

REVIEW: 'Magic Mud' at Racine Art Museum a must during NCECA

By Rafael Salas, Art City contributor

March 20, 2014



With dozens of ceramics exhibitions installed around Milwaukee, here's one not to miss.

The Racine Art Museum has unearthed some spectacular ceramic works from its collection and displayed them with a curatorial gravity that is both contemplative and sophisticated. It belies the somewhat corny title, "Magic Mud: Masterworks in Clay from RAM's Collection." There will be many ceramic exhibits in the area to coincide with the upcoming NCECA conference in Milwaukee. Enjoy as many as you can, but don't skip this one.

Beth Cavener Stitchter

Run, 2006

Stoneware, metal, and paint

Racine Art Museum, Gift of Karen Johnson Boyd

Photography by Noel Allum

I walked into the galleries to find I was the only one there. I was glad for this silence. The lighting is moody, the walls painted in deep, earthy tones. This is a departure from the blazing all-over focus of the white cubes of other galleries. Indeed, from the beginning, the goal seems different from that of other exhibits. RAM's mission focuses on what is designated as a "craft" media, but this show demonstrates the validity of ceramics as a medium for current trends as well. The inclusion of ceramics in the contemporary canon of art is a divisive issue, and one that RAM does not shy from. One can see the bone-thin bowls of Otto and Gertrud Natzler next to allegorical sculpture by Christina Cordova. Seeing this range of the ceramic material in the functional but almost holy beauty and color of the Natzler's vessels and the conceptual and narrative possibilities in the figurative work of Cordova, one has the chance to examine and consider the breadth of potential contained in this primal medium.

As the viewer walks through the tightly curated rooms, a corner turns to reveal a gallery of monolithic sculpture by Toshiko Takaezu. These human-scaled works dot the gallery floor and are lit by spotlights, giving them a theatrical presence and power. They resemble cocoons, seed pods, or other natural forms. As I walked among them and read the wall texts, I found that in fact they were often named after constellations or had other celestial references, such as "Isis (Sirius)," and "Po Tolo (Dark Companion)."

The pieces were haunting and wonderful, poured wetly with multiple layers of glaze dripping downward and over each other. These monumental yet minimalist forms quietly evoked the sublime power of nature and the eternal. I'm still thinking about them. Other works in the show continue to describe allegory, myth and narrative. Beth Cavener Stichter demonstrates technical bravura in a stoneware sculpture of a terrified horse in mid-flight, fleeing an unseen menace. Titled "Run," the horse is mounted as if emerging from the gallery wall, rearing up to reveal that its front legs are in fact shackled. It demonstrates a connection between human and animal psychology and communicates both poetically. We share in the fear of what the horse is fleeing from.

More quietly, there is a wall displaying ceramic teapots of various periods and styles. Teapots are often considered an object that allows ceramic artists leeway to demonstrate proficiency and creativity, much like architects who design chairs. These teapots are fun and technically amazing. Birds stretch their necks as they transform into the spouts of the teapots, while other pots are abstracted into bulbous or angular versions of this traditional form. This wall rounds out the conceptual breadth of the exhibit, demonstrating the legacy of craft in the medium while also communicating the creative potential of it.

The Racine Art Museum is an interesting visit. Their collection contains America's largest contemporary craft collection, over 4,000 pieces in multiple craft media like ceramics, fibers and glass, as well as another 4,000 works on paper and sculpture. It is a small museum with grand designs. I look forward to visiting again.

Rafael Francisco Salas is a painter, an associate professor of art at Ripon College and a regular Art City contributor.