

NEWS WEB EXCLUSIVE

10 Cool Trends in Contemporary Ceramic Art

BY Alexander Mahany POSTED 06/09/14

From Face Jars to Fractured Fairy Tales, a handy guide to what's going on today in clay

Glazed and confused with the [profusion of ceramics](#) in museums and galleries these days? Here's an *ARTnews* guide to trends in contemporary ceramic art, from porcelain that riffs on global trade routes to clay heads that have been decked out with hair extensions and shades.

Face Jars



Clockwise from top left: William J. O'Brien (2), Rebecca Morgan, Dan McCarthy, Jeffry Mitchell. Click through for more information.

The story of Face Vessels and how they came to the United States is at once fascinating and devastating, as it represents a transmission of Kongo culture through the Middle Passage and into American art. While some may more overtly reference their source material than others, ceramics by Dan McCarthy, William J. O'Brien, and Jeffrey Mitchell stand as misshapen totems to a past that is all too often hidden or forgotten.

Creation/Destruction



Clockwise from top left: Ulrika Strömbäck, Alyson Shotz, Kathy Butterly, Robert Chamberlain, Kaneshige Kōsuke. [Click through for more information.](#)

Flattened, crumpled, and collapsed, these ceramic works squeeze out something new by crushing traditional forms. Chunky, un-useable, yet funky, Robert Chamberlain's vases are created with cake-making equipment in an inventive marriage of domestic instruments. Work by Ulrika Strömbäck and Kathy Butterly toes the line between creation and destruction to thrilling effect.

Mad Hatter's Tea Party



Clockwise from top left: Patrick Purcell, Yeesoookyung, Jessica Stoller, Arlene Shechet, Mounir Fatmi. Click through for more information.

The work of [Patrick Purcell](#) and [Yeesoookyung](#) features the kind of pageantry, pomp, and artifice that wouldn't seem out of place at one of the Mad Hatter's tea parties. In particular, [Arlene Shechet's](#) collaboration with the famed Meissen porcelain factory in Dresden, currently on view at RISD, merges preciousness and opulence with absurdity and a feverish energy. Like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, these works contain more than a bit of madness and danger, with overt references to death and the tradition of [vanitas still life paintings](#) in work by [Jessica Stoller](#) and [Mounir Fatmi](#).

Anti-Ceramic Mush



Clockwise from top left: Lynda Benglis, Beverly Semmes, Rudy Shepherd, Polly Apfelbaum, Sterling Ruby. Click through for more information.

At once raw and sophisticated, spontaneous and deliberate, these ceramics use color and texture to explore themes around gender and race. Work by artists [Beverly Semmes](#), [Lynda Benglis](#) and [Polly Apfelbaum](#) may be biomorphic, zany and voluptuous, but it comes with a pointed, political edge.

Work that Body



Clockwise from top left: Sergei Isupov, Jessica Harrison, Alessandro Pessoli (2), Ellen Lesperance. Click through for more information.

Whether glossy and bloodied like [Jessica Harrison's](#) kitschy figurines or rough and paint-splattered like [Ellen Lesperance's](#) densely populated ceramic installations, these works use the varied textures of pottery to push the human form from the corporeal to the transcendental. In the grand tradition of [Giacometti](#), these artists manipulate, strain, and stretch the human frame to transform recognizable figures into something imaginative, dynamic, and often tortured.

Fractured Fairytales



Clockwise from top left: Allison Schubaik, Miwa Ryōsaku, Klara Kristalova, Kate MacDowell. Click through for more information.

With work that is at turns idyllic and nightmarish, but always surreal, [Miwa Ryōsaku](#) and [Klara Kristalova](#) reestablish the dark side of the fairytale. Using fables both obscure ([The Goose Girl](#)) and popular (Cinderella) as their inspiration, these artists return such Disney-fied tales to their haunted Brothers Grimm origins.

Life's A Beach



Clockwise from top left: [Lisa Sanditz \(2\)](#), [Betty Woodman](#), [Simone Leigh \(2\)](#), [Allison Schulnik](#). [Click through for more information.](#)

[Allison Schulnik](#) and [Simone Leigh](#) turn to nature for their inspiration, specifically the beach, crafting everything from heavily textured, impasto conches to sleek and smooth cowries. This trend features a strong environmental slant, with [Lisa Sanditz's](#) ceramic cacti fracturing and splintering under the unnatural stress of commercial interests.

The Ol' Blue and White



Clockwise from top left: Ann Agee, Chu Teh-Chun, Jesse Small, Raed Yassin, Chu Teh-Chun. Click through for more information.

These ceramics, by artists including [Chu Teh-Chun](#) and [Ann Agee](#), resemble the classic blue and white pottery that sprang out of Asia in the 14th century to sail around the world as a hot commodity on global trade routes. Younger artists [Jesse Small](#) and [Raed Yassin](#) repurpose the iconic blue-and-white motif for a contemporary audience; Small's *Triton Ghost #1* recalls the origins of the porcelain trade as well as [Ms. Pac Man](#).

Portraiture



Clockwise from top left: Teresa Gironès, James Thomas, Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, James Thomas. Click through for more information.

In Teresa Gironès and Magdalena Suarez Frimkess's coarse, almost-unfinished ceramics, a depth of feeling threatens to burst through. In a similar vein, James Thomas's busts, equipped with Donald Trump-style wigs and oversized '80s glasses, portray fully realized characters with outright humor, but also a surprising tenderness at the fragility of people as they age.

Ceramics in 2D



Clockwise from top left: Friedrich Kunath, Janet Fish, Liz Glynn, Mary Jo Vath. Click through for more information.

Paintings ranging from Janet Fish's intricately patterned cup and saucer to Mary Jo Vath's somber and sinister nature morte bring crockery to the canvas, updating the tradition of the Dutch still life to contemporary life. In yet another medium, Liz Glynn uses papier-mâché to emulate the raw heft and craggy history only ceramics can generate.

Copyright 2014, ARTnews LLC, 48 West 38th Street, New York, N.Y. 10018. All rights reserved.