



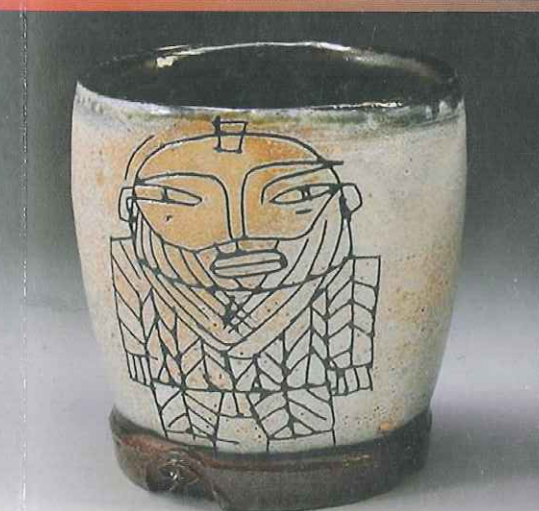
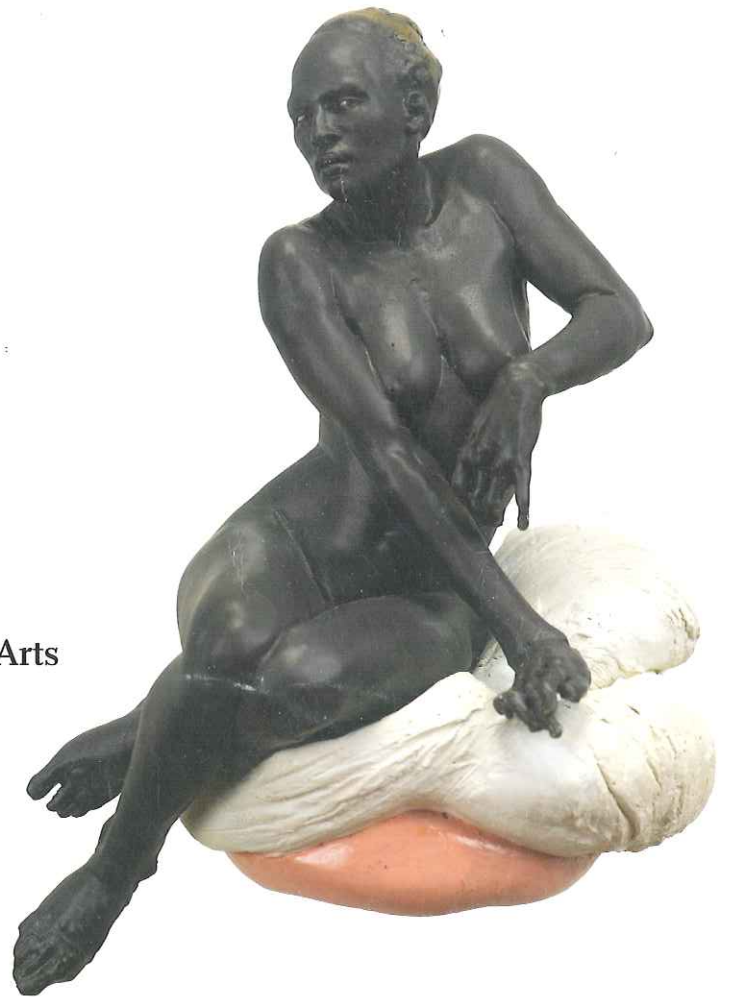
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Overthrown: Clay Without Limits

Gwen F. Chanzit

At this time last year, the Denver Art Museum was preparing a museum-wide initiative that would showcase the medium of clay throughout our two-building complex.¹ *Overthrown: Clay Without Limits* was the most ambitious of the installations—with twenty five contemporary artists taking over our largest temporary exhibition gallery of 11,000 square feet. Putting this exhibition together was a great adventure for me, a modern and contemporary curator, who faced a steep learning curve with only about fifteen months lead time.

My intention was to identify a group of extraordinary ceramic artists to install the angular, soaring spaces of the Anschutz Gallery inside our Daniel Libeskind-designed Frederic C. Hamilton Building. I even dared to seek an artist whose work would bridge our two buildings (by Libeskind and Gio Ponti) and lead visitors through the entire complex. The artists of *Overthrown* exceeded my initial aspirations! In the end, several artists' projects spilled out from that gallery and visitors were treated to unexpected delights throughout the complex.

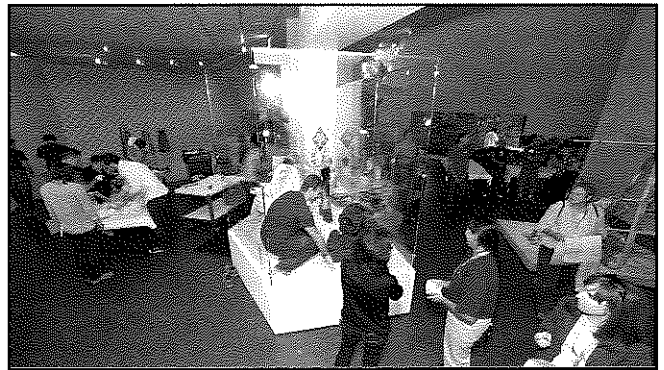
The first task, of course, would be to identify artists and tender invitations. Initially working from around 100 compiled artist folders, I pared the list and made studio visits to almost all twenty five participants. Two symposia in the year before the exhibition, NCECA's "Critical Santa Fe" and the Victoria and Albert's "Exhibiting Ceramics," helped me engage with the dialogue of contemporary ceramics. As the project evolved, I asked each invited artist to propose his or her most ambitious project ever. Site-specificity was important. With few exceptions, artists developed new works for particular locations.² A year's notice—the most any had to develop this project—was not much time, given the technological challenges most undertook. It clearly was a leap of faith on the artists' part, and also on ours, since the works did not exist before the exhibition.³

So what does it mean—to *Overthrow*? Some people think of regime change, others to go beyond the mark. The meaning "to conquer and topple" includes going beyond established boundaries, which these artists did, in myriad ways. Each set a personal mark and, together, they showed ceramic art to be among the most versatile, diverse, and

inventive of any art today. I think these artists did overthrow some previous notions of what ceramics can be, and surprised even viewers who make regular rounds of ceramics exhibitions.

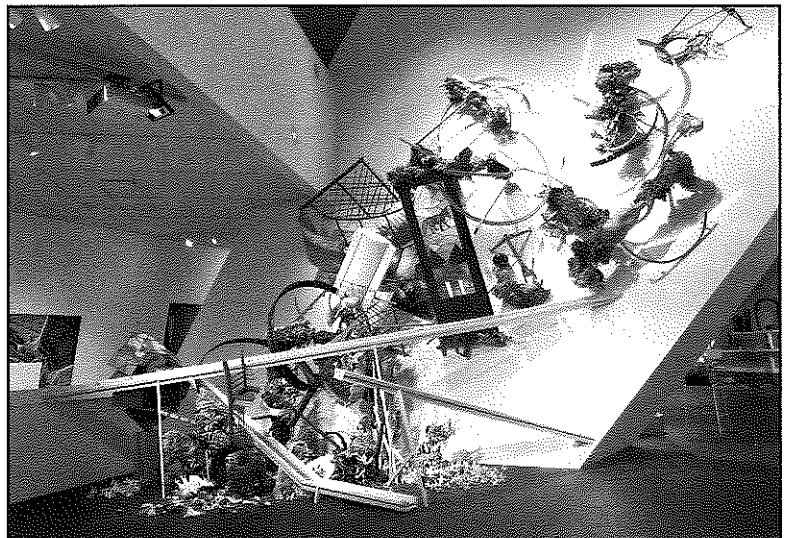
These twenty-five artists worked in all scales, from architecturally expansive to almost impossibly small. They used twenty-first-century technology hand in hand with standard modeling and molding techniques to push beyond what some might assume to be the limitations of the medium. Much of the work in the exhibition moved beyond pedestal, to wall, floor, and even ceiling; some incorporated a kind of integrated platform or enclosure that placed the work in its own self-contained context. Many exploited the interplay between the work and its site. Some used not only clay, but also found objects—metal, plastic, abandoned industrial materials, pottery shards, and other debris. Because the history of modern sculpture, from Rodin to the constructivists and beyond, has long embraced the release of sculpture from the pedestal to integrate viewer, object, and space, I have wondered why this move from the pedestal seems so daring in ceramic art. In fact, one of the most noted aspects of *Overthrown* was its lack of pedestals.

Many of the works engaged physical or thematic relationships. Del Harrow responded to the geometric shapes of the Libeskind architecture. John Roloff's digital photographs and clay samples from the Colorado Front Range spoke to geologic and ecologic considerations of place. Linda Sormin's installation referenced mining, a longtime activity of the locale. Clare Twomey's luscious drifts of red clay dust derived from the red clay color that gives our state



Above: installing *Overthrown*.

Below: Linda Sormin, *Mine (i hear him unclip me)*, 2011. Glazed ceramic, souvenir kitsch, and studio remnants from Tim Berg, Gerit Grinum, Nathan Craven, Robyn Gray, and Ted Yoon, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy Denver Art Museum.





Tsehai Johnson, *To Dust She Returns*, 2011. Porcelain, feathers, paint, and hardware, dimensions variable. Courtesy Plus Gallery, Denver. Photo courtesy Denver Art Museum.

its name: Colorado.⁴ These clay dust deposits spanned the museum complex, inciting awareness of time, space, behavior, and narrative.⁵ The turquoise color in Harrow's tile glaze came from copper oxide, a substance found in the Rockies. Martha Russo, Katie Caron, and Sormin incorporated found materials from the area.

It should be no surprise that architecture informed many of the works; ceramics have been an integral component of architectural programs since ancient times. Much as in the language of world architecture, Kim Dickey's surface decoration united diminutive modular elements across a whole. Roloff's "windows" were sited not only within the gallery, but also around the museum—some in relationship to the museum's own fenestration. Tsehai Johnson's installation related to architectural form and space, and to literary precedents, social values, and behavior within an architectural context. Julian Stair's work also spoke to social, as well as spatial, implications of architecture. Stair's beautifully crafted objects sat upon clay "grands"⁶ that emphasized the relationship of object to object, object to room, and pots to ground and architectural space. Nathan Craven built his largest work to date, a ceramic pathway on which to walk into the gallery. Caron and Russo utilized one large sloping wall and bridged across to another.

The placement of Dickey's freestanding wall, relative to the gallery wall, was a critical part of its reading. Sormin incorporated her dynamic installation onto the atrium's twenty-foot-high sloped wall—visible from many vantage points, including above and below. Both Stair and Marie Hermann arranged objects against a wall, but accomplished vastly different effects. Stair's configuration was orderly and precise; Hermann's poetic arrangement relied on a subtle, nonconforming relationship of tactile elements that derived more from the human and the experiential than from the systematic.

Collected objects in Caron and Russo's construction were emancipated from former rational contexts, much as in works by early twentieth-century master Kurt Schwitters. Anders Ruhwald's ceramic objects also were decidedly nonfunctional, and the rela-

tionship of these anomalous objects to interior space, fundamental. For this installation, the floor and walls of one entire gallery bay were tiled with the artist's tiles. That alteration of space made the individual parts and their relationships unique to this presentation. Quinn also took on a portion of the gallery's interior space, creating what she considered to be a total work of art—a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For many, this chandelier construction called up notions of palatial opulence, but it also referenced the natural world, with oppositional layering of interior and exterior, domestic and landscape spaces.

References were historical, cultural, and sometimes nostalgic, as in Kristen Morgin's re-creation of books, board games, and characters from vintage cartoons and popular television. Loss is a part of this *memento mori*, with entropy ever present. Dickey cited a specific medieval tapestry in her ceramic wall. Walter McConnell's allusions have run from Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*. Brendan Tang's

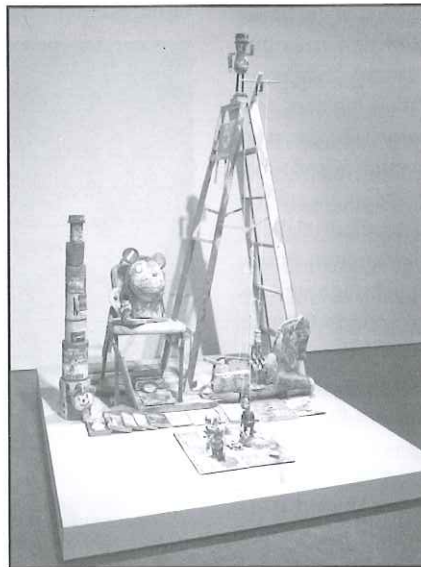
works refer as much to Asian blue and white ware as to Japanese *manga* and *anime*.

Like Roloff, whose interest in geology and ecology propels his work, both Mia Mulvey and Neil Forrest find inspiration in science. Mulvey refers to scientific display and wonder, with both the real and the poetic existing side by side. Forrest's underpinnings range from the relationship between micro- and macro-structures to insect activity and habitat and skeletal structures; he investigates the intersection of the organic, the technological, and the architectural.

Today, we know that ceramic practices are as likely to rely on the computer as on the wheel. For this project, Roloff's tools included a digital camera and computer. Mulvey used a laser cutter to make her thin porcelain forms. Several of the artists, including Forrest, Harrow, McConnell, and Quinn, utilized 3D modeling software. McConnell used a 3D printer to make prototype models (positives) from which plaster molds (negatives) were made for some of his wet clay figures. Others, like Forrest, went directly from concept drawings for computer-designed objects to computer-controlled mills that made the mold. Yet these artists also use low-tech methods when appropriate. McConnell some-

times uses molds from the hobby industry. Harrow has used an inner tube, as well as foam-board and tape, to make forms. Annabeth Rosen's constructed and baled works rely on disparate parts—some formed, some found, some taken from broken shards.

Many pushed technologies—like Forrest, whose investigations about the interaction between ceramics and architecture prompted him to utilize new technologies in kiln systems and clay fabrication. Before he could even get started he had to build a new kiln that would accommodate his huge elements. Andrew Martin experiments with remarkable glazing techniques. John Gill, Heather Mae Erickson, and Tang push the forms of functional objects. Cheryl Ann Thomas exploits the kiln incidents she predicts will occur when her large, coiled forms succumb to gravity, weight, and heat.



Kristen Morgin, *In The Conservatory, With Mr. Bill, On A Silent Night*, 2011. Unfired clay, wood, wire, and paint, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles. Photo courtesy Denver Art Museum.

Ben DeMott works such fragile filaments of porcelain extrusions that he executes his sculptures under magnification with tweezers, always aware that the life of each work is subject to uncertainty.

Without exhibition mounts, works by Paul Sacaridiz, Rosen, Morgin, and McConnell became autonomous. Rosen's freestanding sculptures mounted on casters appeared as anthropomorphized bundles that related spatially to each other and to us. Sacaridiz's constructions, inspired by utopian ideals of architecture and city planning, remained self-reliant; correlations and allusions operated within the structure itself.

The physical installation of this extraordinary set of artworks brought exciting challenges and opportunities, all of which contributed to the final exhibition. It's been said that ceramic artists have always used new technologies. These artists continued to push forward, taking risks that entailed material chemistry, maverick kiln techniques, digital photography, and computer-aided technology. The artists, their assistants, and the museum staff brought not only expertise, but also a spirited collaborative energy to this complicated and rich project. The range of practicalities addressed by artists back in their studios, to solve technical hurdles, build special kilns, and work out innovative production methods, was extraordinary. Once the projects came to Denver, the artists and museum team addressed additional complexities, not the least of which included the physical installation of some works that had already pushed limits. For example, though many artists prepare detailed drawings and specific plans for construction, Sormin's site process is about creating as she installs. And because her work was in the central space of the atrium, we could use our huge lifts only after public hours. McConnell's on-site creative method required 5500 pounds of wet clay be delivered to the second-floor gallery. One of our biggest installation challenges came with Forrest's group of heavy ceramic elements that were suspended from above—the largest of which weighed around 300 pounds. The team had to remove the high gallery ceiling and figure out how to fasten the parts to the actual structure of the building. This kind of collaborative problem solving made the exhibition possible.

When this project began, I kept thinking of the well-known slogan used by a certain company: “**No Limits.**” These artists went to extremes. They broke boundaries that were physical, technological, conceptual, and spatial. It was a remarkable journey—as they challenged themselves and us. I think they really did *overthrow* expectations of what ceramic art looks like—its size, its context, its methods, and meaning.⁷

1 Even the Photography department contributed to “Marvelous Mud,” with an exhibition entitled *Dirty Pictures*. There was also a full program of demonstrations and hands-on activities for people of all ages—from the first floor “Mud Studio” to the outdoor adobe collaborative project led by Athena and Bill Steen. I also reinstalled one floor of our Modern and Contemporary galleries with *Earth and Fire*—an installation of works in all media that engaged the theme. Naturally, ceramics was the highlight. Among the many works by modern ceramics masters, were those of Robert Arneson, Betty Woodman, Martha Daniels, Toshiko Takaezu and Charles Simonds.

2 Because of the way the works were integrated into the space, many no longer exist after the exhibition; in some cases only parts were recovered.

3 Even shipping proved to be a challenge. Because the works were conceived and made for this show, some of the initial planning had to be flexible in order to allow the artists full freedom to develop projects.

4 “Colored red.”

5 As people wandered through the complex—they discovered the piles of red clay dust in unexpected locations throughout the two buildings—as if the wind had blown them in. They emphasized the architecture itself, and led to discovery. These works needed to be out of reach, because it would have been a mess if

people had stuck their hands in them. And as one might imagine—the artist had to convince museum personnel that she could position these in places without air vents blowing the dust through our HVAC system.

6 “Grand” is Stair's own term for these platforms.

7 The Denver Art Museum hosted a symposium near the end of the exhibition run, with several of the exhibition artists participating in pales moderated by Paul Greenhalgh, Namita Wiggers, and Ezra Shales. Peter Schjeldahl, delivered the keynote address.

Gwen F. Chanzit is curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Denver Art Museum where she has presented many exhibitions, from those on individual artists Herbert Bayer, Matisse, and Bonnard, to group exhibitions, including *Color as Field*. In 2011 she organized the DAM ceramics exhibitions, *Focus: Earth and Fire* and *Overthrown: Clay without Limits*.

An expert on Bauhaus artist Herbert Bayer (1900-1985), Chanzit published *The Herbert Bayer Collection and Archive at the Denver Art Museum*, *Herbert Bayer and Modernist Design in America*, and a revised edition of the latter, *From Bauhaus to Aspen: Herbert Bayer and Modernist Design in America*. For a 2009 Austrian exhibition catalogue on Bayer, *Ahoi, Herbert: Bayer und die moderne*, she wrote “ein visuelles alphabet: die entschlüsselung von bayers ‘anthologien,’” (“A Visual Alphabet: Deciphering Bayer's Anthology Paintings”). She authored the forty artists' essays in the Denver Art Museum catalogue, *Radar: Selections from the Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan*, and was editor and essayist for DAM catalogues, *Embrace!* and *Overthrown: Clay Without Limits*. Chanzit holds a Ph.D. in art history and contributes to future generations of museum professionals as director of museum studies for the University of Denver's graduate program in art history.