



Heidi McKenzie. *Division*. Hand-made porcelain tile, ceramic decals, plexiglass, wood, hinges. 2020.
Photo credit: Dale Roddick

Disrupting the Canon

MAGDOLENE DYKSTRA & HEIDI MCKENZIE & HABIBA EL-SAYED & NATALIA ARBELAEZ

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In an exhibition and panel discussion scheduled for NCECA 2020, entitled *Disruption* and *Disrupting the Canon* respectively, Natalia Arbelaez, Magdolene Dykstra, Habiba El-Sayed, and Heidi McKenzie draw attention to the art world's ongoing tendency to marginalize artists who do not fit a Eurocentric, male, heteronormative worldview. Unfortunately, the relevance of this exhibition and panel discussion was made clear in a recent article by Garth Clark, an internationally renowned ceramic art critic, historian, and curator. On January 15, 2020, Clark published "CFile's Top 15 Male Artists: Ceramics in Fine Art" in his online journal (notably, two weeks later, it was removed). The article began with several caveats which were meant to explain the reasoning for following in a long tradition of separating out the top men in the field.

"We have two lists, one for men and another for women. This will cause a lot criticism. But, without this separation, only a few women would make the Top 15—not because they are lesser than the men as artists, but the market still discriminates; holding them back. Our top women artists in ceramics list is coming soon."¹

In attempting to answer the question of why women would need their own list, Clark identifies a well-known problem: the market still discriminates. The question is: why rely on the market to determine the "top" artists? If we can agree that this metric is flawed, why continue to rely on it as the rubric for notable art? Instead, why not use Clark's influence to amplify the voices of those who are continually undervalued by the system?



Another question that emerges from the disclaimer is why the list of women artists is “coming soon”. Instead of publishing both lists simultaneously, the list of male artists got priority attention, continuing to classify women artists as secondary.

Another question in response to this article is where artists who do not subscribe to the out-dated gender binary fit? This is not just an oversight. This omits a wide range of contributors to our field. As Audre Lorde wrote, “It is to make a point by choice.”²The decision to list top male and female artists necessarily excludes those artists who identify as non-binary.

The history of Western art demonstrates a multi-faceted approach to streamlining its canon: the devaluing of craft, the history of limiting educational opportunities for women and people of color, and the methodical omission of marginalized artists in publications and museums.³The four artists below use their artistic research to challenge the homogenized art narrative that has privileged those in power.

Claiming Authority

Natalia Arbelaez's work has always dealt with identity. She was drawn to clay for the ease with which she could model a figure. She uses her practice to research and preserve family stories and ancestral histories as an extension of herself. Documentation became a way to celebrate her lineage while learning it, as it was not readily available to her. As a Colombian American born to immigrant parents, Arbelaez has often felt that American history does not include narratives like hers, much less celebrate them. She has used her work to celebrate her parent's immigration stories, to speak of how people migrate to the United States, and to query who is allowed to be legal or historically given citizenship. Arbelaez consciously chooses to work with terracotta, a clay that has historically been viewed as inferior to “purer” white clay bodies, particularly porcelain. She often uses gold luster on her figures, highlighting the value of their stories. Occasionally, Arbelaez covers the warm terracotta with white glaze. This simultaneously references the history of majolica, which aimed to imitate porcelain by covering terracotta with tin-rich glazes, and the experience of immigrant children adopting the culture of their adopted nation.

Arbelaez also researches pre-Columbian and Latin American ceramics, a feat she feels called to. Throughout her experience in higher education, she felt these histories were often lumped together as pre-Columbian, Indigenous, and African ceramics, and given little attention compared to European and Asian ceramics. Working in this manner, Arbelaez found that her research and work filled a gap that included the histories of people like her. She realized if these gaps were to be filled, she must take the authority to do it herself. With that conviction, Arbelaez started the project of researching women of color who played an important role in contemporary ceramics.

Arbelaez proposed this project to the Museum of Art and Design, where she spent six months researching their permanent collection during her RESIDENCY. With help from the staff and curators like Angelik Viscarrondo, she went through the work of eleven women of color in their

ceramics collection. Her research focused on five women: LUCY LEWIS, KATHERINE CHOY, MARGARET PONCE ISRAEL, PATTI WARASHINA, and SANA MUSASAMA. She used their stories, work, and contributions to create new work influenced by these women. Arbelaez's new body of work proves to be rich in content, while also filling a gap of representation for women of color in ceramics and its histories.



Starting with Lucy Lewis, an Acoma Pueblo Native American potter, Arbelaez was drawn to Lewis' animal forms, color choices, and Mimbres influences. Arbelaez used these inspirations to create a narrative form that celebrates Lewis' legacy of daring to come to the forefront, while honoring tradition with the inclusion of her own innovation.



Katherine Choy has been another focal point for Arbelaez, who researched Choy's work not only in the MAD collection, but in places that they both navigated. Natalia was a 2016 – 2017 Rittenberg Fellow at the Clay Art Center in Portchester, New York, a ceramic center that Choy opened in 1957. Arbelaez feels a duty to honor and continue the legacy of Choy, who created a space that gives opportunity to artists such as herself, among others. Choy died at the young age of twenty-nine, a year after creating the Clay Art Center. Arbelaez believes Choy's name and history have not been as well known because of her untimely death. Choy's work could have been as prolific as TOSHIKO TAKAEZU, whose work is also in the MAD collection. Both women's work speaks to the style of ceramics in the 1950s: heavy, cut, and altered ceramic forms, strongly surfaced with painted brushstrokes. However, neither of these women is as celebrated when compared to their male contemporaries, such as Peter Voulkos and Paul Soldner, who are household names in the ceramic community.

Arbelaez incorporates the roles of critic, historian, and researcher into her artistic practice. By asserting her authority to fill in the gaps of ceramic history, Arbelaez challenges the notion that history must be written by experts sanctioned by institutions run predominantly by cis, white males. In order to see diversity in our histories, Arbelaez insists on the need for diversity in those who write our stories.

The Right to Self-Definition

As an Egyptian-Canadian, Magdolene Dykstra pushes against pressure to create identity-driven work, which can further exoticize her experience of the world. Instead of dealing overtly with issues related to her identity, her work references specific points in art history and subtly pokes holes in the old narratives surrounding those eras.



Dykstra's work is rooted in a pursuit of the sublime as a means of meditating on her position in the universe. Whether in the context of nature, the exploration of infinite space, or the impending chaos of climate disaster, the sublime experience is the moment where "thought comes to an end" and we are faced with all that palpably exceeds our control.⁴ Dykstra accesses this transcendent experience by using an aesthetic of cellular accumulation to visualize the vast numbers of the human race. She uses clay for its connection to artists throughout human history. This responsive material bears the memory of the earliest artists, who shaped figurines with this widely available medium. Dykstra also uses clay for its integral role in the development of human life, citing scientific theories which state that clay provided protective capsules for the development of the first biological proteins that ultimately led to the evolution of the first living cells.⁵ Composing her work primarily with unfired clay imparts these roiling masses with precarity as she meditates on the insignificance of an individual within the horde. What does it mean to be one human within 7.8 billion?

Barnett Newman revitalized the discussion of the sublime, which had previously been associated with Romantic landscape painting in the early 19th century. In "THE SUBLIME IS NOW" (1948), Newman wrote about an artistic

drive to make work from the artist's own feelings, rather than symbols from outdated legends. The Abstract Expressionists used nonrepresentational means to convey intangible emotions. Using scale to evoke the boundless, formless sublime, Abstract Expressionism rebelled against neatly packaged, easily consumed, increasingly mass-produced culture. While Dykstra is drawn to the use of abstraction to reflect on the elusive concept of the sublime, she points to problems with the story of the Abstract Expressionist movement, which continued in a pattern of dismissing unwanted individuals. Born in the 1950s, the narrative of this movement has upheld the highest values in Western society: masculinity, heterosexuality, and whiteness. PETER VOULKOS has been held up as a hero for bringing Abstract Expressionism to clay, translating the machismo of the genre into ceramics. Art history has retroactively raised the names of LEE KRASNER and JOAN MITCHELL, among others, into focus, but even this maintains a limited view on the emergence of abstraction in the mid-20th century.



In addition to the hyper-masculinity of the mythology around Abstract Expressionism, the notion persists that 20th century abstraction emerged in one geographical location: New York. For example, ALMA THOMAS, whose family moved to D.C. to escape racial violence in Georgia, made work that resonates with Color Field painters, ultimately using tessellated brushstrokes to create colorful, geometric compositions.⁶ During a time when younger African American artists were making work about their

racialized experiences, Thomas' "blackness" was called into question – as though abstract art could not be "black art." Nevertheless, Thomas refused to let her style be determined by what others defined as "black art." In her persistent exploration of color and abstraction, Thomas insisted on her right to self-definition.

The freedom of abstraction was also wielded by artists in the Middle East as a way to ward off Orientalism that viewed Arab culture as exotic and inferior. While there is a long history of Arabic calligraphy being used to decorate ceramic vessels and tiles, HAMED ABDALLA translated his training in Arabic calligraphy into paintings that used shapes and forms that alluded to words written in Arabic. *Defeat* (1963) demonstrates Abdalla's experimental approach to materials in his visceral response to the socio-political frustrations in Egypt.²

Following in the footsteps of Alma Thomas and Hamed Abdalla, Dykstra wields her artistic freedom, choosing an abstract language to engage in subject matter that does not limit her identity to one aspect of her existence. In referencing the complicated backgrounds of these moments in art history, Dykstra amplifies forgotten narratives reminding us of those who have been marginalized.

Considering Perceptions

Habiba El-Sayed's performance art, sculptures, and installations focus on negotiating aspects of her identity as a Guyanese-Egyptian, Muslim woman living in North America. Her work is ultimately about perception: the way marginalized people view themselves, each other, and the world, and, of course, the way they are perceived in return. Not only historically, but contemporarily, El-Sayed considers the power of perception, the gaze, and the lasting impact of the often distorted portrayals of Muslim women.

For centuries, art that was regarded as valuable was created by white men, for white men. It was their narratives and perceptions of the world that were accepted as correct, interesting, and worthy. Orientalism is perhaps the most distinct example of this. In 19th century Europe, art was not only a source of entertainment, but also a tool for propaganda. Luxurious silks, patterned rugs, nude women in reclined positions, and robed men with dark skin were considered simultaneously enticing, exciting, vulgar, and savage to the conservative European viewer. Some of these perceptions continue to permeate art and media today, although the

two-dimensional canvas has now taken the form of a screen. Arguably the most famous writer on the subject, Edward Said notes, "In films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigue, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low."³





In *Destruction of a Chaise Longue* (2019), El-Sayed challenges the hyper-sexualized, vulnerable, and oppressive way Muslim and Middle Eastern women have been depicted in art history and contemporary media. An animation of Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant's *Odalisque* is projected onto El-Sayed, while she mimics the ridiculous poses of the women depicted. Prison-like, the paintings hold the white-washed bodies of women of color, posing for the male gaze for an eternity. In the animation, the subject is removed from the painting, liberating the figure from the scene. The piece considers the inherent power of autonomy and the destruction of tools of oppression. The performance includes El-Sayed reclining on a

chaise built entirely from red earthenware. Much of her work utilizes clay's inherent qualities of plasticity and strength, but also its vulnerability and fragility. It is this duality that so strongly draws her to the material. In this piece, the chaise had to be strong enough to serve its supportive function, yet thin enough to be dented, slumped, and ultimately destroyed.

El-Sayed has also been exploring the distortion and flattening that comes with displaying complex subjects on a two-dimensional plane. With works like *SSSScreens* (2018), she considers different definitions of the word "screen" and uses the airport as a platform to examine the way black and brown bodies are perceived by authority, society, and themselves. The piece consists of hand-built *mashribiyyah*, intricately patterned privacy screens that function by providing a sense of anonymity for the viewer, allowing them to see without being seen. Her work considers the power associated with the gaze: the power in seeing and being seen, but also the vulnerability that comes with hyper-visibility. The installation also features a distorted funhouse-like mirror that forced the viewer to confront their own image, illustrating how these flattened representations can also affect the way we see ourselves.

El-Sayed's newest piece, *Insta Gratification* features a series of projected selfies over raw clay *mashribiyyah*. The work aims to challenge voyeuristic representations of Muslim women by reclaiming one's own image and narrative. The popularization of selfies and the democratizing nature of the internet have allowed us to control and curate our image online. What we choose to show the world and what we choose to withhold are rooted in body autonomy and consent. In direct opposition to oppressive depictions, policies, and religious pressure, El-Sayed chooses what the viewer can see. The screens partially cover the images, distorting the viewer's perspective. Further, the screens force the viewer into the role of the voyeur, peering through something designed for privacy to get a glimpse. However, regardless of vantage the viewer may only see that which the artist has chosen to show of herself. Because the screens will remain unfired, they are susceptible to cracking, breaking and changing throughout the exhibition. El-Sayed considers the parallels between her constant negotiations of her appearance as a Muslim woman and the fragile, ever-changing quality of the screens she chooses to build and break.

Confronting the Narrative

Heidi McKenzie challenges dominant power centers by confronting racial marginalization and the inextricable joining of migration and colonialism of her family's past. McKenzie began her ceramics career in 2010, engaging with abstract self-portraiture, throwing and altering bands of agateware on the wheel. Participating in Project Network at Guldagergaard Ceramic Research Center in Denmark allowed her to explore multiple-part mold making, as well as photographic image transfer. At first, McKenzie used imagery to more viscerally express the human body, her own body. In 2016, following the death of her father, McKenzie began to investigate functional pottery. Illness prevented her from working on the wheel, so she developed a series of slip cast porcelain *neriage* pots. *Neriage* technique relies on laminating different colored clays together, allowing them to mix into a swirling blend of the clays, referencing her mixed-race Indo-Trinidadian/Irish-American identity.



McKenzie's current work explores notions of archive and ancestry. McKenzie's 2019 exhibition, *Family Matters*, explores the juxtaposition of her mixed ancestry through archival photographs on abstract symbolic ceramic structures, such as children's building blocks and a pyramidal house of cards. The iron-rich sepia tone of the fired ceramic decals amplifies the sense of passed time and memory. This work led directly to a desire to research and pursue her Indo-Caribbean ancestors' collective past. McKenzie has created two installations in dialogue with one another that confront the atrocities and challenges of the South Asian Caribbean indentured worker.

After the British abolished slavery in 1833, there was a critical shortage of cheap labor to work the plantations in Guyana and Trinidad. The British "exported" a million Indians from 1838 to 1917 into indentured servitude in British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Suriname, Mauritius,

and Fiji. This new pool of cheap labor was sent by the shipload to the colonial islands to work sugar, cocoa, and coffee plantations. Living conditions were abysmal, and no better than those of recently freed slaves. The class and caste system so prevalent in India vanished in the New World. Single women were recruited in order to reach quotas: prostitutes, widows, abused run-aways, and misfits were often solicited or tricked into signing their lives into indentureship. If a woman arrived unwed, she was haphazardly paired with a man in the holding depots without regard to caste or religion.²

McKenzie's installation, *Illuminated*, literally sheds light on predominantly shunned women. McKenzie fashioned panes out of handmade low-fire porcelain that she presses onto plaster bats, and rolls to one-eighth inch-thick slabs. These porcelain panes are installed in hanging lanterns. Each pane functions to illuminate the archival photograph of an indentured South Asian woman. These women were often photographed in finery and likely paid for sitting. The images were used on postcards for the Colonial locals and tourists to send back home to show the "happy, wealthy, thriving East Indian community" in the colonies. Many of the images are literally labelled "coolie woman" or "Indian-type coolie." The term has its roots in the Tamil

word *kuli* that means wages or to hire. However, by the late 1800s, the word coolie had entered the Caribbean vernacular as synonymous with foreign “lackie” or servant.¹⁰ McKenzie shines a light on the cognitive dissonance between the “happy coolie” and the reality of their experience of oppression and slave-like status.

McKenzie is inspired by the photograph of her great-great grandmother, Roonia Rachedine. The back of the photograph offers much information: Roonia boarded the *Golden South* in Calcutta a single Hindu woman, and disembarked in Guyana, married to an Afghani Muslim man. She died at the age of 105 in 1936, having served her indentureship and birthed the artist’s paternal lineage that eventually migrated to Trinidad.



McKenzie’s other installation, *Division*, focuses on the larger picture of indentured life within the colonial context, on the plantations, with men, children, and white settler owners. McKenzie underscores the gross disparity between the workers and their masters through the suggestion of an everyday object, a Victorian room divider that might well have been in the very homes of the of the plantation owners. Handmade porcelain tiles with archival images of the workers in their derelict milieus are mounted directly on the panes of the divider, and backlit, creating the tension between servant and served and temporarily suspending the division between the classes and the racial hierarchy.

Using ceramics, McKenzie asks the viewer to consider, acknowledge, understand, and transmute in contemporary times the historical barriers of class, caste, race, migration, and colonization.

In preparation for the exhibition and panel discussion, Natalia Arbelaez, Magdolene Dykstra, Habiba El-Sayed, and Heidi McKenzie worked together to highlight overlooked histories, challenge a traditionally Eurocentric male perspective, and assert their right to self-definition. After the cancellation of NCECA 2020, these projects are being rescheduled for future dates.

Endnotes

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⁴ Morley, Simon. "The Contemporary Sublime." The Sublime, Whitechapel Gallery, 2010, pp. 12–21.

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⁷ Oikonomopoulos, Vassilis. "'Defeat', Hamed Abdalla, 1963." Tate, Tate, July 2014, www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/abdalla-defeat-t14314.

⁸ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p.287)

⁹ Giautra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, University of Chicago Press, 2014, p. 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xx.

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