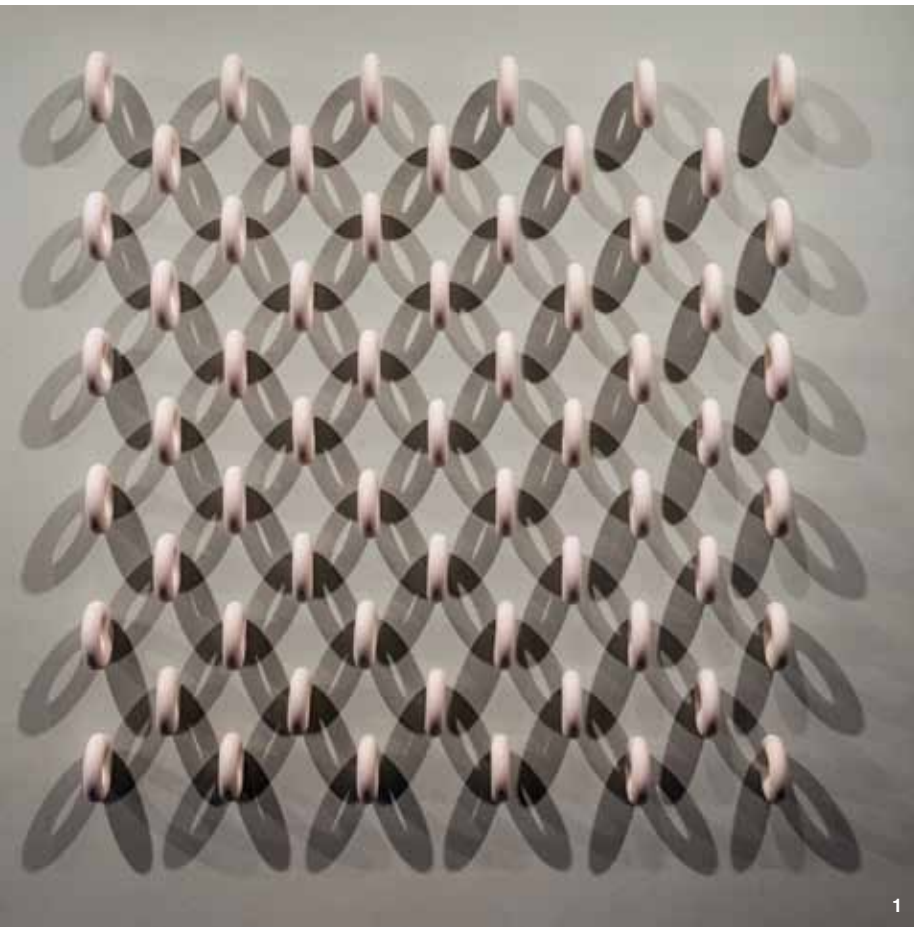


Flow

NCECA INVITATIONAL EXHIBITION

by Heidi McKenzie



This was my first encounter with Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and my time at the Milwaukee Art Museum (<http://mam.org>) was transporative. The building itself is a wonder to behold, flooded in parts with light and generous in its function to showcase art that's been made through the centuries. The 2014 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) ceramic arts invitational exhibition, "Flow," stretched itself over 250 feet of Santiago Calatrava's 2001 expansion space that kisses Lake Michigan's coastline with eyes wide open. The first object to draw me in was Beth Cavener's *Tangled Up in You* (2). The work depicts the dance of life between a hare and a snake. The snake's skin boasts an exquisite display of Japanese-style

tattoo drawings that tell a vast assortment of stories. Hung from the ceiling, the sculpture's sheer presence was arresting and evoked a formidable store of potential energy and emotion.

If Cavener's work provided the show's flashpoint, Del Harrow's *Air_Breath* (10) was the anchor. The piece consists of eleven white porcelain pots that, arranged in a continuum, seem to literally breathe into an expansion from one iconic form to another. The ceramics are one part of a triptych, along with a large graphite sketch of the multiple iterations of the shape superimposed on itself in computer-generated spirographic precision, and a video loop of the pot breathing (i.e. transforming from the narrow-necked vase to the full-shouldered vessel).

From the perspective of idea married to execution and form, the clear stand-outs were Harrow's *Air_Breath* and Jeffrey Mongrain's *Sound Wave Model for Milwaukee (Sculpted Quote from Santiago Calatrava, Architect for Milwaukee Art Museum)* (7). As surmisable from its title, the work was created specifically for this exhibition based on a series of works where the artist magnifies the pattern of a sound wave to mammoth proportions, approximately 45 inches in diameter. In this case, the pattern represents the Ojibway etymological root for the name Milwaukee, *ominowakiing*, meaning a gathering place near the water. The large black discus undulated with rhythm and flow. I would very much liked to have seen the whole hall written in his mysteriously compelling ceramic syntax.

Jarred Pfeiffer's *Torus 4* (1) captured a similar ethos as Mongrain's work. His equilaterally spaced grid of unadorned white toreaan vessels scintillated in the brightness, yet left me somehow wanting more. Akin to Pfeiffer's intricate shadow-play was *City* (15) by France Goneau. The work's reliance on darkness pitted against the lightness of negative space teased its viewers into filling in the blanks with their own public imaginaries. In this way I found the work, while elegant in its simplicity, to be brilliant in the way it drew in a participatory contemplation of the urban landscape.

Tsehai Johnson's *Swarm* (5) was a perfect storm of everyday clutter, neatly distorted and nearly replicated pouring vessels in a seemingly infinite array of disheveled order. In the artist's words, *Swarm* depicts the "clash between fantasy's perfection and the messiness of reality."¹ I found myself questioning the monochromatic aqua blue/green and white. Why use this color over all other colors, except perhaps a nod to the irrepressible popularity of blue. Installed in the spaciousness of Calatrava's light-filled corridor, the multiples appeared dwarfed in space, but at the same time the work challenged its viewers to find moments of fluidity in an otherwise repetitious quotidian life.

A discovery for me this year was the work of Rain Harris. Her piece *Dribble* (4) represented a spontaneity and freedom from convention. Its decisive, minimal use of ceramic content and oozing resin encasement of a bouquet of artificial flowers recalled the ceramic medium of glaze in a kind of joyful symbiosis. I could easily imagine this style of work tipping into the absurd, but Harris clearly understands where the boundaries lie, and she skirts their limits with deftness, insight, and thoughtful interpretation.

Chris Gustin's anagama wood-fired work was all about the tactile and the sensory cross-over between touch and memory. His larger-than-life vessels seemed to speak volumes about humanity's evolutionary ebb and flow—all within the subliminal realm. *Dimpled Vessel with Neck #1201* (3) easily treads into anthropomorphic proportions, and my only wish would have been to see



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1 Jarred Pfeiffer's *Torus 4*, each 4 in. (10 cm) in height, porcelain, 60 low-fire, slip-cast forms, 2013. Photo: Tom Parish. 2 Beth Cavener's *Tangled Up in You*, 6 ft. (1.8 meters) in height, stoneware, ink, rope, 2013. Cavener collaborated with Alessandro Gallo who worked on the surface design and painted tattoos. 3 Christopher Gustin's *Dimpled Vessel with Neck #1201*, 3 ft. 6 in. (1.1 m) in height, stoneware, anagama wood-fired, 2012. Photo: Dean Powell. 4 Rain Harris' *Dribble*, 19 in. (48 cm) in diameter, slip-cast porcelain, resin-dripped flowers, 2013.



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all of Gustin's displayed vessels evocative of the figure (animal or human) within this exhibitionary context. Regardless, it was an easy connection between theme and form.

Where I was more hard-pressed to find thematic continuity was in the works of Arlene Shechet, Billie Theide, and Elenor Wilson. Brilliant and technically superlative works unto themselves, I was puzzled at their inclusion within the whole. Such was also the case with Michelle Erickson's *Potter's Field* (14)—a conceptually compelling skeletal portrayal of the human love story that moved beyond

race, class, border, and gender. Perhaps co-curators Linda Ganstrom and Mel Buchanan's liberal interpretation of the theme *flow* was at the root of my disorientation. Culling works from the diversity of NCECA's membership and creating a cohesive whole is not a trifle task. Flow is one of those roomy ideas or concepts that could seemingly be stretched to fit virtually any creative output. Overall I found the curatorial premise that reached beyond the immediacy of the flow of water/liquids and the flow of energy held a certain strength of currency that contributed to the exhibition's overall success.



Chris Antemann's *The Paradise Chandelier* (19), while technically impressive, lush, and inventive, missed the mark as a part of the whole, as did, I felt Jae Won Lee's encased black porcelain flowers, in *Seize the Flower in the Mirror* (9)—an abstract and complex rendering of black chrysanthemums and asters inspired by a Song Dynasty poem that straddles Eastern and Western sensibilities.

Lauren Mabry's *Composition of Enclosed Cylinders* (6) constituted a study of abstract mark making with glaze and emboldened colors. The artist describes this abstraction as an "absence of representation" and yet, what I saw represented were a series of non-uniform three-dimensional Euclidian solid cylinders. The form itself provided the canvas—a trope of the ceramic artist. Even though the works were stacked in sets, Mabry seems to insist on randomness. I felt that the work, as a set of multiples, was somewhat haphazard and therefore begged more intentional order with respect to size, color, pattern or image.

5 Tsehai Johnson's *Swarm*, 18 ft. (5.5 m) in length, each cup altered, handbuilt, and slip-cast porcelain, 2013. Photo: Wes Magyar. 6 Lauren Mabry's *Composition of Enclosed Cylinders*, 38 in. (97 cm) in width, red earthenware, slips, glazes, 2013. 7 Jeffrey Mongrain's *Sound Wave Model for Milwaukee* (*Sculpted Quote from Santiago Calatrava, Architect for Milwaukee Art Museum*), clay, black iron, wax. 8 Linda Swanson's *Seep*, water, nylon, bentonite, salt, and red art clay, 2014. 9 Jae Won Lee's *Seize the Flower in the Mirror* (detail), 35 in. (89 cm) in length, in handbuilt colored porcelain, wooden case, wooden table, 2013. 10 Del Harrow's *Air_Breath*, 16 ft. 6 in. (5.1 m) in length, video, graphite on vellum, slip-cast porcelain, 2013. Photo: Peter Lee. 11 Ryan Labar's *Mihaly's Drift*, 10 ft. (3 m) in height, porcelain, 2014.





12 Tsubusa Kato's *Object*, 36 in. (91 cm) in height, pale blue celadon, porcelain, 2006. *Photo: Alexandra Negoita. Courtesy of Dai Ichi Arts, Ltd.*
13 Gerit Grimm's *Leda and Swan*, 3 ft. 7 in. (1.1 m) in length, wheel-thrown and assembled stoneware, 2012. **14** Michelle Erickson's *Potters Field*, 35 in. (88 cm) in height, slip-decorated earthenware, 2011. *Photo: Gavin Ashworth.*
15 France Goneau's *City* (detail), 27 ft. (8.2 m) in length, colored porcelain, glaze, grosgrain ribbon, thread, nails, mid-fire oxidation, 2011. *Photo: Jean Verville.* **16–18** Jeanne Quinn's, *True and Reasoned and Impure and Inexplicable*, 15 ft. (4.6 m) in height, porcelain, steel, wire, vinyl, paint, 2014. **16** *Photo: John R. Glembin.* **17–18** *Photos: Ken Yanoviak.* **19** Chris Antemann's *Paradise Chandelier*, 4 ft. 4 in. (1.3 m) in height, Meissen porcelain, 2013. *Photo: MEISSEN® artCAMPUS.*

Gerit Grimm was one of those artists who seemed ubiquitous at the NCECA conference this year. Her work has gritty rawness to its unglazed rich brown chocolaty patina. For this exhibition, she chose her modern-day rendering of *Leda and the Swan* (13). The story stems from Greek mythology and depicts Zeus, in the form of a swan, raping or seducing Leda. Here the intensity of lovemaking between mortal and god is intended to depict an epitome of energetic immersion.

Japanese artist, Tsubusa Kato offered up a stunning example of the supremacy of form over function. His work, simply titled *Object* (12), could hardly be interpreted as anything but the cleaving of an ice floe fashioned out of porcelain and celadon glazes. It stood complete in all its

flaws and imperfections. Nestled adjacent to the lake, I felt transported to the coast of Iceland, where I'd last meandered amidst the floes of ice.

Jeanne Quinn managed to create a monochromatic universe of abstract decorative motifs in her installation, *True and Reasoned And Impure And Inexplicable* (16–18). This piece was playful and inventive, and a veritable triumph of calculated whimsy.

I enjoyed the sense of motion frozen in time ushered in by the collective assemblage of works by Ryan LaBar (11). What's unusual about this site-specific installation is its lack of color. LaBar often painstakingly glazes each part of his mechanical, ceramic machinations in distinct hues. Yet for *Flow*, the artist allowed the forms



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themselves to tell the story. During the firing process the porcelain “settled” somewhat, tilting, slumping, easing into a comfort that belies the rigidity of the medium. LaBar worked with this technical happenstance and mounted his grouping of works from the least complex to the most complex on the gallery’s wall. The effect was like reading a story of transformation, progressing from left to right and from top to bottom, as if in temporal sequence.

The only unfired clay in the show was the work of Canadian Linda Swanson (8). Intended to portray the primordial stuff of the corporeal, *Seep* was a time-based piece that morphed and corroded with the incremental march of time as water seeped through mesh netting overhead onto a planar, clay covered surface, creating two crater-like, organically evolving sites of disruption. This piece, *Seep*, alive and restless, yet quiet and unpretentious was another one of the works, like Mongrain’s, that could have filled the whole space by itself.

Although I did find some of the works jarring within the context of the whole, all of the works were of a caliber befitting of an NCECA biennial invitational exhibition. In the end, the 20 NCECA artists showcased in *Flow* were a testament to the competence, capacity and diversity of excellence that sustains the membership.

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1 As cited by the artist in *Flow: The 2014 NCECA Ceramic Arts Invitational*, Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin, exhibition catalog, 2014, p. 31.

2 Ibid, p. 39.