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MANHATTAN

Halperin, Julia. "Perfectly unfashionable to be fashionable again," *The Art Newspaper*, June 18, 2014.



THE ART NEWSPAPER

‘Perfectly unfashionable to be fashionable again’



Are ceramics, long relegated to the realm of craft, finally getting their due? Clay and porcelain works by artists including Josh Smith, Mai-Thu Perret, Rachel Kneebone and Thomas Schütte are in abundance at Art Basel this year, and sales were brisk yesterday on the first of the fair’s two VIP days. The medium “is perfectly unfashionable to be fashionable

again”, says Tom Dingle of Thomas Dane gallery (2.1/M15). Handmade and richly textured, works in clay contrast with the oversized slick paintings and chrome sculptures that predictably clamour for attention on many galleries’ stands.

“Ceramic is such a classical practice, it is interesting to see it being brought back to life,” says the collector Adam Lindemann, who has teamed up with Simon de Pury, the former chairman of Phillips auction house, to organise an exhibition of contemporary ceramics at Venus Over Manhattan, Lindemann’s New York gallery, in September.

During the first VIP preview, an untitled orange ceramic basin by Rosemarie Trockel, made in 2012, sold at Sprüth Magers (2.0/B19) for €120,000, while Lynda Benglis’s sculpture *Oriental Cuckold*, 1993, sold at Thomas Dane for \$65,000. Two untitled glazed totems by William O’Brien sold at Marianne Boesky (2.1/M2) for \$55,000 and \$65,000.

Historic examples also drew interest from collectors. *San Sebastian*, 1960, by Leoncillo, an Italian ceramicist who exhibited alongside Lucio Fontana at the 1954 Venice Biennale, was on reserve at Galleria dello Scudo (2.0/C5) for €130,000, for example. An American institution placed a reserve on an early terracotta work by Hannah Wilke—*Five Androgynous and Vaginal Sculptures*, 1960-61, priced at \$300,000—at Alison Jacques Gallery (2.1/P22)

“We’re seeing artists incorporating ceramics into their work more and more,” says Jed Morse, the chief curator of the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas, Texas. Art students today are encouraged to experiment with a variety of media, he says, and ceramics are faster to make and cheaper to produce than works in bronze and aluminum. Artists such as Walead Beshty and Janine Antoni have recently begun to work in the medium for the first time. *La Belicosidad*, 2013, which Beshty created during a residency at the Cerámica Suro in Guadalajara, Mexico, sold on Thomas Dane’s stand for \$85,000. A pelvic-shaped ceramic from Antoni’s latest series, *Gertrude*, 2013, sold for \$15,000 at Anthony Meier Fine Arts (2.0/F14)

Ten years ago, many artists worried that they would be dismissed or pigeonholed if they made ceramics. “Now, they don’t think of it as a secondary medium,” says Renee McKee of McKee Gallery (2.0/A4), which is showing a terracotta figure by Leonid Lerman, *Hommage to Donatello*, 2013 (\$15,000). Recent museum exhibitions have put the formerly marginalized medium centre stage. A striking example was the 2013 travelling retrospective of the ceramicist Ken Price at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Dallas’s Nasher Sculpture Center. This year’s Whitney Biennial and last year’s Venice Biennale also featured ceramics alongside other media.

Although artists and curators seem to have fully embraced the medium, collectors have been slower to come around. “Ceramic is a challenging material for some people to collect,” says the art adviser Wendy Cromwell. “There is still some resistance to thinking of it as fine art.” Indeed, ceramic pieces by Picasso and Fontana are still a fraction of the cost of one of their paintings. But the medium’s strong showing at the most blue-chip Modern and contemporary fair suggests that the market is growing. Anton Kern (2.1/J10), who is presenting brightly glazed pots by the potter and painter Dan McCarthy (\$9,000), says that McCarthy’s ceramics are easier to sell than his paintings.

For artists, “the appeal of clay has never really diminished,” Morse says. “At its most basic, the same appeal that attracted Picasso and Mirò attracts Sterling Ruby; working in clay is like drawing in sculpture.” Now, the rest of the art world is catching up. Alison Jacques says: “Ceramic was once seen as pottery. Now it’s contemporary art.”

—Julia Halperin