EXHIBITION RE-EXAMINES THE ROLE THAT CLAY HAS PLAYED IN ART MAKING DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

The Ceramic Presence in Modern Art: Selections from the Linda Leonard Schlenger Collection and the Yale University Art Gallery


August 12, 2015, New Haven, Conn. — Over the last 25 years, Linda Leonard Schlenger has amassed one of the most important collections of contemporary ceramics in the country. The Ceramic Presence in Modern Art features more than 80 carefully selected objects from the Schlenger collection by leading 20th-century artists who have engaged clay as an expressive medium—including Robert Arneson, Hans Coper, Ruth Duckworth, John Mason, Kenneth Price, Lucie Rie, and Peter Voulkos—alongside a broad array of artworks created in clay and other media from the Yale University Art Gallery’s permanent collection.

Although critically lauded within the studio-craft movement, many ceramic pieces by artists who have continuously or periodically worked in clay are only now coming to be recognized as important and integral contributions to the broader history of modern and contemporary art. By juxtaposing exceptional examples of ceramics with great paintings, sculptures, and works on paper and highlighting the formal, historical, and theoretical affinities among the works on view, this exhibition aims to re-examine the contributions of ceramic artists to 20th- and 21st-century art.

Exhibition Overview

The Ceramic Presence in Modern Art focuses on the work of 16 artists who have at times or throughout their careers chosen clay as their medium: Robert Arneson, Billy Al Bengston, Hans Coper, Anthony Caro, Ruth Duckworth, Robert Hudson, John Mason, Jim Melchert, Ron Nagle, Magdalene Odundo, George E. Ohr, Kenneth Price, Lucie Rie, Richard Shaw, Toshiko Takaezu, and Peter Voulkos. Their ceramic objects are displayed side by side with more than 200 modern and contemporary artworks in other media by artists including John Chamberlain, Bruce Conner, Helen Frankenthaler, Philip Guston, Hans Hofmann, Edward Kienholz, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Joan Mitchell, Isamu Noguchi, Jackson Pollock, Martin Puryear, Mark Rothko, Edward Ruscha, Ursula von Rydingsvard, and Mark di Suvero.
The effort to more fully integrate ceramics into the history of art responds to recent shifts in approaches to both making and exhibiting artworks. In the last decade, ceramics have become commonplace in contemporary art, created by both artists with academic training and those who are new to the medium. Simultaneously, ceramic artists such as Mason, Price, and Voulkos have gained renown among wide public audiences. “These developments have grown out of a larger dissolution of boundaries and hierarchies in the visual arts, where artists bear less allegiance to any particular historical medium or tradition, opting instead to use whatever materials best suit their ideas at a given moment,” explains Sequoia Miller, Ph.D. candidate in the History of Art, Yale University, and co-curator of the exhibition. “Museums have followed this lead by beginning to incorporate a wider range of artworks and disciplines into both permanent-collection installations and special exhibitions.”

Throughout the installation, historical, theoretical, and formal affinities among artworks are explored. Many of the artists working chiefly in ceramics were close friends and colleagues of artists working in other media, teaching, exhibiting, and collaborating with them. This kind of vital exchange of ideas was especially common in California in the 1950s and 1960s but also occurred in other locations and periods. Price and Ruscha, for example, knew each other as young artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s. Puryear and Duckworth had studios in close proximity in Chicago in the 1970s and 1980s and developed a rich mutual respect for each other’s works. Kline, di Suvero, and Voulkos were also well acquainted, and each explored Abstract Expressionist ideas in his work. Formal correspondences of line, shape, and texture are illuminated through various groupings, such as the display of Mason’s sculptures amid paintings by Guston, Hofmann, and de Kooning and the presentation of works by Duckworth alongside sculptures by Noguchi and Puryear.

“The Ceramic Presence in Modern Art and its accompanying catalogue and programming are the culmination of a great deal of research and close-looking,” says Jock Reynolds, the Henry J. Heinz II Director and co-curator of the exhibition. “This rich collaborative journey began in 2013, when I first met Linda Leonard Schlenger and encountered the breadth and remarkable quality of her collection. That fortuitous meeting, coupled with hours of subsequent conversation, bolstered our shared conviction that artworks created in all media can evoke equally complex and satisfying responses.” Reynolds continues, “We are delighted that the exhibition programming includes talks by practicing artists such as Erwin Hauer, John Mason, Jim Melchert, Martin Puryear, and Ursula von Rydingsvard; this and the other related programs—as well as the installation itself—are sure to yield many interesting conversations among visitors, scholars, students, and artists as these objects are presented and reconsidered in the vital context of this teaching museum and the neighboring Yale School of Art.”
On View

Related Programs

Members’ Previews
Thursday, September 3, 3:00 and 5:30 pm
Registration required; call 203.432.9658 or email art.members@yale.edu.

Gallery Talks
Wednesday, September 9
12:30 pm
The Materials of Sculpture
Sequoia Miller, Ph.D. candidate, History of Art

Wednesday, December 9
12:30 pm
California Clay: Crucible of Sculpture, Art, and Exchange
Sequoia Miller

Artists Talk
Thursday, September 24
5:30 pm
Artists Respond: Martin Puryear, Ursula von Rydingsvard, and Erwin Hauer in conversation with Jock Reynolds, the Henry J. Heinz II Director, Yale University Art Gallery
Generously sponsored by the Hayden Visiting Artist Fund

Symposium
Thursday and Friday, November 12–13
Ceramic Presence: Conversations on Making, Looking, and the Museum

Thursday, November 12
5:30 pm
Opening Keynote: The Ceramic Presence in California
Artists John Mason and Jim Melchert, in conversation with Neal Benezra, Director, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Jock Reynolds. Reception to follow.
Friday, November 13
5:30 pm
Closing Keynote: Observations from the Field: Exhibiting and Collecting Ceramic Sculpture
Art dealer Irving Blum and collector Linda Leonard Schlenger, in conversation with Jock Reynolds and Sequoia Miller

Registration is required for additional symposium events. For a full program or to register, visit artgallery.yale.edu/programs. Generously sponsored by the Friends of Contemporary Ceramics.

Related Publication
The Ceramic Presence in Modern Art: Selections from the Linda Leonard Schlenger Collection and the Yale University Art Gallery
Sequoia Miller
With an essay by John Stuart Gordon
Available November 2015

This lushly illustrated volume is the first to thoroughly examine postwar ceramic sculpture alongside other fine art of the period. The catalogue features over 80 objects by leading 20th-century ceramists, including John Mason, Jim Melchert, Kenneth Price, Lucie Rie, and Peter Voulkos. Essays consider the art in connection with renowned paintings, sculptures in other media, and works on paper by artists such as Willem de Kooning, Isamu Noguchi, Mark Rothko, and Edward Ruscha. Juxtaposing ceramics with non-ceramic works, both visually and conceptually, and examining the visual, historical, and theoretical affinities among the objects, the authors demonstrate that the finest ceramics share the formal sophistication of the most celebrated artworks of the postwar period. As ceramics are increasingly recognized as integral to the wider field of contemporary art, this book offers new opportunities for understanding this important medium.

224 pages / 9 1/4 x 12 inches / 186 color illustrations / November 2015

Exhibition Credits
The Ceramic Presence in Modern Art: Selections from the Linda Leonard Schlenger Collection and the Yale University Art Gallery is organized by Sequoia Miller, Ph.D. candidate, History of Art, Yale University, and Jock Reynolds, the Henry J. Heinz II Director, Yale University Art Gallery. Made possible by the Art Gallery Exhibition and Publication Fund; the Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund; the S. Alexander Haverstick II Director’s Resource Fund at the Yale University Art Gallery; the Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz Foundation for the Arts Fund; the Stephen S. Lash Fund; the Katharine Ordway Exhibition and Publication Fund; and the Wolfe Family Exhibition and Publication Fund.
Yale University Art Gallery

The Yale University Art Gallery, the oldest college art museum in the United States, was founded in 1832 when the patriot-artist John Trumbull gave more than 100 of his paintings to Yale College. Since then its collections have grown to more than 200,000 objects ranging in date from ancient times to the present.

General Information

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut. Museum hours: Tuesday–Friday, 10 am–5 pm; Thursday until 8 pm (September–June); and Saturday–Sunday, 11 am–5 pm. The Gallery is closed Mondays and major holidays. Free and open to the public. For general information, please call 203.432.0600 or visit the website at www.artgallery.yale.edu.

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