

# X—TRA

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## La Vita Nuova

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*The Body, The Object, The Other*  
Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles  
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Unbeknownst to me, on the sunny January day I toured *The Body, The Object, The Other*, a pea-sized group of cells was rapidly dividing in my left fallopian tube. In the weeks leading up to the unveiling of this body-centric exhibition—while unwieldy, delicate artworks were gently lifted into carefully planned positions, wall labels were placed just-so, and catering trays of vegan sushi were called in—the steady bleeding and leg-numbing pain in my lower abdomen was also being thoughtfully tracked (and misinterpreted) as a miscarriage. Bearing this macabre but novel sense of my own physicality, I was curious to uncover whatever bodily wisdom a show titled *The Body, The Object, The Other* could impart to me that I wasn't already mastering—since I had dutifully photographed my many colors and textures of blood, to be interpreted later by another sort of artist of the body.

In technical ceramics jargon, clay *is* a body, and technically speaking, it's a body that holds memory. There are various consequences for clay's special kind of material memory, which is inevitably experienced as a slippage, a slump, a tilt. You can endlessly adjust an off-kilter pot, or smooth out a sculpture's bulge, or stuff newspaper under a slouching handle, but in the firing, a clay form will always cock toward the shape of its steward's original endeavor. Fleshy as we are, what can clay memory tell us about our memory? And what can clay bodies tell us about our bodies? Enter *The Body, The Object, The Other*, the second iteration of the Craft Contemporary's clay biennial.

On the far wall of the second-floor gallery—a synthetically bright, windowless, low-ceilinged space—is a formation of fist-wide, steady smudges, at around shoulder height. Each is slightly tapered, almost ram-like, almost floating, flat

but somehow dimensional. The three rows of blood-like smears, or imprints, are too neat and too precise for the timely, wretched image they evoked for me. If a stain could have a voice, this one would be guttural. In my own animal instinct, I saw the marks as animal-like—something like fucking, a wound, a wide, v-shaped stain—until my higher brain conquered with its preferred protective calculation: not blood, but iron; not flesh, but clay. For all of the fleshy things that have been slapped, pressed, shoved, beaten into a wall, in this instance, it was *not* a body but a hunk of minerals, rocks, dust. What had happened here? Nicole Seisler's *Preparing* (2020), an ongoing performance of wedging (pressing, smashing, forcing) this iron-rich clay against an immovable white gallery wall, sucks all the attention from the room. So stark and rude, so flat and light, it is an ethereal rusty ghost in a gallery of looming pedestals subsuming their sculptures.

As if the word *sculpture* were not fraught enough, ceramics' semantics have always served as both a lifeline and a chasm between objects made of clay—and everything else. In her essay "Ceramics and Art Criticism," presented at the Ceramic Millennium conference in Amsterdam in 1999, Janet Koplos makes two arguments: 1) clay is a material, ceramics is a discourse; 2) ceramics is a different discourse than sculpture. Koplos wrote that mixing these two discourses together would present a universal problem for the clay artist: "It would just mean that things would be regarded as poor sculptures rather than good pots." The cocurators of *The Body, The Object, The Other* may have chucked delicacy out the window with the title of the exhibition, but *clay* biennial is a smart and specific framing choice, touting the material without signaling to those who would subscribe to the limited discourse Koplos so succinctly outlined.

Preparing is not a sculpture, but a residue, functioning almost like a theatrical backdrop, providing a context for the rest of these intriguing and obtuse objects, connected by their materiality, as we know, but nearly nothing else. Alex Anderson's six white-and-gold sculptures, *Eggplant II* (2018), *Excuse Me While I Feel Myself* (2019), *How you feel though?* (2019), *Life's hard, let's not talk about it II* (2019), *Medusa* (2019), and *Must be Love* (2019), appear as luscious gold-dipped truffles against their winter-green-pink gallery wall. Snakes, hearts, and a variety of leaf-or-mouth shapes, perhaps culled from a stroll through the Norton Simon Museum, are reminiscent of naked porcelain bisque-ware in wait for an intricate and expensive application of China paints that will never come. Playful but not improvisational, the drips of gold luster could feign blood, semen, or drool. Frozen in time, a tiny clay bee has settled on a mysterious fallen fruit at the base of a pedestal; allegorical of nothing except art itself, it evokes a not-so-still life, winning the illustrious title of tiniest thing in the room.

Nearby, two groovy clay vessels are set into cut-outs in a translucent black acrylic box. Not unlike an amphibian bobbing in a tank or wading out into waist-high water, Cammie Staros's *Fruits of a Fallen Empire* (2019) magically insinuates living things—the fallen object with its yawning or screaming mouth-hole, truncated, perhaps castrated, and prostrate to its gooseneck partner, or master. The acrylic is a welcome visual aberration in both shape, color, and permeability, its hard edges performing a mighty clash with the smooth, almost insect-like vessel bellies. Foregrounded in the title as the scene of a bygone battleground, the global application of the gourd as vessel, as food, as decoration emerges as a stand-in for a bygone body, or body politic. *Fruits of a Fallen Empire* embraces the sway of narrative, but lets the materials do the poetic waxing. Awkward in form and mysterious in function (though graceful as a space-age gourd cupholder), it yanks time in two different directions. On a cruel day, it could be a prop in a Kubrick film.



Cammie Staros, *Fruits of a Fallen Empire*, 2019. Ceramic and acrylic, 43 × 24 × 12 in. Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles. Photo: Blake Jacobsen.

Perhaps nothing clashes more with *Preparing's* almost imperceptibly dimensional surface than Wanxin Zhang's *Special Ambassador* (2011), which is taller than many humans and, in a word, terrifying. Part evil Mickey Mouse, part sad panda, part Goonies, *Special Ambassador* presents as a zombie-apocalypse

version of its clear referent, the Terra Cotta Army, discovered in Shaanxi province in Northwest China in the 1970s. *Special Ambassador* is eerily placed at an angle in the corner, facing not visitors to the gallery but Phyllis Green's decade-long project *Odd Old Things* (2009–19), which the clay figure is perhaps preparing to annihilate. The impressively huge form—its surface a chunky layered mash of clay that looks heavy and impermeable, oxides dripping down its shoulders and wetting its mouth—pushes figuration into a gleefully macho-maximalist space, a Peter Voulkos turned statue. But unlike the muscly, self-aggrandizing legacy of American abstraction, the stakes in this work are higher. In almost perfect opposition to Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi's strikingly detailed and nuanced army of clay—with their chiseled top-knots and shapely eyebrows, their neatly tied scarves and straight goatees—*Special Ambassador* proposes a simple, lusty question: What kind of emperor would this nightmare warrior serve? One answer: *Special Ambassador* is a grotesque soldier, unearthed for a grotesque time.

The only works comparable in scale and feel to Zhang's figures are Raven Halfmoon's giant stoneware stacks of heads.<sup>1</sup> These huge, lumpy, multisided sculptures, which almost seem to have risen out of the ground of their own volition, bring to mind something mythical and monstrous, even god-like—a Medusa, a Brahma, a Janus. As sculptures, they impress with their physical girth and their many clay-historical references, perhaps reaching further back in time than any other artwork in the exhibition. Even so, their larger-than-life message of cultural continuity and empowerment is disrupted by the application of Halfmoon's signature signatures—her name and the appropriated Chanel symbol, both of which are scrawled onto CADDOxCOUTURE (2019) and CADDOxCHIC (2019).

Disrupting the continuity, is, of course, the point. Halfmoon's works are heavy, muscular, with layer upon layer of postmodern appropriation—not just appropriating bygone civilizations, but also contemporary signifiers, fashion, and even other marginalized creatives who came before her (Dapper Dan?). Either way, the repeated appearance of the Chanel logo hits like a ton of bricks. Never mind the cheeky shot at consumerism, or high fashion, or even late capitalism, the gesture of what I'll call authoring the works is twofold: giving individual attribution to works historically represented as authorless (GOAL!) and shi ting the typecast semiotics of the work. No longer an object representing, or perhaps even glorifying, Indigenous production, CADDOxCOUTURE and CADDOxCHIC are imaginary historical forms designed as fields of representation upon which to deliver a contemporary message. In other words, the sculpture has been labored over in order to be subverted, ruined, defaced—

to defy problematic ideas of purity and authenticity. There may be no point in rehashing old arguments about the meaning of postmodernity, but in clay, this is very much a discourse that still matters, as evidenced by the persistent interest in exhibition frameworks such as this very clay biennial. To that end, it's crucial to acknowledge that Halfmoon's physical and conceptual manipulation of the material transcends it all—craft, form, culture, and most importantly, the leftover modernist conservatism in the ceramic field. Halfmoon gives her objects metaphorical meaning not *through* but *beyond* their form and cultural heritage.

My favorite sightline in *The Body, The Object, The Other* encapsulates a triangulation worthy of its title: the skirted pedestal of Green's Odd Old Things mimicking the shape of the smears in *Preparing*, deepening the crass (or even subversive) reading that they could represent a woman's stale blood stain, like a charting of menstrual blood or pregnancy loss, all while Special Ambassador looks forlornly at the short, stumpy old-things brigade, unnerved by their tutus, and their dumpy, unfeminine figures. Odd Old Things is a lovely artwork because it succeeds in being subtly subversive: of all horrible things a woman can be, the worst, of course, is to be old. Hiding behind cuteness and roundness, Green suggests a legion of creatures gleefully both odd and old, perhaps gendered, but above all, things.

This grouping presents a rare moment in the exhibition where the works seem almost literally to be speaking to each other—fitting for a show whose subjects are intended to be unified by figuration. In this triangle, *Preparing* looms, ordered but inscrutable, bodily but without volume. The trick of the work, the magic trick, is that it hijacks all the other works around it, batters them down, balls them up, and bashes them against the wall. It's an artwork that makes me want to topple everything around me and bash it against the wall, too. Perhaps it goes without saying, but *Preparing* is a feminist gesture because it thwarts the materiality of the sculpture. At last, it can no longer be used to render our bodies—*adieu* to the Venus of Willendorf.

On the other hand, *Preparing* presents a paradox. There is so much sweat and pain here, yet *Preparing*'s primary formal mode is to take something mushy, messy, squishy, earthly, and to discipline it by forcing it into a pre-drawn regimen. There is an inkling here of a kind of a preformed purity—a sanctity of the material, of honoring the material on its own terms instead of degrading it with artifice. I wonder, is the faint pencil-drawn grid boxing in each clay mark a structural tool or a rigid aesthetic conceit? I don't want the artwork to be about grids and discipline. I want it to be about rage. If laborious preparation is our art behind the art, then we are worse off than Sisyphus: we are rolling backward.

Rage may be sublimated elsewhere in this exhibition. Cannupa Hanska Luger's *Something to Hold Onto* (2019) is another artwork whose simple form belies the complexity of its metaphor. The work comprises a short video, a display of clay squeezes called "beads," and a wall label inviting the audience to participate in the project by forming a bead that will ultimately be "joined" with other beads. Among the many idiosyncrasies of *Something to Hold Onto* is its installation in a built-in vitrine. The artwork's mission, we are told, is to draw attention to "the overwhelming number of deaths and traumatic incidents that have occurred as a result of policed migration across the U.S./Mexico border," and its tangible formal outcomes include a series of small, unfired clay forms that from far away resemble human-sized turds.<sup>3</sup> To contextualize this work in the most museological space available in the exhibition invites the audience to perceive these clay things as relics, not as the performative objects they're intended to be. The vitrine and the shelves imply a stasis that seems more aligned with the Southwest Museum than the Craft Contemporary. That said, the curators may have intended a sly inversion of old-fashioned museum conventions, subverting the audience's stereotypes by subverting their expectations.

Much of the content of *Something to Hold Onto* lies in a subtle art world appropriation that you might miss if you hustle up to the second floor gallery too quickly. This jab lies in a "call-to-action" video—a silent set of instructions in which Luger demonstrates the three-part process for creating a clay bead to contribute to his project. There are two prominent formal features of this video: Luger's hands and Luger's torso, bearing a T-shirt that reads, "In a dream you saw a way to decolonize, and you were full of joy." This is an appropriation of artist Jenny Holzer's *In a Dream You Saw a Way to Survive and You Were Full of Joy* (from the *Survival* series, 1983–85), one of her many now-famous *Truisms*. The shirt, designed by Demian Diné Yzhi', founder of *R.I.S.E.: Radical Indigenous Survivance & Empowerment*, is a kind of inverted truism. Far past the space of vaguely poetic, thought-provoking aphorisms, *decolonize* evokes a specific history for which accountability has yet to be accepted. While Holzer's *Truisms* are conceptual linguistic plays that mimic and are deployed like advertisements, the T-shirt's sly word swap proposes that *Truisms* and *truisms* speak only to the slim world that is the art world's majority. Also emphatic in *Something to Hold Onto* is the action one must apply to create this simple, crass, turd-like multiplying sculpture: a closed fist.

Like most biennials, Holly Jerger and Andres Payan Estrada's *The Body, The Object, The Other* is a feat of organization and time spent, if not a radical curatorial proposition. All of the artworks have something to offer the viewer who can unscramble them from each other. (My wish for this show is my impossible wish for all shows—that we have the breathing room to consider each work on its own terms.) Many of the artists share certain features (including being thirty-some-things educated in ceramics programs at universities and having had works on view in commercial galleries in Los Angeles during the past year) that could have caused the show to skew toward a melting-pot vision of contemporary clay practices, rather than an aggregate of uniquely positioned artists choosing to work in clay. But perhaps that's the point. Ironically, it's not the material of clay itself that this iteration of the clay biennial foregrounds but rather its newfound assimilation into the newly imagined institutions of the twenty-first century.

Ceramics is a craft, a discipline, a skill, and a material that has always been kept apart from art yet closely mirrors art's ideological history. At the art college where I work, I sometimes hear faculty offer reasons for why ceramics has “returned”: that clay demands a desperately needed tactility in the age of screen-induced disembodiment. Of course, any art material can be as embodied or disembodied as its maker. The idea of clay as an embodied material is just that—an idea—not some kind of icky modernist truth. Despite new generations' infatuation with clay's unique material properties, along with its easy, if not somewhat lazy, pseudo-metonymic conceptual quality (clay as earth, earth as clay), I don't think today's soon-to-be artists would concede to truth to materials. Contemporary artistic production trends toward truth to oneself and one's own identity, however loosely either is constructed.

And what of clay bodies and my body? Did you know that when an embryo is developing in a fallopian tube, you can take a series of methotrexate injections to stop the cells from dividing? This is not part of art, but it is artful—the syringe with its neon yellow liquid, and the easy but expert way the nurse sinks the needle into your haunch. If you tighten your muscle as the injection is administered, you'll feel sore for days. The trick is to stay completely relaxed. Completely. When I received these injections, I imagined my body was a docile mound of clay, cool and firm. And while a body is not, can't be, like clay, the metaphor clearly has not out-lived its power, reforming anew as each artist sinks their fingers into another malleable slab.