

Del Harrow

On Objects and Orbits

IT IS A NOTABLE IRONY OF RECENT CERAMICS HISTORY THAT THE most significant developments in 20th-century sculpture (the descent of objects from the monumental permanence of plinth and pedestal toward the vicissitudes of a wandering life and the dispersal of meanings of these objects from a firm grounding in form onto the shifting scenarios of contextuality) have together exerted an influence on sculpture in clay that is still tentative enough to be associated with innovation and even eccentricity. This is curious, given that nomadism and adaptability – the capacities to move freely in space and to interact meaningfully with changing environments – are fundamental to utilitarian ceramics: the majority of objects made in clay. Plates, for example, are itinerants accustomed to sharing space with sundry articles from silverware to serviettes and to accommodating themselves in varying degrees to the colours and textures of whatever cargoes they temporarily bear. Sharing a medium and to some degree a lineage with these portable, personality-shifting ceramic objects, sculpture in clay ought to have taken naturally and uneventfully to nomadism and adaptability the moment (if not well before) that these became viable

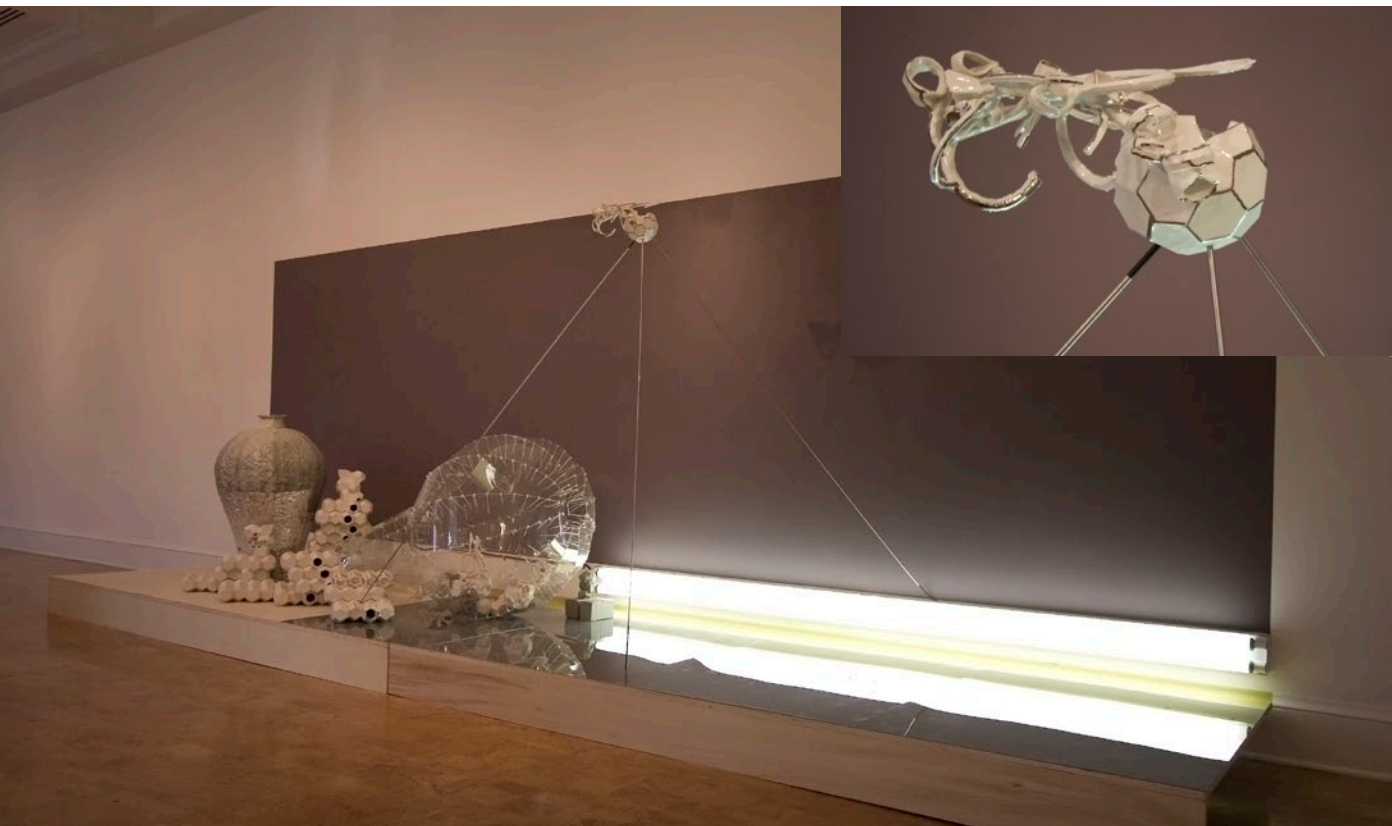
attributes for sculpture in the broader context of art. For whatever reason – whether failure to get the news or tendentious contrariness toward any possibilities originating outside of craft circles – ceramic sculpture only slowly absorbed the implications of the radical changes that shook its counterparts in other media in the latter half of the past century.

In this initial decade of the 21st century and particularly among a generation of sculptors who have only recently entered the field of contemporary ceramics, ceramic sculpture has begun emphatically to embrace nomadism and adaptability, as much through recognition of the centrality of these characteristics to the history of ceramics as through the conviction that ceramic sculpture need not separate itself tendentiously from sculpture in other media.

Contemporary ceramic sculpture, in other words, has found a way to acknowledge equally both a craft tradition and art history; or to put things another way, to pursue what it will from among both of these precedents. This kind of freedom is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the work of Del Harrow, an assistant professor at Colorado State University and an artist who has shrewdly recognized

Article by Glen R Brown

Chinese Satellite Chandelier (with inset detail). 2008. Porcelain, stoneware, Plexiglas, stainless steel, plywood, paint and full-spectrum fluorescent light. 16 x 4 x 6 ft.



that the former boundaries of ceramics as a field can be reconfigured most effectively not by rejecting the central tenets of that field but, rather by embracing some of these strategically: adhering to them for as long as they remain productive but never succumbing so fully to their authority that they become drivers rather than means. As a consequence, Harrow's large-scale, mixed-media, multipartite works can seem as if they have been conceived by a sculptor entirely unschooled in the history and tradition of ceramics, when they have in fact evolved at every step from conceptions of nomadism and adaptability that are not only indigenous to but normative within that history and tradition.

Harrow's mixed-media installation *Chinese Satellite Chandelier* is a case in point. Drawing for metaphorical effect on the institutional glare of its own fluorescent lighting (a harsh mood-maker that reflects crisply from a mirror-like base and backdrop of gray-painted Plexiglas but diminishes into a subdued, even romantically fugitive glow as it plays over surfaces of glazed porcelain and earthenware and falls upon the flat opacity of bleached birch wood) the installation stresses a certain kind of enlightenment. There is no narrative attached to the composition but each part gains in formal and conceptual weight from its contiguity with the next. This condition has not resulted from creation of the parts in reference to an over-arching plan. On the contrary, each formal unit was conceived independently – even self-referentially – and only a vague notion of its eventual integration into a larger composition exerted any influence over its formal and conceptual

traits. Although this concern for the initial discreteness of parts represents a relatively recent development in Harrow's work, it can be situated conceptually within a history of modern sculpture that dates back to the first decade of the 20th century and a tradition of ceramic objects that stretches back for millennia. "The forms in *Chinese Satellite Chandelier*," Harrow explains, "were made over a two-year period. Each of the forms felt like an independently motivated thought. I am collecting all of these objects and, as time passes, you can treat them almost as self-made ready-mades. When they sit in the studio long enough, you can look at them through a different lens."

Chinese Satellite Chandelier, the title of which is simply a fragmentary list of independent forms that have been incorporated into the composition, is laced with sub-themes that could hardly be inferred from any isolated part. Formally, the colossal object at the left (a copy of a Ming-dynasty meiping vase, coil-built from earthenware clay) and the bulbous transparent form (modelled on a baroque chandelier and constructed from clear Plexiglas planes, pierced and joined together with Zip Ties) share a rotund, ovoid shape that, in conjunction with the illumination, recalls an incandescent light bulb. Despite their visual resemblance, the meiping vase and chandelier references have been realized not only through different media but also through different means of construction. The 'chandelier' was produced through a process of assembly quite unlike the hands-on integrative technique of coil building. Moreover, the components of the chandelier were manufactured in a

Top left: **Untitled**. 2009. Stoneware, aluminium foil, Plexiglas, zip ties, led lights and plywood.
Installation view of *The Margins* exhibition, Phoenix, Arizona, US.

Below left: **Untitled (Detail)**. Top right: **Untitled (Detail)**.

Below right: **EKWC CeramiSKIN**. 2009. Stoneware, glaze, galvanized steel pipe and tape. 5 x 4 x 3 ft.



decidedly detached process of tracing a photograph in a CAD program, then employing that software to 'unfold' the form into a configuration of planar shapes that could be separated and printed to create templates for cutting the Plexiglas. "I was working out different strategies for construction," Harrow explains. "I am interested in the textures, the marks and artefacts of those two processes. The ways those are different."

Differences are pronounced in *Chinese Satellite Chandelier*. The odd, geometrical units that evoke a broken honeycomb between the chandelier and the meiping vase are, like the latter, composed of ceramic – though the specific material is porcelain rather than earthenware. Slipcast in moulds taken from a foam-core model, these porcelain units invoke multiplicity and even mass production as a means of manufacture. Formally, their faceted shapes harmonize with those of the chandelier and the meiping vase, though as designed forms the two objects are quite different. The same is true of their relationship to the 'satellite', a curious porcelain polyhedron that sprouts a tangle of cast-porcelain tubing and rises on three slender stainless-steel legs against a backdrop of gray-painted Plexiglas. The relationships of similarity and difference are, of course, only evident due to the momentary proximity of all these objects: these 'self-made ready-mades' that Harrow has first constructed as semi-independent forms and then

consigned to the conditions of nomadism and adaptability. In a metaphorical sense, all of the major components of *Chinese Satellite Chandelier* are satellites. They all originate elsewhere and are on their way somewhere else; passing each other on different orbits around their creator; temporarily sharing a space and defining one another's fields of reference. The coherency of the composition that they form is ephemeral, destined eventually to break apart under the strain of their respective momenta.

Though it is perhaps not immediately evident, disintegration characterizes Harrow's work as profoundly as integration and, certainly, it is a trait implicit within the concept of nomadism. Things draw momentarily together under the mutually definitive and even epiphanic conditions of communities – and then they part. *EKWC Ceramaskin*, an exhibition of work produced by Harrow during a 2008 residency at the European Ceramic Workcentre in 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands, illustrates this process of convergence and dispersion on at least two levels. The less obvious unfolded entirely conceptually, involving intellectual collaboration between Harrow and Penn State assistant professor of architecture David Celento. The second concerned the itinerate fate of objects. Designed as independent projects, some of the key sculptures in *EKWC Ceramaskin* (specifically a five-foot-long, gray-stoneware ramp geodesically

Below left and right: *Models, Diagrams, Works in Progress at NCECA Project Space. 2009. Stoneware, cast porcelain, plaster, steel sawhorses, PERGO flooring, plywood and cast black porcelain.*



articulated into facets and an earthenware limb divaricating into smaller branches held together with green electrician's tape and sprouting buds of tiny electrified lights) would be separated at the end of the exhibition, then later physically and conceptually reunited in a 2009 exhibition at the Urban Institute of Contemporary Art in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This aspect of recycling – the periodic departure and return of objects implied by the metaphor of satellites in orbit – is, within the context of Harrow's work, as significant as the material traits of the objects themselves.

The perpetual cycling in and out of objects destabilizes concepts of monumentality and permanence and is no doubt facilitated by Harrow's primary emphasis on processes rather than finished forms. In the *EKWC Ceramaskin* exhibition, for example, the gray-stoneware ramp-like object was accompanied by a kind of reciprocal of itself, a negative counterpart in the mould used to create it. Composed of plywood panels connected with stapled palette banding and stained with a residue of the gray stoneware, this structure is, of course, a reminder of the moulded origins of the ramp-like form. It is a signifier of a process of working in clay that serves to indicate a specific function within that process. In the context of the exhibition, however, the mould attains multivalence: a shifting potential for meaning. Its significance, no longer contingent solely upon the utilitarian motives that prompted its creation, is curiously like that of a historical ceramic vessel that finds its way into the holdings of a museum: although the utilitarian potential has not diminished materially it has nevertheless faded to secondary consideration due to the change of context and the privileging of concepts and aesthetic aspects of form over the capacity for physical function. An even more provocative analogy could be made between the mould in its exhibition context and a utilitarian ceramic vessel

under ordinary conditions of use. In both cases meaning is at least partially relative to the objects and activities defining the context.

What is obvious about the relative meanings of utilitarian ceramic objects as they slip from one context to the next was, of course, not always so manifest with regard to sculpture. Recognition of the contingency of objects and the situated character of meaning arose only gradually within the experimental tradition of the modernist dialectic. Brancusi's probing works, with their rejection of the conditions of the monument and their implications of sculpture's autonomy through a formal ingestion of the pedestal, constituted a necessary prelude to the eventual negation of autonomy and the triumph of contextuality in the installation and environments of the latter half of the 20th century. In Harrow's work it is no accident that allusions to Brancusi inhabit the contextualized spaces of installations and environments. Harrow thematizes and synopsisizes the 20th-century undermining of sculptural presence – of sculptural self-sufficiency and immanent meaning – not as a mere exercise in historicism but rather as a means of reflection upon the place of his own practice within the history of sculpture and the tradition of ceramics. In an exhibition for the NCECA project space in 2008, for example, he mused over the implications of a discourse between Brancusi's paeans to sculptural autonomy, Lynda Benglis' 1970s indulgence of process (invoked by a drooping mound of ostensibly soft and viscous clay) and the complex, interactive, horizontal dispersal of ceramic tableware when in use.

Although the installation as a device has become generally, often painfully, cliché (a protraction of a 1980s fizzled art-world apocalypse, an endless reiteration of a by-now-superfluous deconstruction of sculptural presence and an instant formula for the look of art-school

On Beaver Dams and Baroque Space. 2009. Stoneware, hand sewn ballistic nylon, slipcast stoneware, led lights, electric blower and motion sensor. 10 x 4 x 4 ft (black form).



work) Harrow delves below the surface of this overused format and, by implying its indispensability to his ontological investigations of the ceramic object, revives the installation's heuristic potential. No doubt much of the success of his installations is owed to the simultaneous autonomy and contingency of his objects, which appear to orbit in from a space beyond and to engage temporarily but profoundly with the other elements they encounter in the installation space. For the 2009 exhibition *The Margins* at the Icehouse in Phoenix, for example, Harrow renewed his reflections on the intersection of 20th-century sculpture and his own artistic identity by recycling the bulb-shaped Plexiglas object from *Chinese Satellite Chandelier* and suspending it vertically, like a massive crystal pendant, alongside hand-built ceramic forms evocative of the *Concretions* of Arp, the cage-like structures of Giacometti's Surrealist period, Naum Gabo's constructivist geometry and the stone wells and obelisks of Noguchi – all against a full-wall backdrop of aluminium foil that seemed futuristic and strangely nostalgic at the same time, like a flashback to the Inconel on the 1969 lunar module or, more aptly, the foil covered surfaces of Warhol's *Silver Factory*.

If these evocations of past art tend to insulate Harrow's work from expressive immediacy and the gestalt-like simplicity of his forms often imparts a certain anonymity to their surfaces, it would nevertheless be incorrect to conclude that Harrow advocates for Warhol's indifference to the activity of the hand. On the contrary, despite the conceptual weight of his objects and installations, Harrow's interest in process is not confined exclusively to an abstract plane. For his Grand Rapids exhibition *On Beaver Dams and Baroque Space*

– which saw the return of the gray ramp and the colossal limb and branches from his *EKWC Ceramaskin* exhibition and their integration with a large, regularly rising and falling, blower-inflated, ballistic-nylon form – he did, admittedly, begin on an abstract level. "I was thinking," he explains, "about the shape of beaver dams, breaking that down into the constituent forms of organic, natural materials that are reorganized into a structural, geometric shape through instinctual activity and all of that in relation to the pressure of a fluid moving through it." At the same time, despite his designing of the inflatable fabric element through the aid of the software program Rhino (clearly not a hands-on process), Harrow opted to carry out the laborious task of cutting and sewing the panels personally rather than contracting the work with a specialist. "I am interested," he relates, "in the way that the mark of the hand accumulates as a layering of information. Making the gray stoneware piece by pressing clay into a mould and the black fabric piece by sewing freehand on a sewing machine were clunky methods for actually fabricating objects from digital models – but that is intentional."

What are we to make of this confession of tendentious reference to the hand, if not a tacit acknowledgement that vestiges of craft-based process are still meaningful, even in ceramic sculpture, even in conceptually oriented work and even in an age of CAD/CAM creativity and largely detached mass-production? Layers of information accumulating from hand activity imply a link between Harrow's work and the long tradition of hand-rendering objects in clay. In concert with reflection on the conditions of nomadism and adaptability within that tradition and the eruption of these in the modern

and postmodern art of the 20th century, they form the basis for a profound consideration of what it means to be a contemporary sculptor in clay. As Del Harrow's work implies through its perpetual process, its disintegration as well as integration, its shifting constitution in the momentary meeting of objects on intersecting orbital paths, the lineaments and parameters of such an identity can by no means be taken for granted as concrete and self-evident today.

On Beaver Dams and Baroque Space (Detail).



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