



House of DeBoer. "Ball if LIfe bong" The Empire Room

NCECA Alternative Spaces

BLAIR SCHULMAN on May 27, 2016 at 7:48 AM

Kansas City, Missouri recently hosted “Makers, Mentors and Milestones,” the 50th Annual Conference of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA). Thousands of people from around the globe converged on the city to view masses of ceramics in dozens of venues, enough to make one’s head spin like a potter’s wheel. It was at the alternative and artist-run galleries that paid closer attention to the viewer experience rather than relying on academic formality.

Front/Space presented exactly this viewer experience. “A Tisket, A Tasket” did not consider objects of absolute functionality, esoteric reverence or worse, a painfully plodded dissertation on process. Charity Thackston and Julia Six created a “participatory installation” of ceramic and non-ceramic objects that asked the audience to question the value we place on outdated objects like Wite-Out

bottles, cassette tapes and alarm clocks. All were perfectly áred renditions in multiples placed atop empty cardboard boxes serving as pedestals, a nice middle ánger to the formalism that ceramics presentation can sometimes engender. The artists invited visitors to handle, fondle and even take one or two. One quickly stopped seeing them as kitsch and began to appreciate how beautifully they shifted our gaze from mass-produced disposable products transformed into objects of beauty and permanence.

With the increasing legality of cannabis in the United States our culture is distancing itself from stereotypical patchouli-scented, psychedelic-themed objects related to toking up. As its recreational use becomes more commonplace it brings this once deáant act out of the shadows, ready to be marketed. Two spaces had exhibitions that addressed this shifting weedscape.

“Objet x WEED-CRAFT Pop Up” at The Empire Room was something of a mini-museum curated by ceramicists Dean Roper and Joseph Hutchins. Roper makes beautifully crafted bongos and other smoking implements suitable for display in vitrines (not hidden in a shoebox to be used after hours). Together the curators chose other artists committed to the same serious crafting. House of DeBoer’s (Brock and Colleen Deboer) *Ball is Life bong*, succinctly presents a conundrum: should one gaze upon it or áll the bowl and light up? The answer is both. Whereas Jen Wilkinson’s *Polymer Cube Pipe* is a bit more practical without sacriácing any of their aesthetic values. Painted to look like a digital Tumblr collage, replete with Guido-inánuenced horn chain, circa 1977, it presents as an object of carefulness with a hipster parable. The beautifully subversive one-hitters disguised as lipsticks by Saint Karen also át this theme.

At PLUG Projects two solo exhibitions tangentially touched on cannabis in more conceptual contexts. In Joey Watson’s “Lifted” the funky shapes, colors and patterns of his ritualistic objects, breath animated musical instruments, cups, altars, and pipes, offered a ceremonial point of embarkation into a living dream. Christina A. West’s “Stay Asleep” featured monochromatic green screens and pot plants amidst languid, contorted or sometimes comatose águres that felt like a dream state of either total anxiety or enlightenment. This combination pulled us towards an unreality, one that is captured like álm and presented back to its audience, tearing down the fourth wall. More importantly, this installation presented a sense of ennui that was neither forced nor settled; it existed truthfully where one was allowed to absorb the full gamut of what West presents without any overt formalism or process. Together these exhibitions dovetailed into a curious before (Watson) and after (West) experience.

Conversely, Emily Connell’s “Vade Mecum” at Kiosk Gallery, was a small explosion of beautiful process-driven, but highly controlled, surface level objects with books at their core. Using a masonry saw to cut cross-sections of the original tomes encased in slip, Connell’s sculptures read as a type of relic, or an examination of the destruction of the status quo, or at least one’s own personal belief system. The work is intriguing and straightforward, but presented in a clinical fashion that detracted from user interaction. It was one space where I felt something to contrast the work’s intricate texture would have illuminated their subtle nuances.

Artists Peregrine Honig and Marcus Cain (of the transgender design studio All is Fair) took their curatorial efforts in a new direction. Their exhibition “Chlorine” illustrated a very áuid theme of

“transformation, obliteration and enlightenment” and featured artists Rain Harris and Judy Onofrio, shown alongside painting (Tom Gregg) and other crafting (Shenequa Brooks). The show elicited an upbeat rhythm to a new multi-use space.

“Standing Wave” at The Studios, Inc. pulled together Sharbani Das Gupta and Ashwini Bhat, along with áber artist Debra Smith and poet Forrest Gander for an installation that didn’t just sing, but performed an aria of synchronicity. Smith’s fabric collages added lightness to Bhat and Gupta’s weighty pieces with Gander’s poetry putting everything into a transcendental perspective that is honest and complete. Their collaboration allowed the audience to see that ceramics need not be presented as stand alone objects. They are meant to exist among other ideas.

All of these venues took a needed step back from the sometimes heavy-handed didacticism of conference-related exhibitions. While at some venues formalist tendencies quite literally placed ceramics on pedestals as untouchable and precious *objets d'art*, these alternative spaces demonstrated the value of ceramics as it might exist in one’s personal space, alongside other ideas and disciplines that focus less on their process and more on its enjoyment.

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