

Seeing through potsherds

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Group exhibition "Smashing!: Fragility, Deconstruction and Fragments in Contemporary (Ceramic) Art," Benyamini Contemporary Ceramics Center, Tel Aviv

Curator Ayelet Zohar has undertaken an ambitious, fascinating project – an art exhibition that examines pottery making from the perspective of the broken vessel. More precisely, the "irreverent moment of smashing and scattering," writes Zohar. Potsherd, in this respect, restores the material to its primary state, opening up the possibility for new contexts.

"The shattering of the vessel designates a shift from three to two dimensions," writes Zohar in the exhibition catalogue. Brought on by accident or unearthed as archeological relics, potsherds "contain traces and memories of the past – the object's function, location, design, time, history, historical period and cultural context." In this way the clay fragments represent both an end point and the potential for interpretation, a new point of origin.

Zohar has left a definitive curatorial mark on the exhibition, which is not particularly common in Israel. This is a charged show imagining a cultural moment precipitated by the blow, the shattered object, whose pieces are collected and used to reconstruct an imperfect whole.

In the words of Zohar, this is "the moment after the object, post-structuralism and even post-deconstruction. This moment is one of fusion and assemblage, or reconstruction and restoration, assimilation and hybridization, creation and creativity."

"Dry Garden on the Roof, Mini-Nakba," (2012) by Zohar herself is one piece in the show that poignantly demonstrates this moment. Pieces of ceramic tiles, porcelain objects, ancient earthenware and stones from demolished homes are all scattered across the rooftop, jumbled and framed to delineate a devastated landscape.

Wrecked puzzles

In "Column" (2012), Miri Fleisher combines broken porcelain plates with Palestinian clay tool shards to create a miniature Tower of Babel that interlaces two languages.



"Blast # 5417" (1998), a photograph by Naoya Hatakeyama.

Jim Hamlyn shows an amusing collage of four different decorative plates that were cut into quarters and then glued to each other ("Quarter Plates," 2012, below). Martin Klimas displays a series of still images documenting the shattering of porcelain statuettes whose pieces are captured in mid-air.

One of the most impressive works is the sound piece by Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, "Use Value" from 2001. The entire exhibition space is filled with recorded shatter sounds, engendering a violent, devastated atmosphere that stands in contrast to the calm of the mostly rotund, stationary objects.

Aside from the decisive moment of shattering, Zohar also makes reference to hybrid figures like Cereberus and Chimera from Greek mythology, with each constituent part harboring "memories of its former existence, shape and function." This recalls the work by Etti Abergel "A Structure That Was or Wasn't," a kind of weight or scale on one side of which is a net holding potsherds, and on the other a collection of papier-mâché skulls.

The exhibition also addresses, albeit in a more understated way, artistically motivated vandalism, as in the work by Ai Weiwei "Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn," from 1995. In this photographic triptych the Chinese artist is shown standing in front of the camera and with an insolent, provocative sense of calm lets go of the urn in his hands. Incitement is at the heart of the matter, desecrating the hallowed and overriding

government rule.

In the video "Broken Vessels: Tikkun" by Tamar Schoer from 2009, the artist is shown washing broken dishes over a period of 30 minutes. Schoer's piece seeks to undermine the hierarchical structure of the binary opposition that values utility versus damaged goods, which in this case are cared for by the artist. In contrast to presenting viewers with a momentary shattering, she shows a meditative, somewhat dangerous, act of fusion, repair.

Apart from the interest in Zohar's words, the sensory and visual experience of the exhibition is largely dependent on viewers. As a medium-specific show, it sheds light on the breadth of the ceramic arts, broaching the possibility for an intellectual discussion about a discipline that is often dismissed as craft.

In this respect, the show cer-

tainly serves the interests of the Benyamini Contemporary Ceramics Center, which seeks to evade the image of a mere hobbies and crafts center.

However, as an art exhibition highlighting the ceramic arts to probe a cultural issue, the show is somewhat limited by the medium of choice.

Despite the persistent struggles of ceramic artists to have their work be regarded as high art, the show's lofty ambitions expose the limitations of this art form. The insistence on fashioning objects works to the detriment of the show. Some of the pieces get caught up in a nostalgic preservation of the past, while others are unable to extricate themselves from the limitation of function or decoration/ornament, and so suffer from excessive lyricism.

For example, "Ornamental Metamorphosis 1-3" by Tamsin Van Essen from 2011 shows vases whose cracks produce a decorative pattern, transforming the functional vessels into aesthetic objects alone.

If ceramic artists were to create work whose meaning is not dictated by the chosen medium then perhaps it would be easier to see this form as a vehicle capable of artistic and rhetorical import. One should take note of the fashion-forward mini-revolution spurred by Grayson Perry regarding perceptions of ceramic art. Seeing as in today's world local, anti-industrial and unique niche markets are highly sought after, now is certainly the time.



"Quarter Plates" (2012), porcelain plates with epoxy, by Jim Hamlyn.