

art of the other

by Heidi McKenzie

A panel discussion and exhibition gave marginalized, female identified, and non-binary gender artists the platform to tell their stories and inspired others who want to expand that access.



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I grew up a beige kid in an otherwise monolithically white city on the east coast of Canada in the 1970s; I chose to dissect multiculturalism and race in arts policy in graduate school; and 20 years later curated my MFA thesis around performing mixed-race identity. And yet, until I heard Theaster Gates, the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) 2014 keynote speaker, stand on the podium in Milwaukee and ask an audience of 4000 ceramic practitioners to self-identify as artists of color and/or Black artists, I hadn't truly embodied what it meant to be "othered." When a mere 40 people stood up, I felt a landslide of emotions cut loose and tumble through my body. There I was, awash in the fresh wound of knowing I was on the margins. I felt called to play a role in shifting the paradigm.

Similarly, at NCECA 2018 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I was drawn to a panel entitled "The Art of Otherness" and also similarly, my experience of the panel further fueled my zeal to make a difference in the way we, as artists whom are othered or marginalized are afforded platforms to tell our stories. The panelists were drawn from the exhibition, "We Are Not Invisible," curated by Amanda Barr who brought together over 30 femme and non-binary artists. The art was about gender, sexuality, culture, religion, race, oppression, class, mental illness, physical disability, motherhood, societal demands on women, politics, and more. The artists' slogan, "Art is our voice."

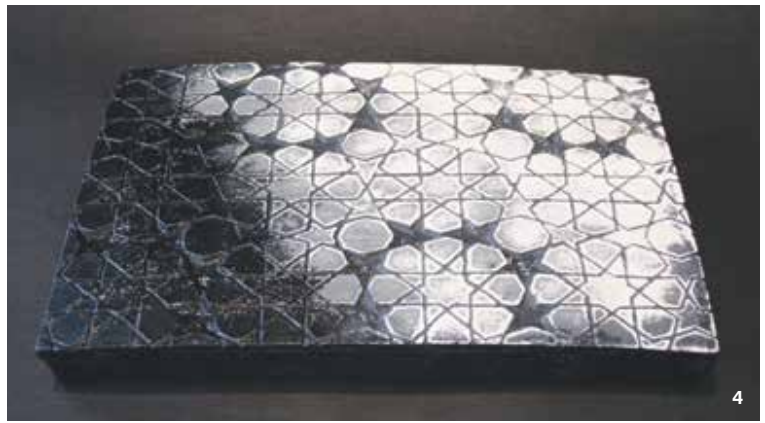
"The Art of Otherness" moderator, Courtney Leonard, navigated artists Raven Halfmoon, Habiba El-Sayed, and Mac McCusker through raw and vulnerable territory. Each of the panelists presented their work and spoke to the importance of push-back in the face of a perceived sense of complacency around the misguided belief that we are living in progressive, post-racial, post-marginalized times.

Resilience and Pride

Raven Halfmoon shared what it feels like to be a young Native American woman desperately trying to understand her indigenous culture and history that's been hindered through decades of domination, suffering, and genocide. Halfmoon is Caddo. The Caddo Nation is a confederacy of Southeastern Native American tribes. Halfmoon's ancestors are from Oklahoma. She studied anthropology and visual art, and her resultant body of work showcases often anthropomorphic, often disturbing self-portraits that portray her own, and her People's, resilience and pride. The work situates her within a landscape of ancient traditions and a timeline that stretches to the contemporary. She challenged the audience to eschew the media and logo-driven stereotypes of the American Indian. She called for a continued fight against cultural appropriation and pan-Indianness, reminding us that the headdress is not fashion, it is sacred regalia intended for the few. Halfmoon sees art as "a physical piece of time that acts as a context for humans and their past."

Identity-based Work

Habiba El-Sayed, a fellow alumna of Sheridan College in the Greater Toronto Area, gave the others among us a glimpse at the possibility of empowerment. During her BFA studies at Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, El-Sayed's practice shifted in scope in response to heightened Islamophobia. In her presentation she elaborated on how her work reflects the exhaustion, brokenness, and collective sense of guilt that her community is experiencing as a direct result of the fallout from the 9-11 terrorist attacks in the US in 2001. El-Sayed's work is identity-based and by default it is political. She noted that identity-based work up to this point in history has been largely white, cis-gendered, and male-dominated, and that we need to give space to the people we haven't heard from. The work exhibited at NCECA showcases her *Stain* series, where



1 Raven Halfmoon with her ceramic art. 2 Raven Halfmoon's *SAH CADDO* (*Ms. Caddo*), 32 in. (81 cm) in height, mid-fire ceramic, 2017. 3 Habiba El-Sayed working in the studio. Photo: Alia Youssef. 4 Habiba El-Sayed's *Abrasive* (part of the *Stain* series), 11 in. (28 cm) in length, ink-covered bisque, sanded for 30 minutes. 5 Mac McCusker with their *Policing Gender* installation. 6 Mac McCusker's *Transition Pending*, 24 in. (61 cm) in height, red earthenware, fired to cone 5.

geometry-laden, culturally specific patterned tiles are ink-stained and then sanded back. El-Sayed tends to incorporate performance into her work: the act of sanding would have been performed to audio newscasts that link Islam to terrorist attacks. She presented a video of herself performing making/breaking of unfired clay sculptures, with Islamophobic newscasts, where she froze or busied herself dependent on the content of the audio being played.

Self-love and Acceptance

Mac McCusker placed gender identity and trans discrimination squarely on the table. McCusker self-references in gender neutral pronouns. McCusker confines their sculptural practice to self-portraits, believing that they can really only tell their own story, “that being trans means so much more than checking off a box.” Their sculptural, figurative work tackles the bathroom laws in the US and the areas between male and female that they articulate as non-binary space. They also referenced the exhaustion that comes from constantly being on the defensive and of being forced by the media into boxes into which they will never fit. McCusker is an active proponent of the selfie on social media. They experience significant backlash and criticism for performing their identity in this way. McCusker wants to communicate to the world that these selfies are an expression of self-love and acceptance, and that “self-love is the most radical tool for revolution we could ever have.”

It was clear from the audience’s engaged response to the panel discussion in Pittsburgh that there continues to be a need for public platforms where the marginalized are given the microphone. Courtney Leonard urged us all to be mindful in our practice: “All clay comes from the earth. It’s a part of who we are as human beings. Our ancestors, in essence, are in that material. So be really mindful of how we are connected and how we translate it in terms of our otherness.” I was influenced by the confidence, competence, and compassion that I witnessed onstage at The Art of Otherness panel discussion. I continue to be moved in the wake of these artists’ bravery: I pitched and will be presenting a panel entitled “Decolonizing Clay,” at the Australian Ceramics Triennale in Hobarth, Tasmania, May 2019. Perhaps the most important question is, “Who gets to tell our stories?” The resounding answer is that the time has come, and we get to tell our own stories, with pride and dignity. All power to those in power who give voice to the others who walk among us.

For more information and all of the participants’ artist statements, photos, and bios, visit www.wearentinvisible.org/artists. To view the panel, visit www.wearentinvisible.org/exhibition, and follow on Instagram @wearentinvisible.

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