Craft Contemporary

STUDY GUIDE

THE BODY, THE OBJECT, THE OTHER

An Exploration In Clay

Background:

Venus of Dolní Věstonice
29,000 - 25,000 BCE

One of the world's earliest clay sculptures was found in the Czech Republic during the 1880s: a four-inch tall figure, of a woman with parts of her body enlarged, robust, and exaggerated, particularly those parts relating to fertility. In this and comparable figures of the time, the limbs and head are quite small. Some similar figures display no limbs at all and usually the face is featureless. The sculpture or figurine was one of a large group of such figures fashioned of clay during the latter part of the Stone Age. They generally are known as Venus figures and represent the beginning of human use of clay to model the human body.

Today, more than almost 30,000 years later, the human body still inspires artists. As in prehistoric days, today's artists may also emphasize specific body parts, fashion an assortment of postures and poses, take liberties with reality, and use a variety of techniques. The wide range of media they currently use includes dance, music, paint, metal, found objects and the subject of this exhibition, clay.

Clay, made of the earth, is extremely malleable. It is bent, stretched and formed by hands and other forces. It is then altered by fire, colored by nature or humans, and often embellished, accepting a variety of techniques. Clay is used functionally and displayed decoratively.

About Craft Contemporary's Clay Biennial

Installation view of *The Body, The Object, The Other*

The Body, The Object, The Other is the second of Craft Contemporary's biennial exhibitions, focusing on divergent practices in contemporary ceramics. Here, the artists used the human body as their starting point to challenge traditional notions of representation, often going beyond the bounds of a recognizable figure. Included in the exhibition are works by twenty-one artists, both emerging and established.

The exhibition is divided into three categories identified in the title: *The Body, The Object, The Other*. The first of these sections, **The Body**, speaks to an inherent connection between the human form and clay. It also addresses the human need to understand oneself by molding one's image to communicate thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. Clay has the unique ability to both record the body and create an entirely new one. **The Object** includes anthropomorphized elements with projection of human characteristics onto clay forms and two-dimensional figuration as surface representation. In some cases, the artist used the object as a basis to speak about social dynamics and identity. The final category, **The Other**, combines visceral, sublime, abject, monstrous, fragmentary, or androgynous forms and includes themes of identity, alienation and feminist/queer theory.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES

The classroom teacher will give the picture of a sculpture in the exhibition to a designated student. The rest of the students will follow the description details to draw their image of the object. After or during your class visit, the students' depictions will be compared to the original.

This activity can be conducted several ways:

1) Divide the class into several small groups, three to six students in each group, all groups working apart from the others. One student in each of the groups will become its leader (by offering, teacher selection, or group decision) and you will give that student a picture (not to be seen by any other student) of one of the objects in the exhibition. The leader will describe the object depicted in the photo. After the initial drawing time, you may want to let the groups ask questions of the leader. These should be limited to those with a yes-or-no response so that too much information will not be given. Limit the number of possible questions or give a time limit for them.

2) Repeat the process with a different group member as leader.

3) Repeat the activity on succeeding days with descriptions of different exhibition pieces.

4) Work as you have with the entire class listening to the same description before they draw their image of the same piece. The teacher should circulate and give prompts to leaders if necessary.

AT THE MUSEUM

FLOOR 1:

Greeting you is the work of Los Angeles artist **Anabel Juarez**. They are larger-than-life ceramic dresses, standing upright despite the fact they lack the female torsos that would support them. Here the body makes its mark without being seen. Juarez made the dresses of hand-built clay coils, creating shape shifting works that explore the territory between abstraction and representation. An art writer describes them as "figurative without figures." Do you see them as figurative or abstract?

Installation view of *The Body, The Object, The Other* (January 25, 2020 – January 10, 2021) at Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles. Left to right: Anabel Juárez, Vestigio III, 2017; Musa, 2017; and Vestigio II, 2017.

Nearby, artist **Cannupa Hanska Luger** invites audiences to participate in an ongoing series called *Something to Hold Onto*. The artist, raised on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, reflects this heritage and the concerns of the indigenous community as he responds to timely issues. Participants contribute a small but meaningful gesture– a closed fist – imprinted on a clay bead. These he has strung together "into a long string of solidarity, building global consciousness around Indigenous peoples and our connection to movement and land."

COURTYARD:

Galia Linn, *STONE*, 2019

The artist **Galia Linn** has placed her guardian figure, *STONE*, in the outdoor courtyard, a space that is up-to-date and in the present, but also with references to the past. Here, there remains a circular window that was once a ticket booth and steel posts that once supported a rotating gate; both have lost purpose over time. Since the artist grew up in Israel, where archaeological excavation sites abound, her interest in ancient sites, rituals, and goddess figures are often part of her work. Embodying both strength and vulnerability, *STONE* acts as sentry both welcoming and guarding the museum and its visitors.

FLOOR 2:

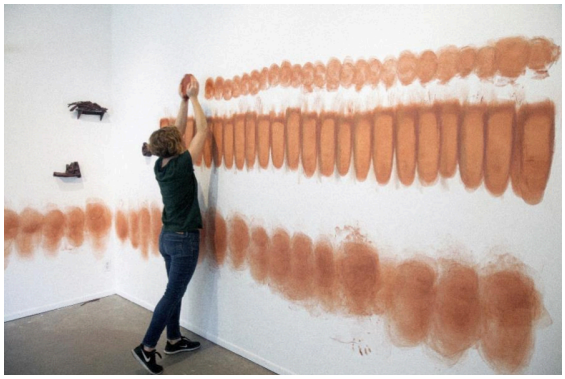
Alex Anderson brings both aspects of his dual Japanese and African American heritage into play in his modern, starkly white figures decorated with baroque elongated flowers and shiny gold leaves. The black and white ceramic sculpture displays influences of the cartoonish forms of the Japanese superflat aesthetic, offensive racial stereotypes, and emoji cuteness. By combining such unexpected influences together, the sculptures both attract and repel audiences, prompting them to question what they are seeing.

Alex Anderson, *Life's hard let's not talk about it II*, 2019

The "Odd Old Things" by **Phyllis Green** have bodies not typical of those dancing adorned in delicate hand-sewn tutus. The artist has transformed Edgar Degas' ballerinas into antithetical and functional objects that are neither thin, graceful, young nor polished. Created in terracotta, they have been interpreted as awkward, aging, bulky and sometimes as unashamed, glowing, wise and at ease with themselves.

Edgar Degas, *The Dance Class*, 1874

Phyllis Green, *Odd Old Things*, 2009-2019



Nicole Seisler uses the gestural aspect of ceramic mark-making to record ephemeral moments and interactions between people, place, and time. In this ongoing series titled *Preparing*, Seisler starts with one of the first actions learned when working with clay: wedging. The goal of wedging is to remove any air bubbles and create a uniform consistency throughout the clay, which is fundamental to any ceramicist. Here, Seisler wedges each piece of clay one hundred times, the action of kneading the clay against the wall leaving rows of smears across the wall. The image above shows the artist using the same technique in *Holding Patterns*.

(left) Euphiletos Painter, *Terracotta Panathenaic prize amphora*, ca. 530 B.C.
(right) Cammie Staros, Whale, 2016

Drawing from Athenian Figure Vases of Classical Greece, artist **Cammie Staros** hand-builds objects that can take on anthropomorphic aspects through her painted abstract references to clothing, armor or facial features; frequently, they underscore a gender divide as outlined in traditional Greek sculpture.

FLOOR 3:

Jenny Hata Blumenfield, *The Vessel As Female* series, 2019

Jenny Hata Blumenfield addresses the notion of women as vessels, incomplete, metaphorically vases or ships, passive receptacles in her 2019 series, *The Vessel as Female*. This portrayal has a long history, written in the bible and portrayed in centuries of Western art while men, typically, are portrayed as whole. Blumenfeld's installation includes photos of a female figure in poses mimicking classic Greco-Roman figures and busts. Two-dimensional photos serve as backgrounds, three-dimensional ceramics appear in the foregrounds. How does the artist challenge the equivalence drawn between the two—one an inanimate, decorative object and the other a living human being?

With his art, **Jason Briggs** combines textures that seem to invite viewers to touch the work. At the same time, the apparent delicacy of the porcelain pieces along with the artist's placement of them upon satin and velvet pillows imply the need of treating his presented work with care.

Jason Briggs, *Pearl*, 2011

Cassils is a transgender body builder, personal trainer and visual artist working in live performance, film, sound, sculpture and photography. The multi-faceted artist from Montreal, Quebec, now based in Los Angeles, sees the body as a form of social sculpture. In *Becoming an Image*, Cassils attacked a 2,000-pound block of clay in almost complete darkness, illuminated only by intermittent seconds-long flashes from a photographer's camera. The accompanying sound installation *Ghos*t, 2019, captures the exhales, grunts, and breaths of the artist during the event.

Raven Halfmoon, *CADDOxCHIC*, 2020

Native American artist **Raven Halfmoon** is a member of the Caddo Nations, a confederacy of several southeastern Native American tribes who were forced to a reservation in Texas, and in 1859 removed from there to Indian Territory. With her ceramics she connects with her people's heritage in her production of mostly large-scale heads, often red, black, and white, with a traditional Caddo technique of layering rounded thumbprint-like forms on the surface. Her works often come with artist-written graffiti that reveal stereotyping and ignorance of native cultures in America.

Roxanne Jackson, *Metal Goddess*, 2017

Roxanne Jackson injects a sense of dark humor into her ceramic sculptures, intertwining the macabre with the absurd. She states, “The grotesque and humor are inextricably linked: transgression, distortion and exaggeration are all elements of the grotesque, all motifs I use in my work. Somewhere in between the human and the animal, the real and the fantastical, the funny and the frightening, is the exhilarating territory of the grotesque.

Cynthia Lathi combines her own clay constructions with objects and images from a myriad of sources, including eBay, party ephemera, stuffed animals, antiques, and mass-produced figurines. In this exhibition are works that join paper reproductions from magazines, old books, and photographs with the artist's works of clay as well as works that combine clay and stuffed animals. The final pieces are meant to reflect the beauty and chaos of the world, influenced by human artifacts from ancient times to the present, as well as by her personal experiences and emotions.

Sharif Farrag, *Bodach and Idea Bats*, 2019

Sharif Farrag is a first generation Arab American—his parents grew up in Syria and Egypt—whose art brings together Middle East traditions and his personal experiences living in San Fernando Valley, where graffiti and skateboarding were among his major interests. Being a practicing Muslim in post-9/11 suburbia certainly affected his life.

"When I made Bodach, I didn't just make a twisted metal looking puppy person to try to scare kids, or freak people out. I also was thinking about who is othered, my own body and heritage, and how in America it's been demonized since I can remember. I am Muslim-American, my parents coming from Egypt and Syria. The way Muslim and Arabic culture has been mediated in the USA has always made me feel attacked… Bodach is a self-portrait, a version of myself that doesn't have to exemplify arabic good behavior, trying to prove the media wrong like my mom taught me.

"Clay is a material that is transitional: it can change phases from liquid to solid, it can mimic other materials, and it can appear messy and even abject, but also clean and precise." – Nicki Green

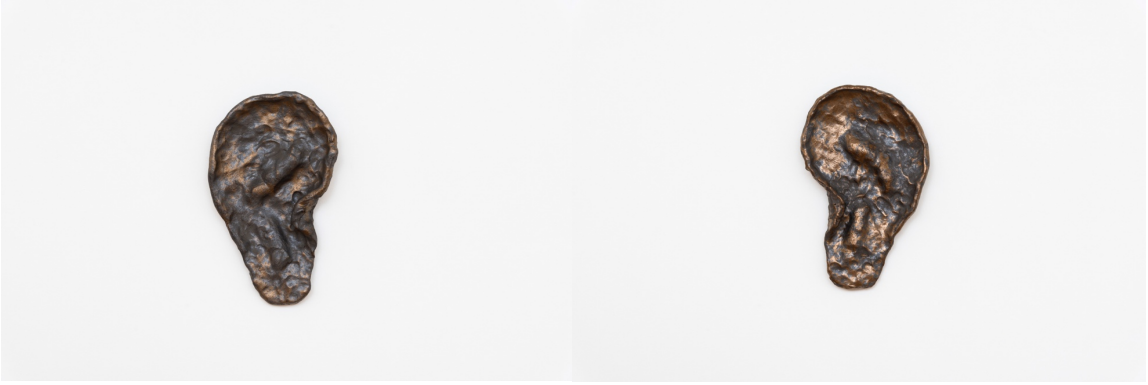
Clay gives **Nicki Green**, a trans, queer, and Jewish artist, the flexibility and malleability that resonate directly with her identity. Furthermore, clay's status as a craft medium – and therefore traditionally considered a "lesser" or "decorative" art – speaks to the artist's interest in marginalized discourses. Green uses these subversive qualities of clay to investigate themes such as conceptual ornamentation, the aesthetics of religiosity, and the preservation of history.

Brie Ruais, detail images of *Topology of a Garden, Southwest, 127.5 lbs.*, 2018

Brie Ruais begins her work by attaining a piece of clay that weighs exactly what she weighs. She then uses her body as her tool, using the weight and impact of her whole body to pound, stretch, distort, and move the clay. It is a lengthy, difficult process, and results in huge ceramic works made up of many torn, smashed, flattened tile-like pieces. Do you see her imprints in the clay? What else do you see?

Anders Herwald Ruhwald begins to explore ideas by working malleable clay, but once built, the process of drying, firing, and glazing transforms and adds meaning to the object. He thus sees sculpting as an ever-changing process by which the final form reveals itself, with the works lingering between the figurative and the abstract. Do you see them as figurative or abstract? Compare and contrast with Anabel Juarez's works.

Anders Herwald Ruhwald, (left) *Two Face (Pink Blue)*, 2019; (right) *Two Face (Pink/Turquoise)*, 2019



Pointing my Voice to Find the Dimensions of You (Pair), 2019 are two oversized ears that are installed apart and across from each other, suggesting the space in between to be an imagined head and the viewer to be inhabiting the space of the mind.

Megan Smythe credits ballet training for the dexterous manner in which she locates and relocates the body parts represented in her pieces. She has created a new site-specific composition for this exhibition. Her use of the word composition, instead of installation, is a clue to her working style of moving parts around until the work "starts to talk back." Her compositions can include everything from glass, concrete, and bone, to foam, plastic and plasticine, creating multi-media clay and glaze-based works.

Bari Ziperstein's *Propaganda Pots* series comment on consumerism, propaganda, and women's roles. She also takes note of connections she finds between present-day United States and Soviet-era Russia. Working with hand-built slabs of clay that she rolls out, layers, curves and cuts into shapes, she incises drawings on their surface which she enhances with vibrant colored glazes.

Installation view of Bari Ziperstein's works at Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles

POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES

Obvious and appropriate activities connecting students to the exhibit would have them working with clay, appreciating its malleability, experimenting with shapes and textures, and taking inspiration from the many objects in the exhibition. These will surely occur to you as you and your class view and discuss the figures—the bodies fashioned by the artists and responded to with your docent during your visit. All suggested activities are designed with minimal investment in materials and equipment so that they can be used in all classrooms.

All students, those in the early grades and older, would benefit from manipulating the material. They can poke a piece of clay, squeeze and reshape it, pinch it, form pencil thin snakes, fashion coils, press out slabs and try combinations of the actions. Be sure that they have time to merely move the clay around, and talk about how it feels, looks, and smells. Later, look at projects available in books and on the internet for children to use to experience clay, especially selecting ones that allow for creative manipulation.

Older students could consider the various types of clay, additives, and clay-like products. Activities centered around the body could find students mimicking some of the poses created by the artists, transitioning from a static pose to one that demonstrates i.e., quick motion, changing cardinal direction, moving only one or two body parts into new positions (one arm and one leg, changing the head and a wrist), etc. Following are suggestions for follow-up activities revisiting observances made on your museum visit. Grade levels are not given, rather, these provide ideas for you to adapt as you can.

Remembering *The Body, The Object, The Other*

On returning to school, let the students talk about their memories and their reactions to their visit to Craft Contemporary. How do they describe particular sculptures? Were artists making statements with their work? Was it political? Was it personal? Were any pertinent to the students' lives? Could they relate more to any one piece than others? Why?

Work of Art

What does it mean to be a work of art? Consider some of the elements. Did the size of any piece impress you? Shapes? Colors? Textures?

Yves Klein, *Untitled Anthropometry (ANT 106)*, 1960

Body in Art

Students can use books or the internet to find representations of the body in art, selecting one for further study (artist, subject, medium, etc). New York's Museum of Modern Art has a useful overview at www.moma.org. Use the keywords: body in art.

The trace of clay (evidence that it had once been present) sees clay serving as a tactile reminder of the body in the works of artists Brie Ruais, Nicole Seisler, and Cassils. Students, too, can use clay to document the movements and gestures of their own bodies.

Vase-based Body

Each of the poses of artist Jenny Hata Blumenfield mimics the shape of classic Greco-Roman works. If students are provided with a comparable outline of a vase they can draw the designs they would use to change it into a body outline. If it were a clay vessel, what would they add to alter it?

Jenny Hata Blumenfield, *The Vessel As Female* series, 2019

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A) Bell krater
B) Lebes
C) Skyphos
D) Aryballos
E) Hydria
F) Volute krater
G) Kantharos
H) Psykter
I) Kylix
J) Stamnos
K) Alabastron
L) Oinochoe
M) Lekythos
N) Amphora

Language Arts

Clay, working with clay, viewing specific clay artworks can all inspire language experiences for students. Poetry, for example, can take any form including the written words that take a specific shape such as concrete poetry, alliterative references, then/now poems, limericks, dialogue between student and an artwork in the exhibit, or between two artworks, or between clay and the artist forming it—and more.

Emoji and Hieroglyphs

Artist Sharif Farrag includes emojis in his whimsical art. Students undoubtedly include them in their internet communication. Pictorial writing was famously used by early Egyptians whose pictographs have been found painted or carved on parchment, stone, and clay. A comparison of emoji and hieroglyphs can lead to activities involving art and language activities. Younger students can use examples of rebus puzzles to do the same.

(left) Sharif Farrag, *Big Arm Jar With Railing*, 2019

Hieroglyphs on the Temple of Kom Ombo, Egypt

Xu Bing, *Book From the Ground: From Point to Point*, 2013

Wabi-Sabi

Galia Linn pushes clay to break and crack in the kiln. She thus expands on the ideas of Japanese **Wabi-Sabi** and creates pieces whose flawed surfaces embody the human experience and speak to the acceptance and transcendence of imperfection. Groups can explore the concept in discussions and perhaps in art projects.

Creation Myths

Some of the earliest human art is clay and the stories of many cultures tell how the first humans actually were made of clay. Students can research creation myths for one or more cultures and compare them. They can see how origin stories explain the relationship of humans to clay and tell, then, why it is so appropriate that clay has so often been used for early art.

女媧, or Nüwa, is the mother goddess of Chinese mythology who was said to have created humans out of yellow clay to ease her loneliness

Different Types of Clay

When used with different minerals and firing conditions, clays are used to produce earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain. Students can become aware of the distinctions. Alternate sculptural materials for students include wire, wood, paper and plaster and an unlimited availability of found objects. Many artists, including Cynthia Lahti for whom used photographs are integral, incorporated alternate materials.

Kilns

Kilns are high temperature ovens used to fire molded clay have a long history throughout the world. Students could investigate the various forms including early pits dug in the ground fired with dung, uphill-climbing Asian step kilns and beautiful old European bottle kilns as precursors to today's very small to football-field large electric models.

Abstract vs. Representational

Many of our artists veer away from traditional, recognizable representation toward one that explores relationships of shapes, textures, and colors to express a feeling. Students can explore the differences between abstraction and realism, even though in art the distinctions between the two are frequently debated.

Beads of Clay

Beads can be made by students in many ways: with rolled paper, drilled corks, natural seeds, and worked clay. Artist Cannupa Hanska Luger has participants create beads with meaning as a community project.

Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Something To Hold Onto*, 2019

Five Senses

The appeal to three of our five senses is obvious. Young children can relate what they saw, heard, felt. Encourage a varied vocabulary. Not until using the medium do people think of clay as activating the sense of smell. In an interview of artist Galia Linn, when asked what she loves most about clay, she said, "The smell, definitely the smell." Do any students recall using this sense? Any opinions as to probable taste?