

VISUAL ARTS

WORKABLE WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES

Ceramic artists in "Eclectic Earth" show the medium's nearly boundless range

By William Jaeger

Ceramic art is not what it used to be. If you imagine pots and vases instead of 3-D printed sculpture and mixed-media experiments, you are very 20th century.

And that seems to be the point of "Eclectic Earth," where 13 artists using various ceramic materials and methods show just how edgy and unexpected the medium has become. You have to see this to really get it.

Start with something clear as day, "Should Have Been," a three-dimensional wall-hung bust of an old man that

emotes and demands attention on every level. Over two times life-size, this head pushes from the wall with sad, expectant eyes. The artist, Thaddeus Erdahl, asks that we confront the soul of this unnamed man. The skin is an array of cracked earth and skin-like surfaces, along with rougher, almost machine-like interferences, like the grid of holes across the cheeks and lips, as if scars from duct tape torn from the brittle face. On each shoulder, unexplained, is a military insignia, the rank of sergeant. The implications grow.

This outdoes what would be possible in mere marble or wood. There are complications of texture that add to the emotional gaze as well

as adding tactile interest. In another direction, Tim Rowan's staid wood-fired natural clay shapes are like weighty vestiges from a vast 19th-century factory. These shards sit mute, their crackled, brownish surfaces all about age and resistance. If each is geometric deep down, the forces of time have, it seems, torqued and tortured the remains.

The life-size six-cylinder internal combustion engine, "Static Fuel #4" by Steven Montgomery, seems so realistic you think it might even run. Not only are the black ribbed tubes, dirty steel exhaust pipes and worn screw heads reproduced with remarkable clarity, the patina reveals in part a metallic shine that is not what we think of as clay. Even the large pipe wrench next to this, gripping a massive hexagonal nut, is a savvy illusion of the real thing.

We are a long way from pottery here. Montgomery not only fools us by slyly replacing one material with another, showing off his technical prowess. He also asks what an engine really is, what it looks like, and why it's hanging on the wall as if it was art. Unlike a playful Oldenburg hamburger made of plastic, which makes you laugh, or a Warhol replication of a Brillo box, which makes you think, we have a subtle likeness that is about physical substitution. Which makes you smile.

Most of the show succeeds regardless of material, and sometimes clay mixes with metal, wood, and glass. The four small, surreal whimsies of Jill Allen are exquisite mixed-media works—cupcakes, I think—that turn on pure wit using fabric and wire as well as ceramics.

Colleen Toledano's delicate balsa frame box, "Smoke Screen," with its airy rice paper walls, encloses an organic trachea-shaped porcelain object that supports a tiny tree at the top, a sculptural illustration about smoking.

You can't escape wondering about the off-white series of sculptural objects that look like globs out of a spaghetti-making machine. Bryan Czibesz used a 3D printer that extrudes a porcelain mix to build forms that have at least vague resemblance to real things, like a statuesque



Bryan Czibesz works in 3D porcelain and polyethylene.

If you go

"Eclectic Earth: 13 Contemporary Ceramics Artists"

Where: Schick Art Gallery, Saisselin Art Building, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs

When: Through Dec. 8

Hours: Monday-Thursday 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Friday 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Saturday-Sunday noon-4 p.m.

Admission: Free

Info: www.skidmore.edu/schick or 580-5049

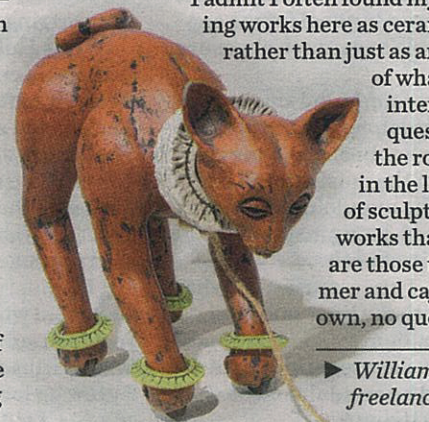
standing man holding something unexplained in his arms. The fact that these are formed and executed by a computer is more than novelty, I think, but the artist's deliberate craftmaking detachment and the relatively predictable surface and lack of detail detracts from the concept.

There is still a large contingent of traditional craft in the ceramic art world, three of the artists here show dinnerware or the equivalent. Gorgeous, well crafted, a little sly at times, and conceptually thin, they are easy to admire. And they belong to the larger conversation, for sure. In this show, though, they talk a different talk.

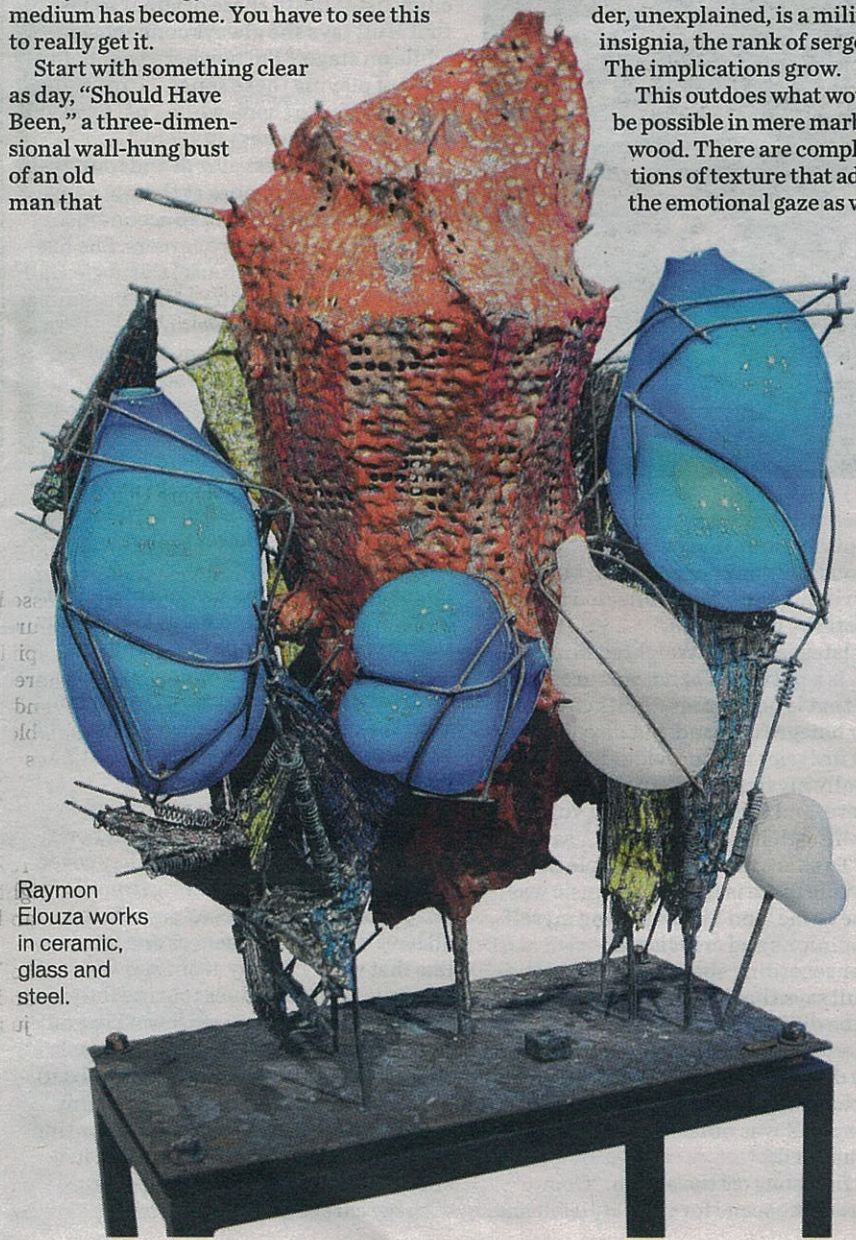
I admit I often found myself appreciating works here as ceramic objects, rather than just as art. That's part

of what the show intends, asking questions about the role of ceramics in the larger world of sculpture. But the works that succeed best are those that just simmer and cajole on their own, no questions needed.

William Jaeger is a freelance writer.



Melody Ellis' "Pull Toy" (earthenware, steel).



Raymon Elouza works in ceramic, glass and steel.