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SUMMER 2015

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COAST SALISH REVIVAL

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art thrives in
British Columbia

BREAKING BARRIERS
WESTERN ARTISTS PUSH
THE BOUNDARIES OF CLAY

FUTURE STATION
ALBERTA BIENNIAL LAYS DOWN
THE LINE ON CONTEMPORARY ART

FEATURED ARTISTS
MIA FEUER, STEPHEN FOSTER, LEVINE FLEXHAUG,
TARAS POLATAIKO & BRIAN FISHER

Display until August 31, 2015

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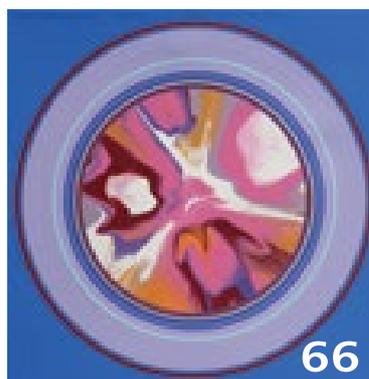
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Images: Mia Feuer, *Boreal*, (detail), 2013. Photo: Sue Wibican.

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On the Cover: Luke Marston, *Being Mindful*, 2009,
yellow cedar and yew wood, 16.5" x 16" x 6"
Photo: Kenji Nagai, Courtesy of Inuit Gallery of Vancouver Ltd.

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS



WESTERN ARTISTS ARE PUSHING
THE BOUNDARIES OF CERAMICS
IN EXCITING NEW DIRECTIONS

BY SARAH SWAN

ABOVE: **Monica Mercedes Martinez**,
Softening the Line, 2014, ceramic intervention



LEFT: Jeannie Mah, *I am Blue Mikado*, 2007, porcelain with photocopy transfer and underglazes, 9.4" x 4.3" x 3.5" (Blue Mikado dinnerware digitally altered by Jo Anne Lauder)

On a wintry Winnipeg day last year, Monica Mercedes Martinez knelt in the snow, squeezing red clay around the bars of an iron fence near her Main Street studio. The effect was transformative; the barrier became sculpture. She called the piece *Softening the Line*. The yard behind the fence had become a popular place for homeless people to sit or sleep, and she'd begun to resent the fence's formal significance – a hard, cold metal line that separated the dispossessed from the rest of society.

Martinez was born in Chile, but grew up on the Prairies. She is a gutsy artist, preferring to work with clay in its extreme forms, either completely raw or fired beyond all recognition. In her ongoing series, *One Man's Garbage*, she takes kitschy, mass-produced figurines and exposes them to extreme temperatures. Some survive, but most morph into new art objects, strange and luminous forms fused to bricks in the kiln.

When Martinez was an undergraduate at the Alberta College of Art and Design, a sculpture teacher warned that she would get bored with clay. "I'm still waiting for that to happen," says Martinez, who graduated in 2010 and then completed a Master's degree at the University of Manitoba. "I think I'll run out of life before I run out of ideas of new ways to interact with this material."

Martinez exemplifies what's happening in ceramics these days – old attitudes are giving way to fresh, vibrant voices. Ceramics is experiencing a renaissance.

Chief among the reasons for the renewed critical interest in Winnipeg is the strong programming of Tammy Sutherland at the Manitoba Craft Council, as well as the leadership of Grace Nickel, a ceramics professor at the University of Manitoba, and forward-thinking curators like Sigrid Dahle.

This summer, from July 30 to Aug. 22, Martinez will be part of the craft council's exhibition, *Play, Precarity and Survival*. Ace Art in Winnipeg is lending its exhibition space for the show, curated by Dahle. It will include five other Western Canadian artists: Jeannie Mah, Marcel Dzama, Brendan Tang, Seema Goel and Rachael Kroeker. According to Dahle, each artist resists or expands on customary ways of approaching discourses about ceramics. These are artists who have done away with the troublesome binaries that have dogged the field for decades. Gone, for example, are the old

BELOW: Grace Nickel with three porcelain columns from *Arbor Vitae*, 2015.



"IF THERE IS AN OVERALL TREND, IT'S IN EMBRACING DIVERSITY AND VERSATILITY IN MATERIAL AND PROCESS WITH AN OPEN MIND." – GRACE NICKEL

debates on art versus craft, functional versus conceptual, and traditional versus technological.

Regina-born Jeannie Mah, for example, has been creating delicate porcelain cups and vases for decades. But she has insisted on pulling what's typically regarded as a decorative art into the conceptual sphere by inscribing the work with images that carry personal or historical weight. For this show, the critically acclaimed Mah will make a multimedia installation in which ceramic objects are transformed via video projections.

Meanwhile, Vancouver-based artist Brendan Tang, best known for anachronistic hybrid sculptures, will exhibit a series of drawings. Titled *Swimmers*, it portrays exquisitely detailed blue-and-white china tableware. But each Spode, Ming or Royal Delft pattern dissolves into a rippling pool of water. Small groups of swimmers, usually parents with their children, splash and play inside these intricate historical motifs. Though Tang's hybrids have a large, charismatic presence, these drawings are quiet. They feel almost weightless, a comment, perhaps, on our lack of connection to the traditions that surround us.

Rachael Kroeker is an emerging artist and the youngest member of the Stoneware Gallery, Winnipeg's highly respected potters' co-operative. Her sculptural work, though, is made by slip casting moulds made from various sizes of rubber balls. Once fused together, they resemble conglomerates of molecules. But it just



ABOVE: **Rachael Kroeker**, *Stacked Bowls*, 2014, marbled and layered slip cast porcelain, and stain, each 2.8" x 4.9" x 4.9"

LEFT: **Brendan L.S. Tang**, *Untitled (Royal Delft)*, 2012, inkjet print, 12.2" x 18" (detail)

OPPOSITE ABOVE: **Seema Goel**, *Altered Images*, 2003, digital prints, stoneware and indoor, installation detail

RIGHT: **Marcel Dzama**, *Melting Snowman Canisters*, 2005, ceramic (produced by Cerealart)





might be her towers of stacked bowls and cups that steal the show. Her marbled series is the perfect marriage of organic form, function and beauty. Evocative of earth and sky, they demonstrate ceramics' seductive power.

Seema Goel, an interdisciplinary artist from Saskatchewan, has engaged a wide range of processes, from taxidermy to spinning wool to architectural design. But she frequently turns back to clay. "Clay," she says, "is generous, forgiving, teaches patience, involves alchemy and happenstance, requires trust, is the fruit-and-cheese plate of diversity and contradictions." In 2003, Goel made thousands of hand-thrown ceramic cups for an ambitious installation called *Altered Images*. The cups covered the floor in an irregular, organic form reminiscent of cell growth.

For the craft council show, Goel will use commercially produced porcelains and her own imagery. She is pursuing a Master's degree that seeks to connect aesthetics with environmental engineering, so is mindful of ecology and the permanence of the fired object. "I often wistfully admire musicians for the ephemeral nature of their material," she says. "If that note was off, it will eventually fade into the air. It won't end up in your 'and-this-pot-is-for-my-dentist' list because, crap, I fired it."

Goel's observation may be lighthearted, but it touches on several ideas important to Dahle's research. "There is a lot of humour and playfulness in this show, something that ceramics

is really good at," says Dahle. "I've been wondering if ceramics' ability to deploy humour is related to the fact that fired clay, in skilled hands, can mimic virtually any kind of natural or synthetic material."

Apparently, clay can even mimic snow. And Winnipeg-born artist Marcel Dzama's *Melting Snowmen Canisters* are certainly humorous. They elicit feelings of pity and, if you're a Winnipegger tired of never-ending winter, perverse joy. Produced in 2005 in an edition of 2,500, the trio of sad snowmen were designed by Dzama, but manufactured in China.

The choice to include factory-made objects in a ceramics show can be seen as a challenge to the handcrafted, care-in-making aesthetic so integral to many pottery practices. But it could also be taken as a tip of the hat to Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, the mass-produced porcelain urinal he controversially labelled 'art' in 1917. Dahle has begun to favour a revised version of art history in which seminal pieces of Western art, like *Fountain* and Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, are rightfully described primarily as ceramic art.

This is why words like 'renaissance' or even 'revolution' don't feel like hyperbole when describing the current state of ceramics. Not only is art history being rewritten, but according to artist and professor Grace Nickel, ceramics has finally caught up with the post-modern movement. The meta-narratives and strict compartments of material and medium have finally broken down. And, she says, while technologies like prototyping and mould making were long shunned by the ceramics community, a new generation of students is taking such new ways of working to heart. Still, traditional influences have not vanished. "It isn't all or nothing," says Nickel. "The old feeds the new and vice versa. If there is an overall trend, it's in embracing diversity and versatility in material and process with an open mind."

Nickel herself recently completed a breathtaking body of work called *Arbor Vitae*. Her large-scale sculptures are the result of two years of intensive study in China, where she learned from traditional masters how to work with Jingdezhen porcelain. But she also uses a new architectural technology called fabric formwork, which uses flexible fabric membranes to create sensual curvatures. Her sculptures combine the natural beauty of trees with the strength of classical columns. They embody the old and the new, the past and the present, and are emblematic of the category-busting ceramics movement she is helping propel. ☐

PHOTO BELOW: KRISTA GOVENLOCK

