

Wanxin Zhang

ceramics  
M O N T H L Y

## Review: The Body, The Object, The Other

By: Kay Whitney

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Nicole Seisler's *Preparing*, variable dimensions, site-specific drawing, ongoing series. Photo: Esteban Pulido.

Everything about the body is of interest to us, concerns us; we never tire of our own bodies or those of others; we navigate our ways through the world within a sea of bodies and all those things associated with them. The varieties of personal and social experiences of the body are deep, profound, innumerable. The seductive, grotesque, and confounding clichés of sexuality bear expressions of discomfort and conflict that exist between ideas about the body, the reality of the body, and the way culture dehumanizes, distorts, and enables the bodies that live within it.

The title of the exhibition “The Body, The Object, The Other” at Craft Contemporary, in Los Angeles, California, brilliantly encapsulates these situations and concerns. It is a compendious title that encompasses a range of realities. It deals with all the issues generated by the fundamental discord between culture, which seeks to be ordered and coherent, and the uncontrollable disorder of the body. The body becomes something else, something other when it no longer fits conventional expectations in terms of race, gender, alteration, and sexuality. The realities of the body, the unconscious and the instinctual, are always in conflict with social systems that value particular appearances, objectify the body, and otherwise condemn or regulate its borders.

### **Levels of Reality**

Since there has been imagery, since there has been the written word, there have been attempts to explain, describe, categorize, and illustrate the various realms of bodily existence. These multiple realities have a side that is concrete and visually apparent, but there is a major aspect that is invisible—emotions, prejudice, fear of the unknown and unseeable come into the mix. There is a fundamental alienation between our soft bodies—of the whole natural world—from the hard, defined, unyielding contours of civilization. The objectification of the body, the taboos surrounding it, the regimes to control its otherness are the topics under consideration in this exhibition. Its focus is the object that results when an artist considers these various levels of reality and these varied notions regarding the body.



1 Brie Ruais' Topology of a Garden, Southwest, 127 lbs, 6 ft. 5 in. (2 m) in length, pigmented clay, underglaze, hardware, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and albertz benda gallery, New York.



2 Left: Wanxin Zhang's Unbelievable Promise, 6 ft. 2 in. (1.9 m) in height, high-fired stoneware, glazes, 2013. Right: Wanxin Zhang's Special Ambassador, 6 ft. 6 in. (2 m) in height, high-fired stoneware, glazes, 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: Henrik Kam.

There are 21 artists in the exhibition: Alex Anderson, Jenny Hata Blumenfield, Jason Briggs, Cassils, Sharif Farrag, Nicki Green, Phyllis Green, Raven Halfmoon, Roxanne Jackson, Anabel Juarez, Cynthia Lahti, Galia Linn, Cannupa Hanska Luger, Gerardo Monterrubio, Brie Ruais, Anders Herwald Ruhwald, Nicole Seisler, Meghan Smythe, Cammie Staros, Wanxin Zhang, and Bari Ziperstein. Their work is so varied and idiosyncratic that there is no way to categorize it. For the most part, each artist deals with the ceramic medium and their particular subject matter in their own way without theorizing or over-intellectualizing. The majority of the work is deeply personal and uninflected by trends. As a cross-section of the population of ceramic sculptors, the show is diverse in every possible way in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, and aesthetic interests.

### **Expressing Experiences and the Human Body**

Many of the artists in the show address the experience of being in a female body—dealing with issues of femininity and a rejection of its limitations. Their work expands the notion of what constitutes an acceptable female form. Although their means differ, Phyllis Green and Anabel Juarez are both concerned with female embodiment. The bodies they create are unconventional, moving the female form past the traditional nude of Western art history. These bodies seem to heave, push, fold, and squeeze themselves into existence. They contend with the idea that the female body is somehow excessive and overwhelming, too much. Green's tabletop sculptures deal with this concept with humor—the heavy, clumsy clay forms with their crisp tutus each bear a number of little tapered candles to light their cumbersome way. These plump and awkward totemic females are directly related to Degas' sculptures of a young, tutu-wearing dancer. Juarez' monumental, monochromatic, empty dresses stand in for the powerful woman who might occupy them. This woman is decidedly not the woman of advertisements, film, or screen—her statuesque, undulating, twisting dresses stand in for the elemental female body.



3 Roxanne Jackson's Metal Goddess, 12 in. (30 cm) in length, ceramic, glaze, faux fur, lace, shell, 2017. Photo: JSP Photography.



4 Cannupa Hanska Luger's Something To Hold Onto, social collaboration, Art on the Atlanta BeltLine, Atlanta, Georgia, 2019.



5 Raven Halfmoon's CADDO DANCING IN BINGER, OKLAHOMA, 5 ft. 2 in. (1.6 m) in height, stoneware, glaze, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.



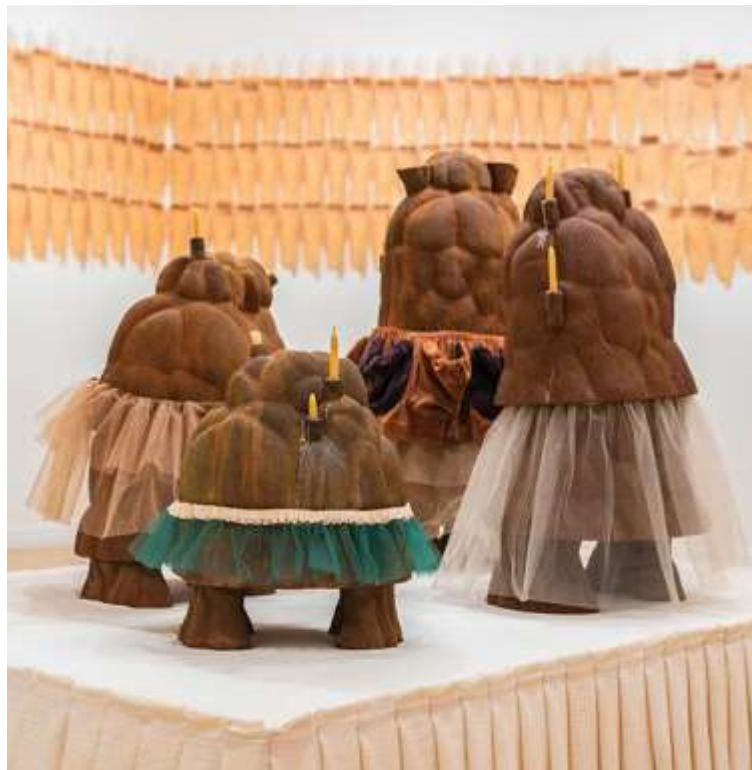
6 Anabel Juarez' Vestigio III, 4 ft. 6 in. (1.4 m) in height, ceramic, glaze. Photo: Michael Underwood.

Brie Ruais and Nicole Seisler utilize clay as an abstract yet factual vehicle, a means of recording time and touch, resistance and disintegration. Both of these artists make process-oriented work using their hands as the sole forming tool. Seisler's participatory red-clay piece *Preparing*, is a record in the form of multiple pieces of clay, each of which has been wedged 100 times against the wall. The red clay leaves a residue and stains the wall. The pieces of clay have been wedged against the wall in rows so long they extend past the corner of the room. Because of the stain and the wall, *Preparing* is simultaneously a drawing and a sculpture. Wedging is the start of any project for a ceramic artist and the title is both an observation of the realities of life as a ceramic artist and a pun.

Ruais begins with a mound of clay, equal to her body weight, placed directly on the ground. She proceeds to push the clay around according to predetermined constraints that delineate the movements she will employ. Manipulating the clay with the pressure of her body and gestures of her hands and feet, her work becomes a record of these physical actions. Her large, wall-mounted piece, *Topology of a Garden, Southwest, 127 lbs*, is both a map of her garden and a record of her movements as she pushes the clay around. The pigmented clay retains the imprints of leaves and branches that stuck to it and burned out during firing. The work records both the landscape and the labor required to create it.

## A Personal Identity

Both Wanxin Zhang and Sharif Farrag deal with the issues of personal identity and autobiography in their work. In every other way, their work is nearly diametrically opposed where means of representation is concerned. Farrag's work is humorous, playful, and colorful; he often melds the ceramic vessel with the idea of the body as a cultural vessel. He constructs his identity through a blend of commercial branding and historical imagery. His *Tonsil Jar* borrows the form of an Arabic vessel with lyrical, looping handles enshrining the red tonsil as if the vessel also functioned as a reliquary. Multicolored, standing on toe-nailed feet, the surface bears a riot of forms, a Gumby-like figure, a red-petaled flower, little faces, a row of colorful ovals. Farrag has spoken about how his heritage, that of an Arab-American man, has been demonized and how his work has become a version of self that does not need to exemplify Arabic behavior.



7 Phyllis Green's *Odd Old Things*, clay, fabric, beeswax, 2009—2019. Courtesy of the artist and Chimento Contemporary, Los Angeles. Photo: Ave Pildas.





8 Sharif Farrag's Split Face Jar, 17½ in. (44 cm) in height, stoneware, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Photo: Ethan R. Tate.



9 Cynthia Lahti's Brown Skirt, 15 in. (38 cm) in height, ceramic, printed found image, archival paper, wood, 2013.



10 Jason Briggs' *Blonde*, 12 in. (30 cm) in length, porcelain, hair, steel, velvet base, 2010.

Wanxin Zhang was part of the first generation in China to receive a formal art education after the Cultural Revolution ended. Trained in traditional figurative sculpture, he fell under the influence of California Funk when he moved to San Francisco in 1992. He seeks to not only express his personal identity, but also to create a dialog around social and political issues. The two life-sized sculptures, *Special Ambassador* and *Unbelievable Promise*, both reference the remains of the Chinese Terracotta Army, Michelangelo's *Pieta*, and contemporary figures such as Mickey Mouse and Mao Zedong. They clearly reflect Zhang's Chinese heritage. The works are cracked and scarred heavily, textured with marks of tools and fingers, pinching, and carved stamps. The surface is comprised of splashed, dripped, and poured glazes, graffiti-like brush marks, and decals.

### **A Focus on the Human Body**

Jason Briggs and Roxanne Jackson have in common an extraordinary level of skill paired with a similar conception of the human body; both are interested in the grotesque and macabre. Jackson's work focuses on the objectification of the female body. Her use of colorful glazes, wigs, jewelry, and fake fur engages with notions of beauty, ugliness, and the feminine. Her work comments on the way that women have been seen as other—portrayed in various grotesque, archetypal roles such as vampire, whore, mermaid, model,

or monster. Jackson's small head, *Once More With Feeling*, is dark and absurd, bearing a face obscured by a thick, psychedelic glaze. The messy, long-haired wig, snakeskin shirt, and pearl earrings present a campy female being who might be a character in a horror movie. Her *Monster Paw* series—grotesquely misshapen, oversized hands with manicured, gleaming nails; diseased-looking palms; and hairy skin are a parody of the beckoning female gesture.



11 Nicki Green's *The Porous Sea (Tub)*, 4 ft. 3 in. (1.3 m) in height, earthenware, glaze, 2019. Photo: Ashley Estabrook.

Compared with Jackson's work, Jason Briggs' is quite stark. He makes what could only be described as oversized animalcules. Resembling some prototypical alien, fetal creature, or a fetish, they are exquisitely rendered and highly refined—amorphous, but somehow recognizably mammalian. Porcelain is Briggs' material of choice and he fully exploits the delicate, skin-like qualities of the medium. He lavishes every section of his work with wrinkles, folds, nubs, and crevices; tempting the viewer to touch, stroke, or squeeze. Each of his creatures is extremely matte, the color of Caucasian skin, and rests on padded, velvet bases. His forms are overtly sexual—suggesting sexual organs, belly buttons, skin pores, and erotic fetishes. To magnify the illusion of reality, Briggs embeds human hairs, one follicle at a time, into the smooth, sensual surfaces. As he notes, "I am more interested in . . . the things that stir in me a compulsion to touch."



12 Nicki Green's *The Porous Sea (Tub)* (detail). Photo: Ashley Estabrook.



13 Jenny Hata Blumenfield's *The Vessel As Female* series, variable dimensions, site-specific installation, 2018. Photo: Simone Niquille.

*The Body, The Object, The Other* provides a varied, inclusive, and dramatic glimpse into some of the best ceramic work being done in the US. It reveals the state of current practices without curatorial theorizing or over-intellectualizing. Perhaps, more to the point, it reveals the significance of ceramics as an important part of contemporary art.

*For more information on the exhibition *The Body, The Object, The Other*, which is on view at Craft Contemporary in Los Angeles, California, through January 10, 2021, visit [www.craftcontemporary.org](http://www.craftcontemporary.org).*

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