

PLAYING WITH FIRE

in Paris

by Lilianne Milgrom

Louis Lefebvre knows a thing or two about ceramics. He sits at the helm of Lefebvre et Fils, a Parisian gallery that has been dealing in antique and Modern ceramics since 1880. Five years ago, Lefebvre opened the gallery up to the brave new world of contemporary ceramics.

For the gallery's recent exhibition, Lefebvre called upon art critic and curator Alexis Jakubowicz, who brought together eleven young ceramic artists from Paris, New York, Lima, and Athens to create an exciting show entitled "Tout Feu Tout Flamme" (All Afire, All Aflame). Jakubowicz admits that curating a show restricted to one specific medium was new to him, a concept that goes against the

grain of contemporary wisdom. However, after visiting multiple studios and considering the works of ceramic artists already known to him, he realized that through the primeval act of working with the earth, the artists were creating exciting personal interpretations of a shared, almost mythological story. Whether one turns to Genesis in the Bible or to the Greek myth of Prometheus, Man has been portrayed as coming from the earth and ultimately returning there. Jakubowicz expands this concept by viewing artists who master working with earth and fire as "contributing to the work in progress that is humanity."



At the front entrance of the gallery, Florian Bézu's *Météore* sits weightily on the gallery's floor, a soundless presence foreshadowing man's appearance on earth or perhaps presenting an eerie post-apocalyptic scenario. The streaked enameled earthenware glazes enhance the spherical form's primordial, naturalistic texture and evoke the violent entry of a foreign body into the earth's atmosphere.

Cascading down the wall to the left of the ominous meteor, Morgane Tschiember's beautiful *Skin* installation represented an inventive combination of clay with mixed media including fabric, varnish, and steel. This work is one of the artist's first forays into ceramics. The title reflects the magnified, pore-like effect of Tschiember's mystifying technique. The clay appears to have been fired on a backing of fabric and steel mesh, pulling apart as it shrank during the firing, resulting in a lace-like effect produced by hundreds of uneven ceramic discs clinging like lichen to their porous ground.

On the opposite wall, Mimosa Echard's untitled work is a delicate triangle whose base is a glazed coil of clay suspended between uneven lengths of steel chain. It gives the impression that the artist drew a thin line on the wall using ceramics instead of a writing tool. She is known for her light touch and her work has been described as "an unearthing and recording of a fragile kind of poetry."



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1 Dewar and Gicquel's *Mixed Ceramics (N°1)*, 35¼ in. (90 cm) in length, stoneware, porcelain, earthenware, 2010. Courtesy: Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris. 2 Patricia Camet's *Viracocha*, painted ceramic, 2013. 3 Robin Cameron's *Ribless*, 22¼ in. (57 cm) in height, ceramic, metal stand, wood base.



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Although it is becoming more and more common to find ceramic artists integrating different materials into their work, what is particularly interesting in this exhibit is that the majority of the artists represented come from other disciplines and are returning to and experimenting with clay, putting a fresh spin onto the oldest material of creative expression.

Jacobowicz thinks it is high time for art to get off its cerebral pedestal: “Ceramics is a way of doing, of making, and getting your hands dirty. It is the intersection of art and craft that is drawing these younger artists.”

The award-winning duo Dewar and Gicquel personify this trend. They have worked together in Paris since 1998, adopting a conscious hand-made approach to sculpture. By using unfamiliar materials and techniques they intentionally become amateurs, choosing not to be in full control of their process. This approach creates a tension in their work that is very appealing. The duo’s work in *Tout Feu Tout Flamme* is entitled *Mixed Ceramics (N° 1)* and as the title suggests, it is an assemblage of slip-cast, wheel-thrown, and found ceramic objects aesthetically unified by layered glazes.

New York-born Peruvian artist Patricia Camet creates slip-cast installations that reference both her contemporary environment and millennia-old artistic traditions. There is a sacred quality to her arrangements that spurs the viewer to both seek the source of the form and read the deeper spiritual messages conveyed by the iconography.

Camet’s work is presented in the gallery’s crypt-like lower level along with other artists whose works convey a



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sense of archeological excavation and meditations on returning to the earth. North American artists Ryan Blackwell and Robin Cameron are prime examples.

There is another subtext that runs through this show: the energy both consumed and alluded to by the alchemy of fired, glazed clay. One work that references this is the understated *Vas et Viens (Come and Go)*, by Chloé Jarry. The piece consists of subtle, slip-cast light switches placed on the walls at light-switch height. Jarry focuses on the inner grandeur of mundane overlooked objects and her minimalist works reflect the influence of her artist residency in Japan.

The Tout Feu Tout Flamme exhibition discards artistic convention. Jacobowicz explains his perception that artists who decide to work with clay “accept the scorched-earth school of art, to agree to a degree of violence or force in the midst of finesse,” an interest in transformation that takes many forms. The participating artists seem to have jumped into the fire without taking too many precautions. The unencumbered results exude a sense of the power of creation.

the author *Lilianne Milgrom is a multi-media artist and writer on the arts. To learn more, visit her website, www.lilianneilgrom.com.*



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4 Florian Bézu's *Météore*, 21¼ in. (54 cm) in height, enamelled earthenware, 2013. 5 Ryan Blackwell's *Mother's Bad Dreams*, ceramic, human teeth, resin, wood, hardware, 2011. 6 Mimosas Echard's untitled, 19¾ in. (50 cm) in height, enamelled earthenware, steel chain, 2010. 7 Morgane Tschiember's *Skin*, 6 ft. 4 in. (1.9 m) in height, ceramic, fabric, varnish, steel, 2013. Photo: Isabelle Giovacchini. Copyright: Adagp, Paris. Courtesy of Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris.