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Visual Arts: The power of porcelain

BY JOHN POHL, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE DECEMBER 6, 2013



Vases by Laurent Craste present refined pieces decorated with violent images. Credit: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

Two exhibitions of porcelain sculpture demonstrate the versatility of this medium in the service of both self-expression and conceptual art. Laurent Craste features in both exhibitions. He has a solo show at the Museum of Fine Arts, where his pieces appropriate the forms of 18th- and 19th-century French porcelain while subverting their iconography.

And he is in a group show at Art Mûr, which selected work from his output of vases with high visual impact. One vase, typical of his work in the vitreous but seemingly malleable material, is a vase with the treads of the boot that squashed it.

Craste said he explores the work of early French makers of porcelain because of the richness of their archetypes in terms of cultural history.

Porcelain tableware and decorative objects were imported from China until the 18th century, when Europeans uncovered the secrets to making ceramic objects that were bright white (with clay that contained no iron) and translucent (high firing temperatures formed glass within the porcelain).

Glazes were used only to take advantage of the hard, smooth white surface of porcelain for the reproduction of images and designs. It was a way for the upper classes to display their wealth and political power, Craste said in an interview. Napoleon used it as a way of legitimizing power, he said, presenting his foreign conquests as Romantic scenes of bucolic landscapes and picturesque palace ruins.

“Such pieces are seen as inoffensive, but they aren’t,” Craste said. “They speak of violence.”

Paire de vases Médicis — Auschwitz et Hiroshima are refined and elegant pieces made with the forms of those French traditions. But the images on the vases are of Auschwitz’s gates from the railway tracks and the ruins of Hiroshima.

The Art Mûr exhibition features a number of Craste’s deformed vases, including a version of a piece that is also in the MMFA show: a vase hanging by a rope around its neck, a kicked-out table on the floor below it.

Nicholas Galanin, who is also in the Beat Nation exhibition at the Musée d’art contemporain, shows a hanging mass of 60 porcelain arrows with the kind of blue design typical of European porcelain. Galanin’s Imaginary Indian Series is a panel wallpapered with a Victorian design of ladies and gentlemen at ease in a country landscape. Five masks of aboriginal faces hang on the wall, camouflaged with the same design as on the wallpaper,

but only one, with hair and an expressive eyes and mouth, is readily apparent. The others must be discovered. Martin Klimas captures in his photographs cheap ceramic figurines exploding in all directions as they fall onto a hard surface.

Diane Charbonneau, the MMFA's curator of modern and contemporary decorative arts, said that in his work, ceramics becomes a subject rather than an object.

Clint Neufeld, a Saskatchewan artist, has several of his ceramic car engines and transmissions on display, often set on living room furniture. In pristine ceramic, these examples of industrial design, usually seen in their dirty, oily state, become things of intrinsic beauty and marvels of human ingenuity. Car lovers should see Neufeld's nine life-size pieces. A piece like Grandma's Doily and a Chevy Rear Axle combines what are thought of as the separate worlds of men and women, said Mike Patten, a gallery assistant at Art Mûr.

The ceramic rear axle also raises the question: is this craft or art — or both? "Neufeld plays with our mind," Charbonneau said. Craft and art are a false dichotomy, she added. "Artisans and artists all work conceptually."

Trans-form/Pose/Figure — Laurent Craste continues until March 30 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1380 Sherbrooke St. W. Details: mbam.qc.ca.

Porcelain: Breaking Tradition continues until Dec. 21 at Art Mûr, 5826 St. Hubert St. Details: artmur.com.

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