

DAM's "Marvelous Mud"

When clay goes out on a limb



25 artists break new ground in big ways with "Overthrown"



In the 14-foot-tall "Mast Year," Mia Mulvey has created a striking, dreamlike tree adorned with birds and delicate butterflies rendered in slip-cast and laser-cut porcelain (detail above). Visible through the doorway is a portion of Tsehai Johnson's "To Dust She Returns." Courtesy of Plus Gallery.

By Kyle MacMillan
Denver Post Fine Arts Critic

Wet and raw. Glazed and fired. Molded, carved, shaped and extruded. Mounted, stacked, suspended and combined.

Clay in nearly every permutation imaginable can be seen in "Overthrown: Clay Without Limits" — the largest and most ambitious of the eight new exhibitions that make up "Marvelous Mud" at the Denver Art Museum.

The vast offering, which stretches to every floor of the museum and involves almost all its curatorial departments, is by any measure the largest temporary presentation the institution has ever attempted.

Bold and eye-grabbing, "Overthrown" blows up all the tired preconceptions that have accumulated around clay, one of civilization's oldest and most widespread artistic materials.

It features 25 artists from across North America and Europe who are daringly pushing ceramics in directions never envisioned and transforming the field in the process.

The mainstream art world, especially the hip vanguard, has long dismissed clay as merely craft and not taken it seriously. But this sophisticated, cutting-edge exhibition makes clear that such perceptions are no longer possible. It has definitively come into its own as a viable, serious medium.

Sure, this show has a few works that draw on the vessel tradition that has dominated ceramics since the time of the Greeks and beyond, like "Volumes Within Voids," a quiet wall of cups and teapots by Julian Stair of London.

But for the most part, this exhibition snatches ceramics out of the functional realm and knocks them off their pedestals, showing clay to be an exciting, versatile material that can be used to explore just about any conceptual, formal or perceptual issue imaginable.

If all that sounds a bit cerebral, it is. These works all have abundant intellectual oomph behind them, as any worthwhile artwork should. But that does not mean they are in any way inaccessible or arcane.

On the contrary. The brainy underpinnings of many of these works are

MUD » 5E



Anders Ruhwald has created a kind of dizzying, fun-house environment with his installation, "Like the New Past." Courtesy of Gregory Lind Gallery, San Francisco



"Apoptosis," a floor-to-ceiling collaborative work by Katie Caron and Martha Russo, incorporates porcelain, paper clay, LED lights, electrical cables and found objects. Photos by Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post

Five not-to-miss works in "Overthrown: Clay Without Limits"

1. **Tsehai Johnson, Denver** — "To Dust She Returns," porcelain, feathers, paint and hardware. This room-size installation, which explores issues of domesticity, is the most fully realized example yet of Johnson's three-dimensional wallpaper.
2. **Kristen Morgin, Gardena, Calif.** — "In The Conservatory, With Mr. Bill, On A Silent Night," unfired clay, wood, wire and paint. This installation looks like an assembly of found objects, paperbacks, record covers and toys, but ev-

3. **Kim Dickey, Boulder** — "Mille-Fleur," aluminum, glazed terracotta, silicon and rubber grommets. One of the show's most quietly striking pieces, this 20-foot-long garden wall is adorned with an impressionistic mosaic composed of 6,000 hand-painted clay leaves depicting an idealized meadow.
4. **Claire Twomey, London** — "Collecting the Edges," red clay dust. Shattering tradition-

al ideas of sculpture as something constructed or carved, this work consists of a dozen heaps of red clay dust positioned in often surprising locations around the museum.

5. **Cheryl Ann Thomas, Ventura Calif.** — "Relic Heap (Black)" and "Relic Heap (White)," colored porcelain. These striking pieces, about 3 feet in height, are among the show's minority of nonsite-specific works. Each looks like a graceful mound of fabric.

More images from "Overthrown: Clay Without Limits"

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MUD: Museum-wide show elevates an art form

Kristen Morgin's "In the Conservatory, With Mr. Bill, On a Silent Night" looks like an assembly of found objects, but it is actually a bravura example of trompe l'oeil.

Courtesy of Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles; Photos by Kathryn Scott Osler, The Denver Post



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balanced by no shortage of visual razzle-dazzle that anyone can enjoy. And some of these selections are just plain fun.

On a recent morning, for example, a group of children frolicked in "Like the New Past," a kind of fun-house installation by Anders Ruhwald, a Danish artist who splits his

time between London and Bloomfield Hills, Mich.

He has created a partially open room totally covered in floor tiles arranged in an assertive blue-and-orange checkerboard pattern that clashes where it meets along the seam between wall and floor, and collides with the angles of the walls. The result is slightly dizzying and so visually assertive

that one feels compelled to put up a hand as an eye shield.

Also delighting visitors old and young is "Footing," a playful ceramic take-off on Carl Andre's famous metal-plated floor sculptures that radically redefined where and how artworks could be displayed and how viewers could interact with them.

In this work, which begins



just outside the glass doors to the exhibition, Nathan Craven of Roswell, N.M., has created a series of floor panels composed of hundreds of loosely interlocking, vaguely biomorphic components a couple of inches in height. They rest inside a wooden frame and fit together like jigsaw puzzles.

The works can be simply enjoyed for their intricate, visual interplay, but visitors are encouraged to go further and walk on the panels, with the extruded ceramic components making soft clinking noises as people move across them, adding yet another sensorial dimension.

Created for this show

While some of the selections, especially most of the 15 smaller ones grouped in the show's only display case, existed previously, most were created specifically for "Overthrown."

Curator Gwen Chanzit pushed the artists to be as ambitious as possible, and the results in a few cases are career-defining achievements. That

is certainly true with "Apoptosis," the largest and most visually dramatic work in the show.

It was a collaborative effort of Martha Russo and Katie Caron, both members of the faculty at the Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design in Lakewood.

Managing to be sprawingly cacophonous and yet somehow cohesive at the same time, this massive installation encompasses some 4,000 sculptural elements and found objects. They line a sloping wall that is 20 feet long and 6½ feet wide, with elements spilling onto an adjacent wall and jumping across to a nearby partition.

The piece was principally inspired by the vast interplay of electrical poles and wires that ubiquitously line roads, streets and alleys across the country. It incorporates poles, insulators, wiring and an array of other electrical and metal hardware, much of it embedded in clay forms.

But it goes much further

conceptually, intermixing those elements with cellular and other biomorphic forms that allude to electricity's essential role in all life. The latter are represented in part by 30 globular, paper-and-resin forms and 150 smaller porcelain spheres — all illuminated from within.

The show is a kind of follow-up (and a worthy one at that) to "Embrace!" As with that vast 2009-2010 exhibition, Chanzit asked the artists to respond to the particularities of architect Daniel Libeskind's angled, sloped design for the Hamilton Building.

No work does this better than "Apoptosis," which makes use of an odd, angled corner in the vast Anschutz Gallery that usually defies conventional art presentation. Indeed, the entire exhibition, with its mix of unlikely shapes and configurations, looks right at home.

Chanzit has done a commendable job of arranging the works so they each have a distinct space of their own and adequate breathing room, while allowing for ample sightlines and lively interactions among the selections.

Buzzing with visual energy and artistic innovation, "Overthrown" is a fun, significant exhibition with plenty to offer both serious contemporary art enthusiasts and families enjoying a casual weekend visit.

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