

Art Review: *Marvelous Mud* at the Denver Art Museum

by [Holly Hunt](#)

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Works by Jeanne Quinn, Martha Russo and Katie Caron, Kim Dickey, Del Harrow, Annabeth Rosen and John Roloff.

From Porcelain Forests to Pre-Columbian Pubic Covers (By Way of Your Grandmother's Tea Set)

"Clay. It's rain, dead leaves, dust, all my dead ancestors, stones that have been ground into sand. Mud. The whole cycle of life and death." This quotation, from ceramicist Martine Vermeulen, appears on a wall in the wittily entitled *Dirty Pictures*, a display of earth- and mud- themed photographs. *Dirty Pictures* is one small part of *Marvelous Mud*, an ambitious collection of exhibits exploring the medium of clay appearing at the Denver Art Museum through September 18, 2011. I'll admit I approached the exhibition expecting a lot of pottery, and was very pleasantly surprised to find a range of works that pushed the limits of the medium and inspired a fresh look at familiar objects.



Works by Neil Forrest, Kim Dickey, Jeanne Quinn, Martha Russo and Katie Caron.

Marvelous Mud includes two major temporary exhibitions — *Overthrown: Clay Without Limits*, featuring installations by 25 contemporary artists, many of them site-specific, and *Marajó: Ancient Ceramics at the Mouth of the Amazon*, the first exhibition in the United States devoted solely to the artifacts of a little-known culture that flourished in the pre-Columbian Amazon (see end of article for more details). A further six exhibitions have been mounted within specific departments. *Dirty Pictures* is photography's contribution; *Focus: Earth and Fire* draws on the museum's modern and contemporary collections. The Native American section offers a focus on [Nampeyo](#), and in the same galleries Santa Clara potter Roxanne Swentzell is using adobe to construct a giant storyteller figure entitled *Mud Woman Rolls On*. A display of the high quality porcelain laboratory ware produced locally by CoorsTek (yes, it began as part of the beer company) joins the Olivetti typewriters in decorative arts and design.



Coors Porcelain Co., Casserole, 20th century

Glazed porcelain.

Left to right: Denver Art Museum; Bequest of James H. Mills. Denver Art Museum; Bequest of James H. Mills. Denver Art Museum; Gift of John K. Coors and CoorsTek, Inc., Golden, Colorado.

With such a wide range of objects and approaches on display – almost more than a visitor can take in during a single visit – it's hard to find a unifying theme, other than the shared focus on clay, but Vermeulen's words offer a way into this diversity. What I found myself focusing on was the different ways in which the clay was so often made to form environments, not just objects.

While *Overthrown* features a wide range of works, many of which, like John Roloff's casts inspired by the geology of the Colorado foothills, or Clare Twomey's installations of fine red dust, refer to clay in its natural state, I found myself most drawn to those works which used the medium to play with the intersection of the natural and the domestic. And this is fitting, considering the humble and almost invisible role that ceramics and the earth that they are made from have played in our lives, from children's mud pies to dainty china objects tasked with embodying femininity and the life of the home.

Tsehai Johnson set out to explore these contradictions in her installation, *To Dust She Returns*. Pieces of white ceramic, resembling both polished bone and the rococo curlicues beloved of decorators, form an intricate trellis ornamented with feather flowers, imitating old-fashioned wallpaper. But as the pattern climbs above eye level, the ceramic turns gray, the feather "flowers" become disheveled, and the very pattern of the "wallpaper" begins to unravel.



Tsehah Johnson, *To Dust She Returns*, 2011

Porcelain, feathers, paint, and hardware.

Courtesy of Plus Gallery, Denver. Photo by Jeff Wells.

The title has a double meaning, referring both to the process of decay these details suggest, and to the fact that the installation includes an element of performance art: a woman in a fifties-housewife dress shows up at intervals to dust the “wallpaper” with a feather duster (to which the feather “flowers” also refer). The graying and dissolution, Johnson explains, show where the cleaner struggles to reach with her duster. The piece, says Johnson, reflects the dual nature of clay – refined into ceramic, it becomes a precious substance and a signifier of wealth; as dust or dirt it is the housewife’s nemesis, undermining order and refinement, the cause of endless toil.

Jeanne Quinn also uses ceramic to create an environment, rather than a discrete object. Quinn’s installation, *You Are the Palace*, *You Are the Forest*, dominates a substantial corner of the exhibition space, a corner she chose and hurried to claim when the exhibition was planned. Here, delicate white ceramic forms evocative of both antlers and chandeliers hang in space, studded with tiny lights. They suggest chandeliers – very deliberately, says Quinn, whose work often references the decorative arts – but also a forest. Fittingly, they are in fact made from casts of ponderosa pine branches picked up in the Boulder foothills.

Variations of tone – as in Johnson’s piece – and subtle manipulations of scale create a sense of distance. Quinn explains that she sought to blur the boundaries between domestic space and landscape; here, as in Johnson’s piece, clay embodies both art and nature, though Quinn creates an alluring unity where Johnson explores conflict and disjunction.



Jeanne Quinn, *You Are The Palace, You Are The Forest*, 2011

Porcelain, glaze, lustre, wire, electrical hardware, and paint.

Photo by Jeff Wells.

The domestic space of childhood memory is mapped out by Kristen Morgin with *In the Conservatory, With Mr. Bill, On a Silent Night*. Morgin has painstakingly recreated worn paperbacks, comics, record albums, toys, and other mundane objects from painted, unfired clay; old Disney toys and pieces of a nativity scene surround Mr. Bill on a Clue game board that gives the piece its title, a battered old rocking horse sitting in the background. Morgin notes that she wanted to use images that were both iconic and accessible, eliciting an immediate response from viewers. It is almost impossible to believe that, with the exception of a few wooden and wire elements, these intimately familiar objects, arousing so many tactile memories of childhood play, are all made of clay.



Kristen Morgin, *In The Conservatory, With Mr. Bill, On A Silent Night*, 2011

Unfired clay, wood, wire, and paint.

Courtesy of Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles. Photo by Jeff Wells.

Blue and White: A Ceramic Journey in the Asian galleries also refreshes our view of something familiar. It brings together a beautiful range of objects showing the spread of the blue-and-white style from China to cultures as far flung as Japan, Persia, and England. The delicacy and refinement of these essentially domestic objects are aptly reflected in a still life by French Impressionist Berthe Morisot (one of two women in that group).



Berthe Morisot, *Tureen and Apple (Soupiere et Pomme)*, 1877

Oil on canvas.

Denver Art Museum; Purchased in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Frederic C. Hamilton with funds from Collectors' Choice 1997, the Anschutz Foundation, Frederick and Jan Mayer, UMB Bank, U.S. Trust and T. Edward and Tullah Hanley, Lawrence C. Phipps Foundation, Adolph Kiesler, Mr. John Pogzeba for the Simon Guggenheim Collection, Mrs. Dan Thornton and Dr. Paul Drey. Ceramic goods also appear as signifiers of domesticity in the *casta* paintings that play a role in *Mud to Masterpiece: Mexican Colonial Ceramics*, the Pre-Columbian and Colonial Latin American contribution to *Marvelous Mud*; *casta* paintings illustrated the multiracial complexities of colonial Latin America through images of mixed-race couples and their children, with captions explaining the precise mixture involved. These paintings also offer a rare glimpse of everyday interiors and their furnishings in an era, now all but forgotten, when Mexico linked Pacific and Atlantic trade routes, and a writer could say of that country, "in thee Spain and China meet, Italy is linked with Japan" (Bernardo da Balbuena, 1604). The mingling of Asian, European, and indigenous styles and techniques is apparent in the objects on display, many of them products of colonial Mexico's thriving *majolica* industry.



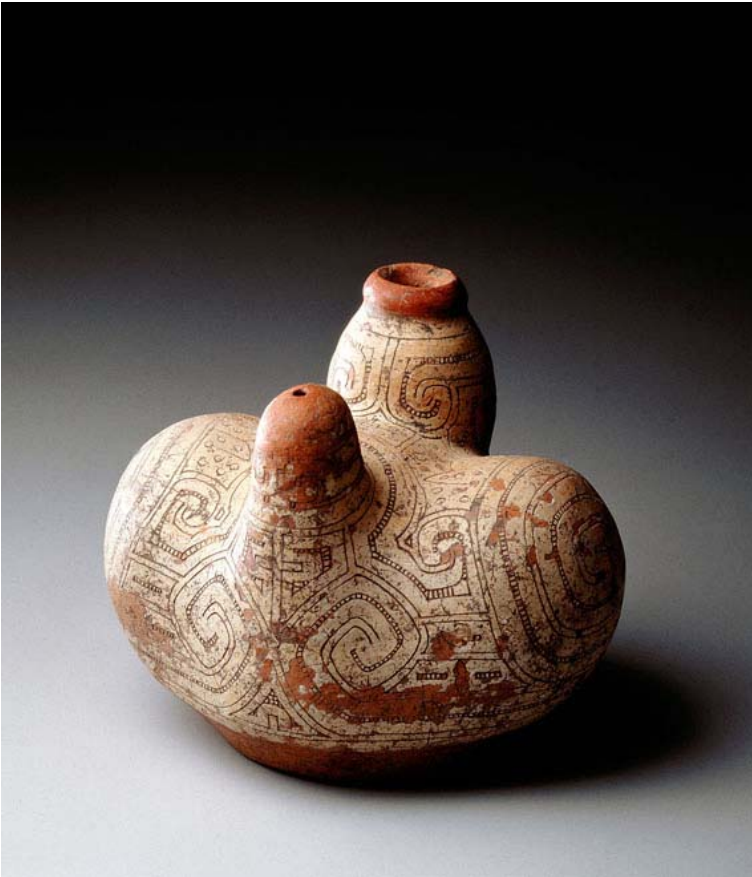
Francisco Clapera, *De Chino, e India, Genizara* (casta painting), Mexico, about 1775

Oil on canvas.

Collection of Frederick and Jan Mayer.– 1911).

A section of the display devoted to chocolate and its consumption again brings home (sorry for the pun) the domestic side of this global exchange. A painted Mayan vessel for the ritual drinking of chocolate shares display space with a silver chocolate pot from 18th century Peru, and an imported cup of Chinese porcelain. Nearby stands a storage jar, probably manufactured in the Philippines, fitted with a massive iron lid so the chocolate inside could be kept under lock and key, safe from pilfering children or servants; inside, says the label, the jar still smells of chocolate.

While I praised *Marvelous Mud* earlier for being something other than a lot of pots, perhaps the most significant temporary exhibition is more or less that, and possibly the most fascinating of all. *Marajó: Ancient Ceramics at the Mouth of the Amazon* is the first exhibition in the United States focusing on the art of a culture which is still almost wholly mysterious, even to archaeologists. Marajó is a vast island lying at the mouth of the Amazon, much of which is underwater during seasonal floods.



Double-spouted jar, Marajó Culture, Marajó Island, Brazil, A.D. 400–1300

White-slipped earthenware.

Loaned by Museu Barbier-Mueller d'Art Precolombí, Barcelona.

Between 400 and 1300 AD, a culture flourished here on artificial mounds built to rise above the flood waters. The current indigenous inhabitants disclaim any connection to the earlier residents; the makers of these objects had vanished before their ancestors arrived, they say. Scholars piecing together an Amazonian tradition of polychrome ceramics speculate about the spread of influence upriver, and posit a connection to early cultures of the Guianas, but nothing is known for sure, according to curator Margaret Young-Sánchez, not even enough to give individual pieces dates within the 900-year span of the culture. This air of mystery only adds to the interest of the ceramics, whose densely ornamented surfaces freely mix incised patterns, molded relief, and bold polychrome paintwork. So covered in ornament are some of these pieces that, Young-Sánchez notes, it was hard to decide which way up to put them; some have been positioned on mirrors that reflect otherwise hidden elements of the designs. The surprisingly pristine condition of these artifacts – the bottom surfaces show virtually no wear – points to one of the few conclusions archaeologists are willing to draw: that they were produced as grave goods, made for burial with the dead, like the objects in Egyptian tombs. This is most clearly the case with the anthropomorphic funerary urns on display, which once contained the bodies of the dead. More puzzling to the modern view, but showing the same intricacy of design are the women's pubic covers on display – ceramic objects, apparently worn like bikinis (What? said a friend when I tried to describe these. *What?*)

The objects in the exhibition come largely from three sources – the Frederick and Jan Meyer Collection, the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Museu Barbier-Mueller d'Art Precolombí in Barcelona, Spain. The objects from Barcelona seem to me to be the standouts in terms of aesthetic quality, especially the exquisitely molded vessels in the shape of tortoise shells, covered in mazelike geometric patterns of dazzling complexity. An admirer of Latin American literature, lost in their intricate turnings, cannot put aside thoughts of Borges's labyrinths and forking paths. The sophistication of these artifacts, coupled with the realization that even today we know virtually nothing of their creators, gives them an almost uncanny charge. Perhaps more than any of the other elements of *Marvelous Mud*, they show how rich and strange the material of everyday of life really is.