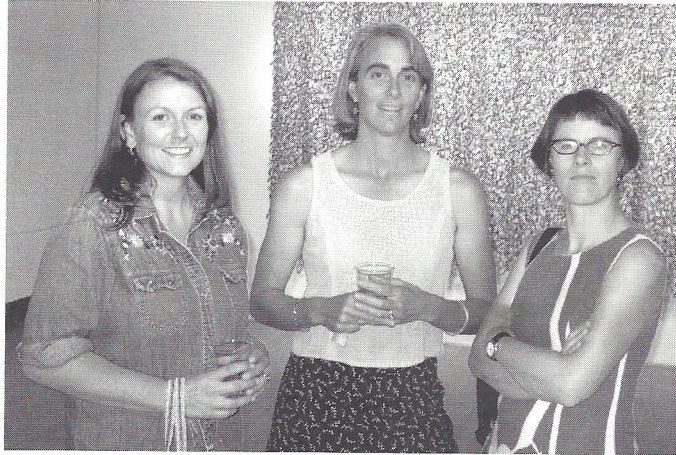


Johnson, Fetterman, Russo on the state of ceramics

Over the past year, Carson Masuoka Gallery has had the distinct pleasure of showing some of the nation's finest contemporary ceramicists. From established artists, such as Jun Kaneko, Deborah Masuoka, Christine Federighi, and Martha Russo, to new faces such as Tsehai Johnson, and Mia Fetterman-Mulvey, each artist pushes the ever-blurring boundaries of the clay medium. I recently sat down with Johnson, Fetterman-Mulvey, and Russo, all past Colorado Council on the Arts Award recipients, to discuss the history and future of contemporary ceramics:

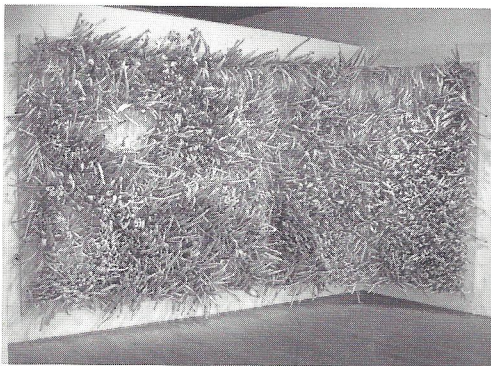


From left to right: Mia Fetterman-Mulvey, Martha Russo, and Tsehai Johnson at the *Ambient Lux* opening.

Jeremy Stern: How has the perception of ceramics as a craft medium changed?

Martha Russo: After the instigators of the 50's, 60's, and 70's (ie. Peter Voulkos, Toshiko Takaezu, Robert Arneson, Betty Woodman, Viola Frey, to name a few), who moved clay from a so-called "craft" medium to a vibrant art material, there has been an explosion of artists who primarily use clay and have been whole-heartedly accepted in the general art world. I think the Site Santa Fe exhibition curated by Dave Hickey, a few years back, in which he paired Elsworth Kelly, a painter, with Ken Price, the ceramicist, in a spacious gallery is one clear example of the acceptance of clay as a serious player in the art world. In general, I think the idea that clay is a craft medium is an old idea...artists who primarily use clay are quite prevalent and doing some provocative work.

Mia Fetterman-Mulvey: I don't believe it is important to view art made with clay in the context of the "crafts." Ceramic is a material with which to make art. One can choose to explore its history of function and utility or not. In either case, I believe the public is beginning to see work that emphasizes a conceptual background over the technical and material aspects of the medium.



Nomos, porcelain, pigment, styrofoam, and pigment by Martha Russo.

Tsehai Johnson: At a time when more contemporary art is moving closer to engaging in actual experience rather than through the imagination as expressed in painting and sculpture, the functional object has increased potency as a venue for expression in contemporary art. However, there remains a divide between craftspeople who are tied to tradition and artists whose work absorbs that tradition and then challenges our notions of the potential of material and its traditions.

JS: How do each of you see your work in terms of evolution of the ceramics medium?

MFM: I believe I am using the ceramic medium as just that, a material. True, I have a personal interest in the processes and

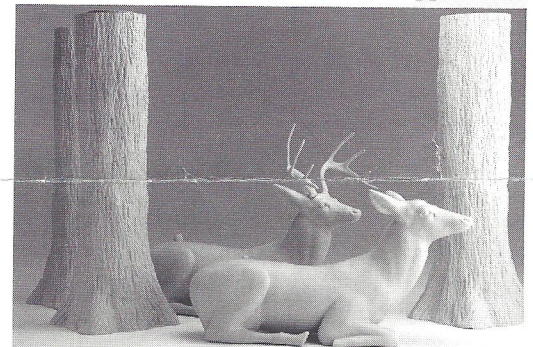
challenges it poses, but I use it because it is the best way to explore my ideas. I feel that my work represents a trend in ceramics in that

I am interfacing with areas not traditionally associated with the ceramic arts, such as technology and science, as well as working from a non-traditional approach. **TJ:** I am interested in objects as cultural and social documents transmitting information about the most intimate details of human life. Mine is a live art made up of everyday objects that inspire me, ranging from bathroom sinks to fine china. It is my hope that in considering the domestic ceramic object from new perspectives I am pushing the boundaries of what

the functional objects can express.

MR: A traditional notion about clay is that it is earth-bound, heavy, gravity driven...the safest place for it is on a pedestal with a plastic vitrine protecting it from possible "touches." One of the central ideas in my work is to free clay from gravity. Making it appear like

it is afloat, light, airy, and with that it becomes extremely precarious and vulnerable to the onlooker. I ask a lot of viewers to be keenly aware of their bodies as they approach my work, giving them



Cervidae, vitreous china installation by Mia Fetterman-Mulvey.

responsibility not to bump into it and break it; to question why would I use such a fragile material to explore my ideas; to accept moments of disorientation to the point of being uncomfortable and nervous.

JS: What direction do you see ceramics moving in the future?

MFM: I think ceramics is moving away from being defined solely by its material. I believe the field is pushing its boundaries towards a more conceptual and non-traditional approach. Starting now and continuing in the future, ceramics is embracing technology, installation and contemporary issues in the art world.

MR: It all seems so open at this point. We owe so much to the "instigators" and all the intriguing artists that have followed since clay has been let into the art world. At this point, I feel like the edges of the "clay world" and the "art world" will only blur together more and more as time rolls along.

TJ: The incredible versatility of ceramics is something that promises to engage artists for some time. At one end of the spectrum one can manipulate this malleable material in a hands on approach, while at the other end of the technological spectrum, once can use clay in indirect and technologically advanced means. The use of technology by artists who work in clay will no doubt increase in the future. While this could lead to exciting new breakthroughs in ceramics, I hope we do not lose our appreciation of the value of working directly in clay and all that it teaches one about understanding three-dimensional form.