*](#) at Salon 94 Bowery in the *New York Times*, art critic Roberta Smith astutely identified a conceptual gulf between “art world, as opposed to ceramics world, ceramics.” Grabner’s fourth-floor Whitney installation smartly includes a bit of both. In fact, if you had to cast an Oscar and Felix from the world of ceramic sculpture, you might well settle on Sterling Ruby and John Mason. Mason is a venerated studio ceramics star, now in his 80s, whose precise slab-building technique is awe-inspiring to makers and viewers alike. Ruby is an irrepressible multidisciplinary artist in his early 40s working in the vein of Jason Rhoades and Mike Kelley, using whatever material best fits his needs for a given project. Mason works in clay, full stop. Ruby, like many contemporary (and historic) artists, works with a team of expert fabricators in his studio and does not always personally create every work he produces. Of this contrast, Grabner writes:

Mason’s sculptures are an unfathomable technical feat evincing extraordinary control of the medium and yielding flat planes and geometries that are unnaturally precise. Ruby’s affecting basins are nearly pre-form, pre-process constructions. Sterling’s hand in clay has a parallel relationship to Serra’s use of lead. Gravity and mass are as much the subject as they are a metaphor of primordial goo.

Pairing these two is not just a wildly contrasting stylistic choice, but a way of bringing into the conversation the essential concept of what it means to make something and how that making is read and understood by different audiences. Mason’s presence is Grabner’s way of telling us that she knows what clay is “supposed” to look like. She also knows there are numerous cultural understandings of what craft and craftsmanship are, and she’s inviting us to read the works as

sets of visual cues that can be embraced, cast off, or remixed, according to each artist's desire.

But for a true devotee of studio ceramics, the disappointment of encountering a lackluster vessel in a major contemporary art exhibition can feel a bit like watching one's hometown starlet turn up at the Academy Awards wearing an unflattering gown. Not all materials foster true makers' communities, but this one does in spades. The ceramics world is a varied and robust place, connected through a network of community studios, specialist galleries, small and medium-sized museums, university ceramics departments, niche publications, Instagram feeds, annual conferences, and feuds. This closeness is in part the result of how studio real estate converges with the demands of ceramic production: working in clay is expensive, requires a tremendous investment in heavy equipment and supplies, years of hands-on training and practice, and is very difficult to embark upon in isolation. While a painter might while away hours working on store-bought canvas and later come to be revered as an "outsider" genius, most artists interested in clay could not easily manage the installation of an enormous gas kiln in their rental apartment. Quite simply, gaining access to the means of production in ceramics requires becoming part of a community. Thus, it is a world where strange bedfellows — attractive, handmade tableware and challenging, abstract sculpture — are frequently collapsed into a single broad category by dint of their common physical substance and reliance on the firing process. The intersection in this Venn diagram is usually where the trouble starts.



Ceramic work by Shio Kusaka at the Whitney Biennial (photo by Jillian Steinhauer) (click to enlarge)

Useful and lovely objects are designed for pleasure, and they have a certain eternal appeal. Visiting the decorative arts wing of an encyclopedic museum, or its Greek and Roman, Islamic, or Asian galleries, visitors behold miracles of ancient aesthetic achievement and an impressive practical understanding of chemistry far ahead of its time. Craftsmen in the medieval and Renaissance periods were working in an era when science still held hands with magic, and their ability to create durable, brilliantly colored, lustrous objects out of mud was — and still is — dazzling. To study ceramics in any serious way is to become an adopted descendent of these makers, and it's hard not to feel some awe for all they achieved. The sides of functional pots were canvasses for storytelling long before the advent of affordable paper, and their longevity gives us a tantalizing glimpse into the point of view of another age.

Yet, all of this history can weigh heavily on a person. It can make the sight of cavalier treatment of *any* traditional material, clay in particular, feel offensive, even painful, as though centuries of cultural memory were being cruelly cast aside and forgotten. As if to protect and distinguish refined technical practice, an umbrella term for works of art made in a deliberately naïve style has recently emerged, and stuck: “sloppy craft.”

In fact it was Grabner’s own colleague at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, artist Anne Wilson, who coined the term “sloppy craft” in 2008, in a visit with then-student Joshua Fought, working at the time on a rugged, DIY-style textile creation in his studio. The existence of this term tells you a lot about the perspective of the community that adopted it: it suggests that “standard craft,” if there is such a thing, is by contrast neater and more considerate. This is partly an aesthetic difference, but it is also, more crucially, a cultural one. The work of artists such as Ruby, Rebecca Warren, and Nicole Cherubini, all of whom draw a combination of admiration, envy, and puzzlement from denizens of the clay community, is closer in spirit to the French painters who were teased with insults like “Fauve” and “Impressionist” until those terms lost their teeth and became reverent, or at least neutral, modes of classification.

There is meaning in their messiness, of course, and it’s actually more difficult to tame a mess in wet clay than it is to avoid one altogether. Does a “deskilled” aesthetic signify an actual lack of skill? Not necessarily, says Adamson: “good craftsmanship can be approximate and expressive, not just ‘tight.’ Sterling Ruby’s work is more open in its composition, but still requires high levels of skill.” What critics of this kind of work are really reacting to is a sense that these lumpen ceramic objects could be viewed by the wider art world as “the best” that their community can muster.

Misplaced though it may be, artist Garth Johnson, curator at Philadelphia’s Clay Studio, believes this anxiety is rooted in a very real lack of familiarity with how the development of expertise in ceramics works: “There’s a misalignment of what signifies ‘amateur.’ The general public sees lumpy, lopsided, gestural work, and it communicates lack of craftsmanship, when in fact, true beginner work always strives for perfection and winds up mired in that struggle.” It’s important to distinguish between *craftsmanship*, the umbrella concept for all skills of makers capable of producing refined objects, and *handicraft* as a cultural phenomenon closely allied with leisure and education. These two, though they share certain physical characteristics, are entirely distinct, even at odds, in spirit. There’s a difference between those who understand skill and craftsmanship as an absolute value and those who see it as a moving target, a motif to be deployed in context, like any skilled postmodernist.





Sterling Ruby, “Basin Theology/The Pipe” (2013), ceramic (photo by Jillian Steinhauer)

I would argue, then, that Ruby’s “sloppiness” is not arbitrary at all: his deep, dark glazing and almost comically ill-formed vessels can be read as a reflection of a hands-on experience with clay that many of us have had, either at summer camp or in elementary school. This facet of clay’s identity — that of a material ideally suited to childhood sculptural experiments — is just one of many that ceramic objects signify. While John Mason demonstrates irrefutable technical mastery, his is the very connoisseurship model that I suspect Ruby’s aiming to disrupt. Clay’s role in art education and hobbyism resonates with a wide swath of the general public, and Ruby is evidently striking a nerve by making high-profile work that embodies the look and feel of “bad pots.”

With its increasing visibility and popularity, this is something that the ceramic world will have to continue to confront, and will be unable to control. The genie is out of the bottle, and a wide world of multidisciplinary artists are interested in every aspect of ceramics’ rich cultural vocabulary, from high-class porcelain to the quiet, lowbrow pervasiveness of Sculpey. For a master potter, this may seem like a scary thought, but it actually reflects the great enduring potential of a historic material that is still yielding new points of view. All of it is part of the mix now, as Grabner’s inspiring “curriculum” shows us. Learning to use our mistakes might just be the next chapter of the lesson plan.

*The [2014 Whitney Biennial](#) continues at the Whitney Museum (945 Madison Ave, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through May 25.*

## ***Related***

[Whitney Biennial 2014: Michelle Grabner on the Fourth Floor](#)In "Photo Essays"

[Down and Out at 75th and Madison](#)In "Museums"

[How Two Curators Will Bring a Chicago Sensibility to the 2014 Whitney Biennial](#)In "Interviews"