CERAMICS AND BEYOND

Seventh Biennale of Israeli Ceramics

by Lilianne Milgrom

A biennale is defined by high expectations. As a vehicle for displaying the very latest innovations and trends, one expects to be exposed to the crème de la crème of contemporary art. As ceramic artists around the globe continue to defy clay's limitations and push their material into new frontiers, clay's chameleon-like ability to give life and form to an artist's wildest imaginings has never been more evident. This was certainly true of the "Seventh Bienniale of Israeli Ceramics," held through November 2013 at the Eretz Israel Museum (www.eretzmuseum.org.il) in Ramat Aviv, which showcased Israeli artists whose work fit within this year's theme "Imprinting on Clay: Cultural Memory in Israeli Ceramic Art." The spacious and modern pavilion dedicated to the Ceramics Biennale at the Eretz Israel Museum reflected a young, prosperous, and technologically savvy nation, well ensconced in the 21st century.

The works of the represented artists displayed an uncommon creativity and stylistic breadth. Giant vessels stood like sentinels as mobiles floated from the ceiling above pedestals sporting tiny figurines that were dwarfed by billboard-sized wall pieces. Translu-

cent slivers of porcelain shared the limelight with crude stoneware sculptures; crackled, encrusted glazes competed with impeccably airbrushed surfaces. Beside a suspended earthenware stool, contorted altered forms lay within reach of sculpted torsos inlaid with words and symbols. Artists looked beyond their base material to incorporate audio and video elements, found objects, wood, wire, leaves, porcupine quills, photography, and embroidery.

As a group, the artists displayed a high level of sophistication, and the works paid great attention to a polished aesthetic based on layered conceptual premises. Interestingly, two notable works both featured seating arrangements. Anya Kirzner's *Around the Table* (4–5) presented a dining table with six place settings, five of which featured altered and distorted plates. The sixth place setting was replaced by a video subtly projected onto the table, showing the artist's hands going through the motions of distorting the other five plates. It is rare that we see the physical artistic process that formed the ceramic object we are looking at. The combination of the static, distorted plates together with the action of distortion was mesmerizing.

Hadas Tirosh and Ari Fisher's installation *Behold How Good and How Pleasing* (2–3) consisted of a dozen unfired stoneware chairs set around a non-existent table. The artists chose to replicate the archetypal Israeli bent plywood chair harking back to the country's founding days. The catalog aptly describes the work as a phantom installation. Being unfired, the work is vulnerable, transient, and the haunting absence of the table conjures communal meals whose partakers have passed on and passed through.

1 Exhibition overview featuring the work of Boris Katz in the foreground. *Photo: Leonid Padrul.*
2–3 Hadas Tirosh's and Ari Fisher's *Behold How Good and How Pleasing*, stoneware, mixed media.

4–5 Anya Kirzner's *Around the Table*, ceramic, video, mixed media.
6–7 Efrat Eyal's vessels from the *Artwife Project Series*, slip-cast ceramics.

8–9 Ami Drach's and Dov Ganchrow's teapot cross sections. **8** *Photo: Leonid Padrul.* **10** Liran Kahana's *Personal Mythology*, stoneware slabs.

Efrat Eyal's vessels (6–7) appear at first sight to be a grouping of classical Greek vases. Upon closer inspection, one sees that the artist has substituted the classic Greek athlete design with a repetitive pattern of naked women undertaking mundane household chores such as cooking and ironing. These works, from the *Artwife Project Series,* have another twist: the seemingly classic shapes are in fact made up of molds taken from forms found in any modern home. Ami Drach and Dov Ganchrow have similarly usurped the common teapot form to create a stunning line up of diminishing teapot silhouettes made up of narrow cross-sectioned teapots (8–9). These teapot slices offer up the vulnerable inner life of the forms, whose functionality is no longer relevant.

Liran Kahana's *Personal Mythology* (10) was one of the few works involving narrative, illustrative surface decoration. Her wall-mounted, undulating stoneware slabs were appealingly carved with free-association symbols and figures. The monochrome naïve imagery brought to mind prehistoric cave drawings, a visual rendering of the artist's subconscious memories.

With over 60 participating artists, Israel's ceramics biennale encompassed all manner of ceramic artistic practice. Several of the works referred to the Holocaust while others alluded to Israel's militaristic character, reminding the viewer of the show's cultural context. Yet the biennale conveyed a keen intellectual undertone and a sense of urgency to break the barriers of conventionality.

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