

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Compare and Contrast: Ceramics at the MCA

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Ceramics are not a common material in the world of fine art. They were highly prized in China and Korea for two thousand years or so, as a walk through the Asian galleries in any decent museum reveals, but most visitors to a modern or contemporary institution will be hard pressed to find any form of pottery in evidence, save for the mugs in the cafe and the toilets in the bathroom.



(Courtesy of the artist., Photo by Nathan Keay HANDOUT)

For the next few months, the Museum of Contemporary Art offers a refreshingly alternate reality. Two concurrent solo exhibitions of flourishing young(ish) Chicagoans Lilli Carré and William J. O'Brien feature ceramics prominently and fabulously. Alongside Carré's strange, witty drawings and animations perch her loopy, quick, pale little sculptures. Amid O'Brien's copious drawings, assemblages, felt cutouts and steel sculptures cluster his audaciously gunky yet dazzling vessels and totems in riotous glazes.

Both artists ask clay to do more than might be expected of it and also, given the context, less. There are no high concepts here. (Plenty are in evidence elsewhere in the museum, which also has up a wee but potent Warhol display, as well as two heady, thematic group shows curated by the museum's resident thinker, Dieter Roelstraete). Instead, Carré and O'Brien both claim to shape ceramics for the sake of shaping them, to see what will happen to clay under the pressure of water, hand, tools and heat.

Apart from a shared penchant for modernist styles, however, the similarities pretty much stop there. (In any case, Carré seems to prefer her modernism early, hard-edged and abstract, while O'Brien takes his late, messy and expressive.)

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Difference encapsulates just about everything else, including the identities of the artists. O'Brien, who was born in 1975, has climbed fast and steady up the fine arts ladder: after earning an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2005, he landed a "12x12" emerging artist slot at the MCA, was picked up by the Shane Campbell Gallery and then the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, and put on a much-lauded solo show at the Renaissance Society in 2011. He's a local success story, and ceramics has been the art form that set him apart all along.

Carre, younger by eight years, is a local success story too, but of another sort. Since earning a BFA at the SAIC in 2006, she's illustrated for *The New Yorker* and *Best American Comics*; published award-winning graphic novels in four languages; and screened animated films at Sundance and Edinburgh. But not until 2012 did she join a commercial art gallery — Western Exhibitions — and begin to exhibit the kind of work that might be expected to fill a museum in something other than a comics exhibition. Not until now has she included ceramics in her repertoire.

Filling half of the MCA's main floor, O'Brien's exhibition is his first major survey. It's also bloated and indulgent, crowded with wall after wall of plodding, oversize, historically derivative drawings and collages. Past heartless Leon Golubs, junky early Rauschenbergs, clumsy David Smiths, empty Christos and discolored Matisses, however, squat some of the boldest, gutsiest, baddest ceramics imaginable.

The smallest cluster together on long shelves, naïve smiley faces cheek to jowl with crude tribal mugs, architectonic planar constructions and, well, piles of slop. They could be the cast-offs of a half-dozen pottery studios in unrelated eras, but they keep each other in check. The heavy stylistic references that flop in two dimensions soar in three.

Nearby, a pair of four-foot-tall urns, bulging with pustular knobs and drenched in runny skeins of leftover glaze, are as festive as they are fetid, objects of worship the day after the orgy.

Finally, a room of towering, kaleidoscopic totems, stacked from dozens of rough vases and disks, are as tacky-tacky as they are terrific, a place to celebrate vulgarity so extreme it comes out the other side.

Meanwhile, up on the MCA's skimpy third floor, Carre's show is taut and modest. Drawings, videos and sculptures work together to explore what animation means, in the technical sense of a sequence that creates the illusion of movement but also, and more strangely, in the larger sense of being full of life — literally.

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A dozen pairs of small ceramic doodles — droopy hands, twisty cigarettes, blobby heads and all kinds of less identifiable shapes — look like they're about to move, or just did. The effect is uncanny, as if time and space have both been stopped, then restarted, then stopped again a few minutes later. The viewer sorts out what happened in between, much as the mind's eye does when watching the consecutive cells that together compose an animation — albeit more consciously.

Hung on the surrounding walls, paired ink drawings of elegant, wan shapes trigger related efforts and peculiar thoughts. Looking at them, I wondered: Is this what happens to a drawing when no one is looking? When it gets tired, or bored, or fed up enough to walk away? When it gets blown around by strong winds? Is this how a more melancholic artist would draw these shapes? Is this how the same artist would sketch them, but in a more festive mood?

Outside of myths and fairy tales, drawings and sculptures don't actually ever come to life, of course. Except, that is, when they are used to create an animation. Carre presents two wall-size ones in a sublimely amusing installation that feels like a tightly choreographed slapstick duet, despite being non-synchronous. Simple shapes morph from plant-like to people-like to stone-like to sculpture-like, all the while looking like escapees from masterpieces by Joseph Albers, Brancusi, Calder and Picasso. They're droopy, slithery, thorny and crunchy, too.

Such noises and violence might not be expected of classic modernist artworks.

But surprise and possibility, after all, are the essence of being alive — and animated.

"BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: Lilli Carré" runs through April 15, "William J. O'Brien" through May 18 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 220 E. Chicago Avenue, 312-280-2660, mcachicago.org.

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