

ELASTIC AUTHENTICITY

MARCH 25–MAY 29, 2011



ELASTIC AUTHENTICITY CURATORIAL STATEMENT

BY SUSAN BEINER & DARIEN JOHNSON

Conversations about art and trends currently taking place in our field were the impetus for developing this exhibition. Topics we discussed revolved around studio practice, the introduction of new technologies, development of content and current ideas being explored by various artists. Through these conversations we became interested in collaborating on a project, and after considering various formats our goal became to organize an exhibition of artists under a conceptual framework focused on similar ideas. Technological developments have had an increasingly significant impact on contemporary life. Realizing that this was a common concern being addressed in our work and the work of others in the field we decided on this as the subject matter to be addressed in the exhibition. Other than the actual use of clay as a medium, we set aside any technical relationships being utilized by the artists and looked to work that explored ideas concerning technology and its impact on society, culture, and perceptions of reality. We found ideas being explored using a range of processes and formats.

In his book *The Great Good Place* (1989), Ray Oldenburg coined the term "third place." He identified three common places of social interaction, all of which exist in physical reality. The first place was home, the second was work, and the "third place" could be a variety of venues including parks, pubs, coffee shops, etc. These informal places for social interaction build community and social connections. The importance of these venues is exemplified in the popularity of the sitcom *Cheers* which ran from 1982 to 1993. While these places continue to hold importance in our society, the Internet is in large part replacing the physicality of the "third place."

As social networking sites such as Facebook, Myspace, and Second Life continue to gain in popularity, the time we spend in "third places" that require our physical presence decreases. We can create new identities, blend reality with fantasy, and connect with people without fear of judgment. For some, these virtual interactions satisfy the inherent need for social connection, but lacking gesture, facial expression, body language, and touch we are experiencing a fraction of a social engagement that would otherwise require our physical presence.

The creation of virtual worlds is a product of technological developments, and advancements in technology also increase our ability to manipulate real environments.

Engineering techniques allow us to confront nature and shape our landscapes to better fit our growing need for space. While this is not a new trend with our relationship to land, computer modeling and other advancements better allow us to predict engineering outcomes and make more drastic changes at an increasing rate of efficiency.

As we expand, the visual landscape is littered with networks and structures that allow us to engage with technology without interruption. Power lines, cell phone towers, and satellite dishes have become common elements in our daily perceptual experience. Engaging with nature itself is now an act of tourism and the majority of people are left experiencing it through the lenses of others, relying on images, descriptions, and video to formulate an understanding of reality. Contemporary life becomes dependent on the information we gather from media and the objects industry produces.

The nature of industry allows for the repetition of objects, and new processes remove us from immediately engaging with material. In response, artists are reevaluating studio processes and materiality, while exploring ideas of over-abundance, perceptual complexity, and a society enveloped in an increasing rate of change.

As we navigate life we are affected by the spaces in which we reside as well as the objects we connect with. Tools have become more than mere extensions of our hands and bodies. They currently allow us to gather, manipulate, and store information, becoming an extension of and expanding the capabilities of our minds. As this happens we form stronger bonds with the intimacy and solidarity of the singular object, which also translates into the potential for an art object to resonate with its viewer.

With the incorporation of new techniques and technologies into studio practice, and a new found awareness of space and site specific context, installation art has become a prominent format of artistic expression. Installation art draws influence from all facets of our environment and, in a way, resists definition. Impermanence, changeability, context, and dependence on documentation as its only physical evidence all contribute to its ambiguity. Installation exists in time and the dialogue happens between the space and the audience. While we often only consider physical spaces, the possibilities are much more limitless, from galleries, unconventional spaces, to digital or even the World Wide Web. Installation has few boundaries.

Technology occupies the background and foreground, which is Elastic Authenticity. It is propulsive to art making, and enables us to achieve parallel visions by generating connections through access of information. We are receptive to new ideas with an easily stretched or expanded awareness, nevertheless returning to what we know as tangible. The implements of technology feed our awareness, forcing us to discern between real and unreal. We are influenced by the ambiguity of new realities through the manipulation of every aspect of our environment – sound, space, light, and touch.

PLASTICITY ELASTICITY AND WILL

ESSAYIST GLEN R. BROWN

For ceramics, plasticity has long been more than a material quality; it has been the anchor of an ethos. The physics of plasticity makes moist clay a medium capable of retaining almost any shape that might be imposed upon it. This capacity easily incites metaphor, as when we speak of those 'plastic arts' that include not only disciplines that actually utilize plastic materials but also those, such as drawing, that only figuratively involve the shaping of matter. Through subtle transition from the literal to the figurative, plasticity underlies and endorses the primitive image of the ceramist as demiurge, a shaper of the physical world who employs his or her bare hands to wrest from clay both the kinds of forms that encapsulate a history of human industry and those that unveil the new through the power of human imagination, innovation and drive to define the future. The quality of plasticity seems to assure a primal relationship between human being and clay, providing a means for the former to invest itself in the materiality of the latter as naturally and indelibly as weather patterns write their histories in the xylem rings of trees.

The metaphorical connotations of plasticity seem to extend so logically from the material nature of clay that alternatives are bound to appear artificial. But what would it be like if a material property different from plasticity were to become the basis of metaphor in ceramics? What if that property were elasticity, a quality that clay as a substance does not possess? How would that change conceptions of clay and the activity of the ceramist? The old metaphor of plasticity bestows on clay the role of

obedient emissary of the human will to preservation, permanence, and even immortality. The ceramist appears like the Plateosaurus that left its footprints—the traces of its general existence but also the evidence of its individual being (its height, weight, and even the eccentricities of its gait)—fossilized in the prehistoric mud of a Triassic riverbed. But the ceramist seems to exceed the dinosaur by linking his or her imprints unmistakably to volition. Impression of the material signals expression of the will.

But what if the traces of that will were erased as soon as they were expressed? What if the surface of the ceramic object, rather than yielding itself up eternally to the imprint of the maker's will, were conceived as elastic? What if that surface were experienced as stretching on impact then rebounding and returning the pressure of the maker's mind with equal and opposite force?

The metaphor should not be difficult to grasp in an age when advanced technology has begun to work its influence back on the mind as if that technology were autonomous, even natural, rather than human in origin. Artificial intelligence, robotics, genetic engineering and a host of other disciplines that once could not even have been imagined have seized the matter of our world and infused it with the attributes of synthetic mind. This new effect of mind is quite unlike the imprint left by human beings on natural forms in the past. It is not a consequence of plasticity. It no longer constitutes a physical or even metaphorical shaping of nature to embody and preserve the human will. It does not exhaust the energy of that will in the process of commemorating it and then, like rilling left by the fingers of a potter on the interior of a jar, ever after serve as a monument to human influence over matter.

On the contrary, the new synthetic mind receives the energy of the human will as if it were kinetic energy, and then directs the momentum immediately back upon its agent. Like a rubber band under the influence of its own resilience, the will now stretches far out into the world and rebounds with virtually all of its initial force. In the process, our actions on the world cease to act as a mirror of ourselves and instead seem to activate the wheels of an anonymous, alien mind that works its subtle influence over us.

The ceramist who acknowledges this technologically inspired sea change in the relationship between human and world, is bound to find the plasticity of clay problematic as a basis for broad metaphors of contemporary experience. In response, he or she might seek to reduce the effects of plasticity by, for example, adopting techniques of slip casting rather than hand building, employing found rather than personally fashioned objects, or introducing non-plastic media alongside clay. Ambivalence toward plasticity might lead the ceramist to transfer certain aspects of a once literally plastic process of manipulating form – that initial stage of playing with possibilities that involves hands tentatively on clay – to a virtual process sustained by computer technologies.

The raster-based or vector-based environments provided by CAD design software may in some respects seem to mimic the natural responsiveness of clay to manipulation by the artist, but of course they are not in the least natural, plastic media. Created by humans, these environments begin to appear natural only because the encoding that brings them into being precedes and seems separable from the encoding that manipulates them. They impart, while the screen is still blank, the impression of infinite possibility, and so mimic the infinitude of the universe. Despite this illusion, however, CAD programs remain products of software designers. They do not constitute nature but rather the human mind in the guise of nature – the opposite of nature in the guise of the human mind, to be sure, but still something far short of a truly independent reality that lies waiting passively to receive the marks of the will.

Confusion of mind and nature has no doubt accelerated in step with technology's infiltration of the body since the middle of the twentieth century. Through genetic engineering the body is no longer so firmly bound to fate, nanotechnology seems poised to outperform some of the body's own immune-system mechanisms, and bionics promises to render even our most complex organs replaceable. Eyes, for example, are soon to be restored to the blind through digital video cameras, microprocessors, and

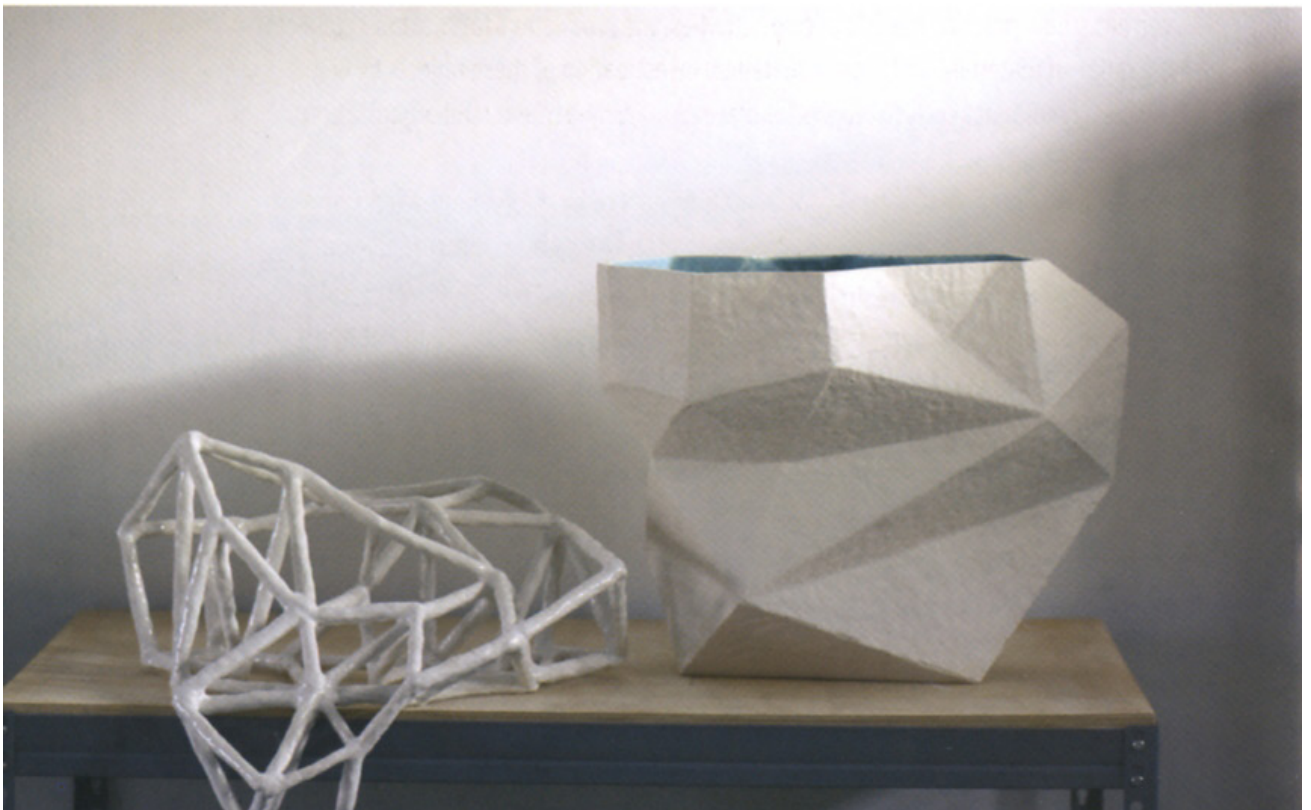
implants that stimulate neurons in the retina. If the eye provides our most important sensory interface with the real, then such technology clearly stretches the boundaries of authentic experience.

The concept of authentic experience has become even more obviously elastic through the introduction of virtual worlds such as Second Life, with their populations of avatars that pose challenges to traditional concepts of representation and personhood. Self-portraiture formerly implied a likeness, and through that likeness intimations of the essence of oneself. But in the code strings of virtual worlds mimesis has given way to something that begins to seem more like genesis. By means of an avatar the mind of a creator contemplates itself, not inwardly nor as reflected externally in plastic form but rather through the actions of an ostensibly autonomous inhabitant of something vaguely like nature. As it augments its virtual experience, the avatar seems to acquire the ability to look back at its creator through alien eyes and with a will of its own. Plastic expression, as a consequence, falters as a concept in the virtual realm.

This exhibition takes as its title a phrase indicative of the changing character of the real in a world increasingly dominated by virtual experience, by information rather than organicity, and by a rebounding human will that presents itself as if it were a naturally given state of being. Acknowledging that effect of being but declining to treat it as a medium for personal expression, the artists of Elastic Authenticity set aside the ancient metaphor of plasticity and introduce clay to the twenty-first century. Nearly a hundred years ago, Fernand Léger urged artists to abandon ties to organic nature and instead to embrace the characteristics of the manufactured object, which had come to encompass quotidian experience. Since then, technology has raised the world to another plane characterized not only by different dimensions but also, and more importantly, by a changed understanding of what dimensions are. The new challenge to artists is not to account for a shift in the real from organic to synthetic but rather to acknowledge the more profoundly consequential acquisition of elasticity by the real and to consider all that it might mean for the human will.



DEL HARROW





(top left) *Knot* from "Interiors and Volumes," 2007, Oak

(top right & bottom left detail) *Cabinet* from "Interiors and Volumes," 2011, Clay and oak plywood

My current studio practice consists of two activities: the production/fabrication of objects from a range of materials, and then, a sustained investigation of these objects by way successive experiments with strategies for placement, arrangement, and organization.

Objects emerge from a confluence of form, material and process. I'm interested in the manifold investigations of historically "Modern" sculpture – cubism, constructivism, suprematism – but also objects from the point of view of material culture. An object's subtle textures and marks contain information about methods of fabrication – manual or mechanized production – and by extension the scale of economy, culture, and the objects station within it.

My installations borrow organizational strategies from both (art) historical composition and vernacular space. Game fields, farms, domestic interiors, forests; a variety of spaces share similar abstract forms: planes, mesh-works, surfaces, and hierarchies. In particular, recent installations have been inspired by the dimensions of my own domestic space – a mid 90's ranch style house – a horizontal cube which conceals a sprawling basement: an expansive space below.



SUSAN BEINER

My current work displays a shift to ideas about installation, covering an expanse of space. Installation allows me to reassemble shapes, attributes, qualities and quantities on a much larger scale suggesting an essential connection to our physical space. My interest is fueled by elements of layering, fragmentation, multiplication, juxtaposition and complication.

What is now organic, a natural derivative, is manufactured by artificial means.

What is organic is synthetic and what is synthetic is organic.

As our environment is changing and our resources depleting our plant structures are also adapting as the energy of color is being released. By controlling plants and their growth factors; their outcomes and specific effects, we are promoting more hybrids. As new plants are germinating, we are increasing the potential for negative outcomes, (mutants) as we get further from the natural growth, engineering completely artificial cells. What we once made to be in an artificial environment has been reproduced repeatedly and lost its initial pigment, producing sterility.

(top left) *Germinating II*, 2011, Porcelain, rubber and thread resin

(bottom left) *Germinating*, 2011, Porcelain, plexi-glass rods, rubber, foam and thread

(below) *Polyunsaturated II*, 2010, Porcelain foam and polyfill



MATHEW MCCONNELL

All ideas are stolen, in your work as they are in mine. This has been true through all generations and across all areas of production. Even that which is perceived to be startlingly new, has its origins in the adherence to a fundamental creative cycle. In current art practice, explanation of this cycle can be reduced to the following three stages:

OBSERVATION

All new works begin by observing existing (dispersed) artworks. Recently, firsthand observation has become a diminished concern in understanding contemporary art. The web browser now serves as a guide to all significant developments in artistic production. Geographies and accessibility are reduced, and prominent trends can be witnessed in real time on the internet.

TRANSFORMATION

In every way of transforming the observed, a new work is created. Variances in tools, processes, and materials (and other, more nebulous factors) offer limitless opportunities for the renewal of observed works. Remaking is making, and transformation is inevitable. Manipulating the fidelity of our reproductions has become a primary means of generating unique forms.

DISPERSION

That which has been observed and transformed can be regarded as a complete form. Institutional complicity in the display of these forms provides finality and authority. Propagation of the work beyond the exhibiting institution through publications and web-based media are standard practice. Successful works are those most widely observed.

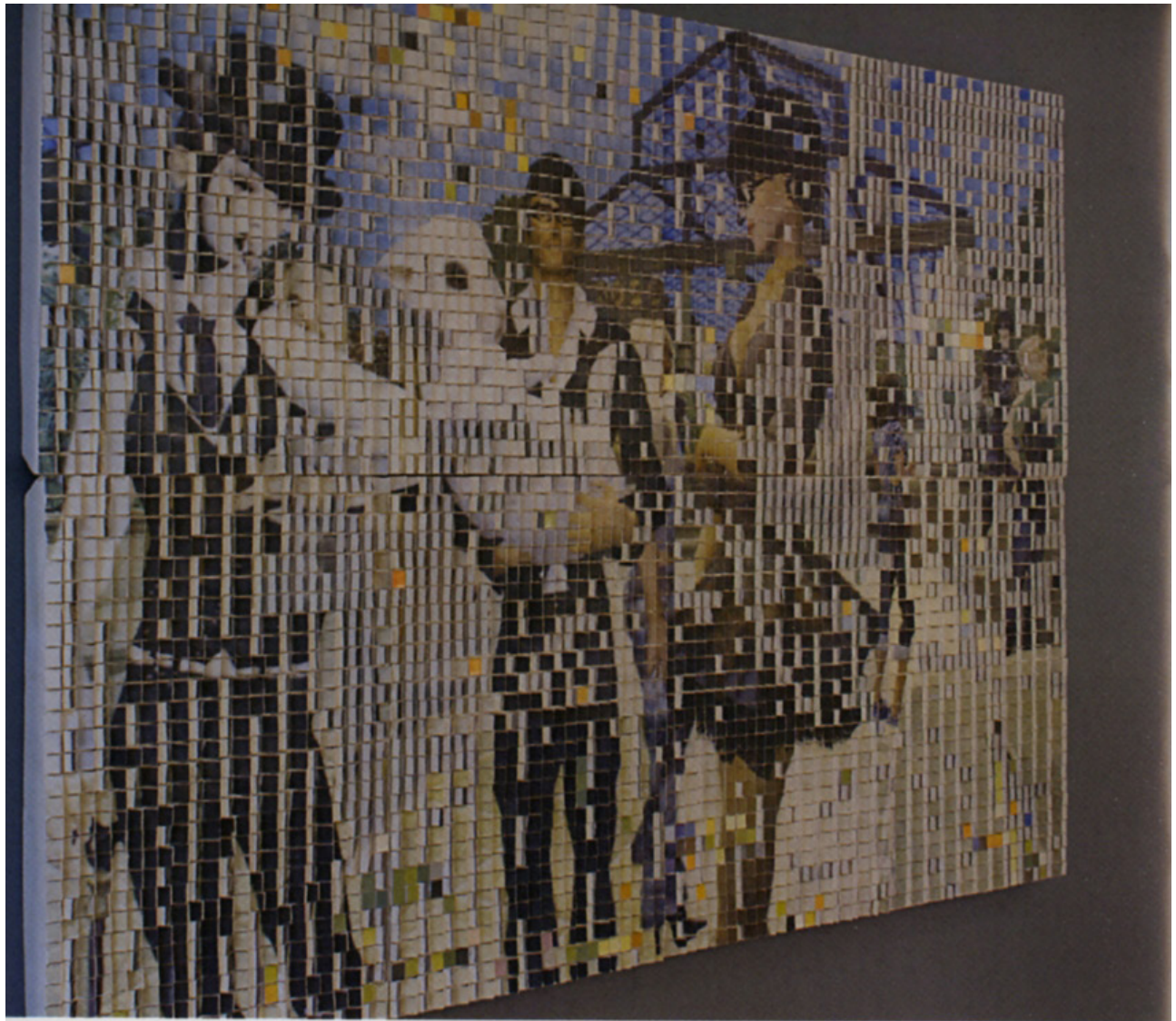
Although the basis for this cycle has remained unchanged over time, recent technology has provided the possibility of dramatically increasing the frequency and reducing the duration of a single creative cycle. This acceleration has altered the fundamental relationship between artists and their responses to the work of their peers.

Fear of a fallout has run rampant. While many believe the cycle cannot bear this unattenuated acceleration, we place our continued trust in the soundness of a cycle that has served so many in the past.

Mathew McConnell, *Many Things New and More of the Same*, 2010, Raku-fired red earthenware

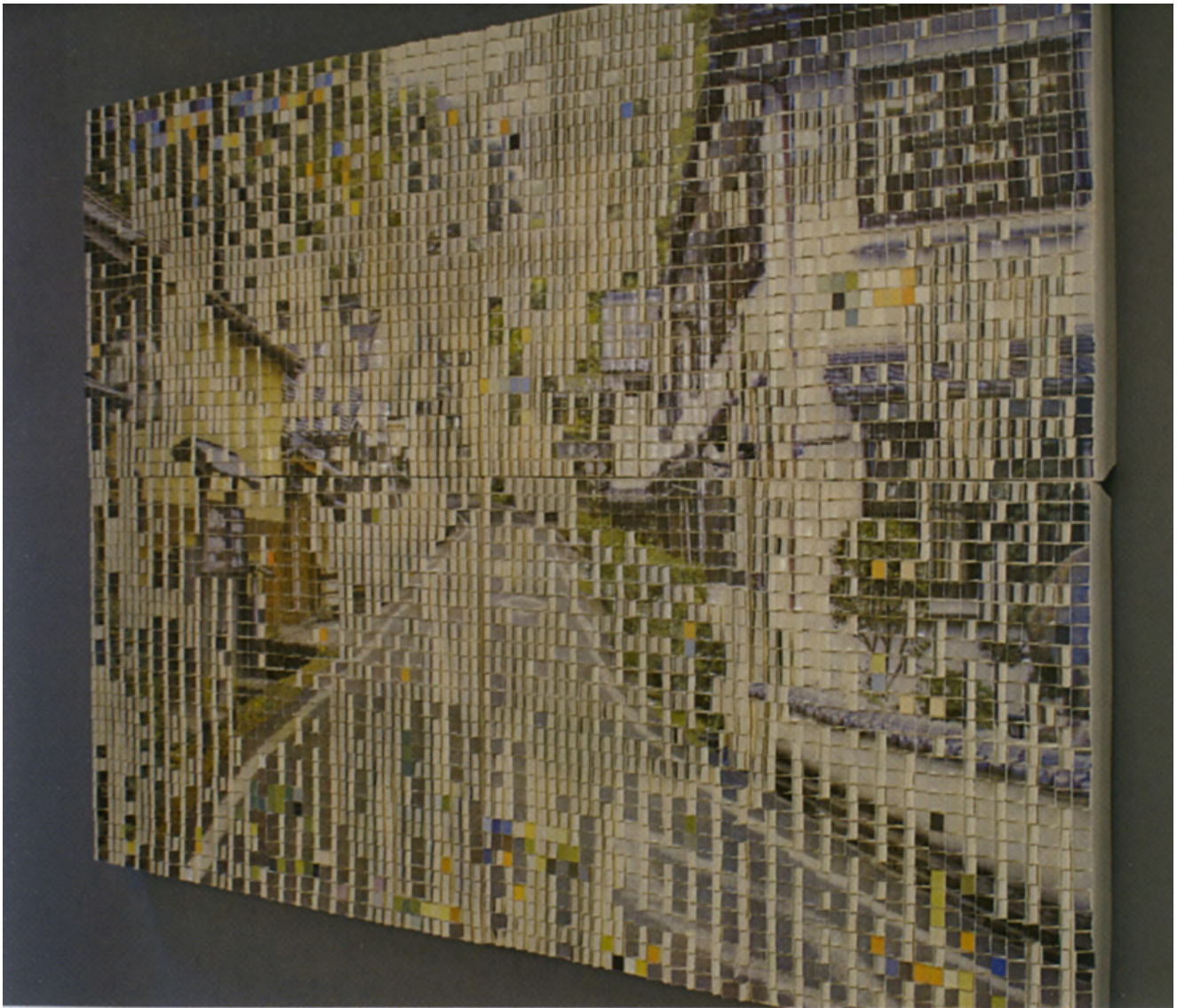






MEGUMI NAITOH





Since 2001, I have been interested in Roman mosaics and their narrative depiction of daily life. I am intrigued by how the mosaics consisted of small pixel like squares that were structured in a non-grid, free form manner. I responded to the Roman mosaics by creating portraits with visible pixels. The tightly configured grid structure of the digital pixilated portraits is contrasted against the more free-formed Roman mosaic aesthetic. The portraits are abstracted and made indefinite by pixilation and present anonymity. The landscape format, size, and frames reference smart phones or computer monitors and suggest internet communication and online activities.

My current work references mosaics and tile murals. My main interest in online activities continues to manifest in this series, exploring the relationship

between technology and our lives. In 2007, I became concerned with Second Life, a 3D virtual world/login community. Second Life is created by its residents and inhabited by millions of users from around the globe who create many communities for entertainment, friendship, education, businesses, etc. Although users can express their identities by creating custom avatars, the environment is established to keep the residents' anonymity.

Anonymous blogs, forums, and social sites are a new way of social interaction. They are quite unique to our contemporary lives. By creating two vantage points and presenting images from both the real and virtual worlds in one piece, the work expresses the integration of real life and virtual life, and how we quickly weave through these two worlds on a daily basis.

Megumi Naitoh, *April 19th, 2009, 2010*, Screen-printed clay

DYLAN J. BECK

is currently an assistant professor of ceramics at Kansas State University in Manhattan, KS. Beck attended The Ohio University in Athens where he studied sculpture and ceramics. Upon receiving his Bachelor of Fine Arts, Beck was awarded a Post Baccalaureate Fellowship at Illinois State University. He then moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to attend Tyler School of Art where he earned his Master of Fine Arts degree. Beck's research focuses on the built environment, including concepts dealing with urban development, the information infrastructure, and the economic, social, and psychological effects of living in a super-modern world.

**SUSAN BEINER**

Received her MFA from The University of Michigan(1993), and BFA from Rutgers University in New Jersey(1985). Currently, she teaches at Arizona State University. She has exhibited both nationally and internationally and has received several awards and residencies. Susan's ceramic work has been exhibited at The Mint Museum of Craft and Design; NC, Magnelli Museum, Vallauris, France, Princessehof Keramiekmuseum; Netherlands, Wustum Museum of Fine Art; WI , San Francisco Museum of Fine Arts; CA, as well as numerous galleries and universities around the country.

**KATIE CARON**

Graduated summa cum laude from Boston University in 2000, and received an MFA in ceramics from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 2009. Her work has been in national exhibitions such as Breakdown at Guggenheim Gallery: Chapman University, California, Reinventing Beauty at the Museum of New Art: MONA, Michigan, and will be included in the international Exhibition Overthrown: Clay Without Limits at the Denver Art Museum in June 2011. Caron is currently an Assistant Professor of Fine Arts & Education at Rocky Mountain College of Art & Design, Denver Colorado

**BRYAN CZIBESZ**

is an artist whose work invokes the notion of the prosthesis in an examination of the fundamental relationship between the technological and the bio-physical. His work can also be understood in the context of his upbringing, which was a mix of an expanding consumer culture, tinkering in the garage, and community theater. Originally from Ohio, Bryan received an MFA from San Diego State University in 2009 and is currently an Artist-in-Residence at The Clay Studio in Philadelphia. He teaches at Arcadia University in Glenside, Pennsylvania, and Rowan University in New Jersey.

**DEL HARROW**

is an Assistant Professor of Art at Colorado State University, and has been an Assistant Professor at Penn State University and a Lecturer at Kansas City Art Institute. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally including Dutch Design Week, Eindhoven, The Netherlands; The Dolphin Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri, and the Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University, Kansas. Harrow is currently producing a large installation for the exhibition Overthrown: Clay Without Limits (opening spring 2011) at the Denver Art Museum, Colorado.



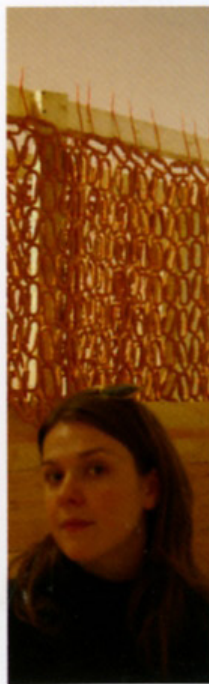
DARIEN JOHNSON

completed a year of post-bachelor work at the Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri, and received an MFA in ceramics from Arizona State University in 2009. His work has been in national exhibitions such as 18th Annual San Angelo National Ceramics Competition, Texas and Generously Odd: Craft Now, Kentucky. Darien is currently an Assistant Professor at Buffalo State College, Buffalo, New York.



GAIL HEIDEL

received her MFA from the University of Minnesota in 2008. She currently lives in Brooklyn, NY and teaches at Hunter College. Recent 2010 exhibitions include In The Ceramics Studio at Lyons Wier Gallery, New York, NY, On Earth at the Rockland Center for the Arts, Nyack, NY, and Remapping at Sheehan Gallery, Whitman College, Walla Walla, WA. Heidel's art practice is influenced by the built environment and the urban planning strategies designed to navigate these spaces.



CASEY MCDONOUGH

was born in 1981 in Florida. He received a B.A. in Visual Art and a B.S. in Marine Biology from Eckerd College and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. Though his background is in ceramics he actively engages with a variety of materials in his studio practice, exploring the intersection of art and science as it applies to the complexities of contemporary culture. Casey currently lives in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where he is an Assistant Professor of Art at Cedar Crest College.



MATHEW MCCONNELL

(b.1979, Johnstown, PA) is currently serving as the 2010-2011 Lillian Fellow at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana. He holds an MFA from the University of Colorado at Boulder (2009) and a BFA from Valdosta State University (2004). Recent solo exhibitions include Many Things New and More of the Same at Unitec in Auckland, New Zealand and Brighter than Real at Vertigo Art Space in Denver, CO.



MEGUMI NAITOH

is a Japanese national who received a formal training in ceramics at Massachusetts College of Art in 2000 and San Diego State University in 1995. She is a recipient of Massachusetts Cultural Grant in 2003, The Clay Studio Solo Exhibition award in 2005, Emerging Artist Award at NCECA in 2007. Megumi is an Associate Professor of Art at Emmanuel College in Boston, MA.

