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NO RULES

CONTEMPORARY CLAY

by Emily Schroeder Willis

It seems fitting for the Elmhurst Art Museum (www.elmhurstartmuseum.org), in Elmhurst, Illinois, to have shown the exhibition “No Rules: Contemporary Clay.” The museum itself is partially formed by the only single-family home ever built by architect Mies Van der Rohe, so it’s appropriate that a museum that valued this rare home by an architect who redefined architecture would exhibit work that redefines ceramic art. No Rules showcases 12 artists (Nikki Renee Anderson, Liene Bosquê and Nicole Seisler, Teri Frame, Michael Fujita, Chris Garofalo, Jeremy Hatch, Joseph Seigenthaler, Thomas Schmidt, Richard Shaw, Jay Strommen, Xavier Toubes, and Blake

1 Michael Fujita’s *El*, ceramic, 2008. Photo: Emily Schroeder Willis. 2 Michael Fujita’s *garden i-block*, 16 in. (41 cm) in height, ceramic, wood, dried flowers, 2008.



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE ELMHURST ART MUSEUM.

3 Chris Garofalo's *Vivarian—Place of Life*, ceramic and mixed media. 4 Nicole Seisler's and Liene Bosquê's *City Souvenirs*, 2011. 5 Joseph Seigenthaler's *Shel*, ceramic, 2012.

Jamison Williams) who have taken their material and explored it for its qualities rather than its function, removing the “rules” for how clay is to operate in art and the public sphere. Whether it is Richard Shaw transforming the material so that it looks like anything but clay, Nikki Renee Anderson photographing her abstract creatures in the stark Icelandic landscape, or Jay Strommen embracing all of the gushiness of the material, this exhibition crosses all spectrums.

Michael Fujita's architectonic-inspired works are instantly captivating from the moment you enter the museum. Their encrusted surfaces buzz with movement, like a swarm of worker bees hovering around their queen, but still maintain a degree of contained chaos. Additionally, I enjoy the slight wink to sculptor Donald Judd in the way he creates simple geometric forms. Fujita's play with preciousness and waste is fascinating; he combines his discarded scraps along with other artists' scraps to form the structure of these pieces. Each sculpture feels as though it could have been excavated from under Fujita's feet, with all his remnants embedding together to form these creations over time.

Teri Frame's *Pre-human, Post-human, Inhuman* clay performance is one of the most innovative uses of the material and truly the most removed from the “rules of clay.” During the performance, Frame covers her face in a mask of raw, white clay and shifts and shapes it into a wide and wild variety of creatures. I am constantly captivated by her transformation of the human body; you barely blink and Frame has transformed into a different character before your eyes. Her performance is such a beautiful metamorphosis of humanity, exploring the different notions of beauty and humanness spanning of thousands of years. It is the blending together of the myth, fantasy, and reality of humanity.

One of my favorite pieces in this exhibition was a large wall piece titled *Sampled Spaces* by Thomas Schmidt, an artist with whom I was not previously familiar. His porcelain squares hang on the wall like a disjointed topographical map, jumbled memories of space and place. It reminds me how even though one can recall an entire event, you don't always get the pieces in the correct place. It is a solemn piece but still carries a beautiful rhythm within.



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6 Thomas Schmidt's *Sampled Spaces*, (detail) cast porcelain. 7 Teri Frame's *Early Humans*, from the *Pre-human, Post-human, Inhuman* clay performance, video still, 2011.

Chris Garofalo's *Vivarian—Place of Life* is composed of dozens of highly detailed sea-like creatures contained in large Plexiglas domes with floors painted with army camouflage patterns inside and set on large Tonka truck wheels. They appear as specimens cataloged together in roving terrariums, creating a tactile narrative of aquatic or desert fantasies. While the sculptures are meticulously crafted, there are too many stories and pieces of information that don't quite overlap, leaving me without a way to piece together a greater understanding or larger narrative.

Walking into the inner corridor, the viewer feels more on display than the artwork. Joseph Seigenthaler's heads (5) protrude from the wall at a size dwarfing the viewer. As you walk, the feeling surfaces that all these characters, including Ralph Nader, Ron Paul, Jacob Rothschild, David Rockefeller, and Shel Silverstein, showed up to analyze you, rather than the other way around. Turning around in this same room, you see two other heads that differ sharply from Siegenthaler's pieces. These are roughly shaped, large heads supported on small wooden scaffolds. These two pieces by Xavier Toubes, titled *Dos Cabezas*, almost look like a work in progress, as if they just rolled in from his studio. Toubes' work feels fresh and, due to the way he formed these massive figures, the clay seems as if it is still malleable. These composed, austere, yet gestural pieces



8 Background: Jeremy Hatch's *Tree House*, porcelain, 2006.
 Foreground: Blake Jamison Williams' *Gammy's Runner*, 5 ft. (1.5 m) in length, porcelain, antique cherry dining table, 2009–2010.



9 Xavier Toubes's *Dos Cabezas*, ceramic, glazes, lusters, wood, 2008. Collection of Elmhurst Art Museum.
10 Jay Strommen's, *Tablets and Tokens of my Appreciation* (Tablet detail), ceramic and recycled glass, 2010.

provide a nice contrast to Seigenthaler's kitschy and tongue-in-cheek heads, which poke fun at politics and aristocracy in America.

Liene Bosqu  and Nicole Seisler have two areas of work on display: one of fired and cataloged work and *Works in Progress*, a wall of shelves drying work. These two artists have charted memoirs of Chicago and New York both individually as well as collectively with "Tour Groups," by impressing raw clay into their surroundings, cataloging their environment and putting the finished pieces on display. In talking to Staci Boris, one of the curators of the exhibition, I asked if she had gone on a "Tour Group." She had, and proceeded to tell me about her piece and the significance to her of making an impression of the railroad track outside of the museum. This conversation reminded me that cataloging an environment is about so much more than recording the decoration that embellishes it; preserving the stories impacting its inhabitants also plays a part, and I wish Seisler and Bosqu  had done more to capture that spirit.

Jeremy Hatch's *Tree House*, a massive, slip-cast, life-sized, porcelain tree crowned with a fort fills most of an entire room and seems to be a shrine to a forgotten space and time. It is a tree of impenetrable memories, of things lost and found again. It is beautifully constructed and I am completely in awe of the skill involved in such an undertaking. No detail is lost and the ghostly presence is breathtaking. Sharing the same room, Blake Jamison Williams has an equally spectacular piece. *Gammy's Runner* is a porcelain table runner placed on an heirloom table that Williams owns. The runner is comprised of hundreds of small, bone-like fragments that Williams shaped between her fingers to resemble her own finger bones. This haunting piece, like Hatch's, catches me between the desire to stay back, revering it, and the desire to touch it in my own hands, completely destroying the piece in the process.





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11 Nikki Renee Anderson's *Icelandic Garden #1*, archival inkjet print, 2011. 12 Richard Shaw's *Hapa*, 24 in. (61 cm) in height, glazed porcelain with overglaze decals, 1999. 13 Blake Jamison Williams' *Gammy's Runner*, *Great-Mother's Table* (detail). Photo: Tim Thayer.

The Elmhurst Art Museum, though small in stature, has created a big impression through the quality of its exhibitions. No Rules does a good job of showcasing contemporary artists and the ways that they continue to bend and cast off the rules for how a material, specifically clay, should be used or how an object made from that material should operate. I am excited to see more of the exhibits that proliferate from this hidden gem of a museum on the periphery of Chicago.

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