

## REVIEW

## Kohler's artist-in-residence program a remarkable success, with room to grow

by Rafael Francisco Salas, *Special to the Journal Sentinel*

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Visual art and Industry are in conflict. Mechanical reproduction homogenizes societies, diminishing the importance of handmade objects and inhibiting artistic expression.

But what happens if that conflict is transformed into collaboration? What happens if masters of industry work with the inspiration of artists to engender new ideas? This pairing may at first appear unlikely, but it's what has been going on for 40 years at the Kohler Company near Sheboygan. The result is one of the most important exhibits to occur in Wisconsin this summer.

"Arts/Industry: Collaboration and Revelation," at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, highlights 350 works from the Kohler Company's artist-in-residence program, a prestigious, internationally acclaimed program where visual artists work with master ceramic and metal technicians in the Kohler factory to create artwork over a period of several months. The exhibit is the apotheosis of this experiment.

Outstanding examples of ceramic and metal artwork emerge from everywhere in this show, which spans 14 galleries of the Kohler. Artist Ann Agee, who also designed an artistic bathroom in the museum, here riffs on blue and white "Delft Style" porcelain. Two large wall pieces book-end the exhibit. They depict snapshot images of pedestrian rural scenes surrounded by blue floral patterns and vines. These pieces combine the history of ceramics with a contemporary reflection on the landscape tradition. They are perfect examples of the residency and its mission in action.

Some of the strongest work in the show also required the most technical expertise. Melissa McGill displayed three life-size doll figures, smoothed over as if they had been tumbled in the sea like driftwood, edges and appendages worn away. They lean in toward each other as if sharing a secret. These works, like many others in the show, required extensive innovation to produce and McGill needed to work closely with industrial designers as well as technicians to create them.



JEFFREY MACHTIG

Young viewers take in a mural by Ann Agee in the "Arts/Industry: Collaboration and Revelation" exhibit at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center.

As I wound my way through this teeming exhibit, a consistency, perhaps even a sameness, began to emerge. Many works reflect on what is actually produced in the factory — whimsical commentary on toilets or urinals. Artists work with the same ceramic and metal materials used in the making of Kohler's industrial products. This could account for some similarities. However, there are also common, perhaps too common, tendencies in form and style. Works based on animals or the human figure in an allegorical context seem to dominate. I wonder if the reason for this comes from a curatorial standpoint, or if perhaps the tendency toward this subject matter is somehow written into the DNA of contemporary ceramics as a whole? In a show this large, this amount of overlap begins to appear redundant. Perhaps an expansion of artistic approaches or more curatorial diversity would enliven the residency program in the future.

Nonetheless, the iconic iron animal masks by Ken D. Little are singular examples, as is the militant installation of monkey warriors by Jim Neel, which I have discussed in a previous exhibit at the museum.

Though there are many truly outstanding pieces in the show, it is at times cluttered. Artworks are lost in large groupings, or are too distant to be seen. Awkward image lists need to be carried around in order to determine artist's names and titles.

Another aspect of the residency that comes to light in the exhibit is that artists are chosen who may not be proficient with the materials they will use. Painters and printmakers are often selected for the residency as well as sculptors. This adds to the creative potential available to artists, and is meant to bring a diversity of approach into the residency. Some artists have flourished with these new possibilities, but for others the artwork produced does not match the quality of their earlier endeavors. John Rappleye's ceramic antlered owls couldn't touch the majesty of his large- scaled drawings of similar subject matter, for instance.

The background behind the Arts/Industry residency is certainly as compelling as the exhibit itself. Museum director and curator Ruth DeYoung Kohler, granddaughter of the Kohler Company's founder, created the Arts/Industry residency in 1974 as its first art director. DeYoung Kohler worked with Ohio ceramic artist Jack Earl to develop the idea and Earl became the first artist-in-residence at the factory.

True collaboration was difficult to achieve at first, however. The workers at the Kohler distrusted that Earl could work well with the challenging technical processes or that he could handle the industrial equipment. They didn't think he had what it took to succeed in the environment in which they worked. There was pride and value in the skills that these workers had and it must have been a difficult transition to have an outsider enter into their professional setting. Earl had the advantage of humility, good humor and a positively dogged drive to succeed, however. During 12- to 16-hour sessions, Earl soaked up the processes of casting and molding his ceramic works and quickly won over the technicians he was working with.

It is this interaction between art and industry that creates the unique nature of the residency program in Sheboygan. My response to the show would be to ask if that collaboration might be

further explored. Ann Agee also created a mural of portraits of workers within the Kohler Company that still hangs in the factory. I wonder if some of the individuals who work there could also be represented with their own artistic voices? Are there other approaches to using clay or metal as an artistic medium that could still be investigated within this program?

Ultimately, the John Michael Kohler Art Center and the Kohler Company have created a lasting mark on the artistic landscape and should be deeply proud of the Arts/Industry residency and the legacy of artistic collaboration it has produced. My hope is that the next stage of its existence will include an expansive range of artistic approaches and a mission that is as progressive and innovative as when the program began 40 years ago.