



Ceramic
Excellence

FELLOWSHIPS AT THE
ARCHIE BRAY FOUNDATION
2010-2011



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Aaron Benson
MJD Fellow

Nicholas Bivins
Matsutani Fellow

Jana Evans
Taunt Fellow

Mathew McConnell
Lilian Fellow

Courtney Murphy
Lincoln Fellow

Annually, the Archie Bray Foundation invites a critic to spend time at the Bray—to meet with the artists, experience the Bray’s unique environment and develop essays for the fellowship exhibition catalogue. This year the residency was awarded to Susannah Israel. Susannah is an artist, writer and educator. She lives in East Oakland, California.

It has been a rare pleasure to be the 2011 Jentel Critic at Archie Bray. Ceramic practice is so rich in exchange and collaboration that it has long been characterized as a conversation.¹

Because the catalogue for the annual fellowship exhibition is rightly titled *Ceramic Excellence*, I considered the meaning of excellence: to surpass limits, exceed previous achievements and set new limits. In order to elicit proof of such superlative performance, I formally interviewed each artist, rigorously investigating process, practice and philosophy.

Now this did happen. But as my questions were answered and greatly enlarged upon, the discussion developed both depth and excitement. Hours passed unnoticed and voluminous pages of notes were borne away, like treasure, for the final writing of these essays. In the studio kitchen and hallway, more conversation brought additional insight from all the resident artists.

For a short time and on very short notice, I was taken into the heart of the life of the Bray community. The residents shared intensely personal sources of inspiration and deeply thoughtful underpinnings for their philosophies. Commitment, discipline and focus characterize the process and the practice of these five artists. In making excellent work, they have indeed surpassed previous limits. But the direction in which this leads does not simply establish a new set of limits.

They have intrigued me by proposing unexpected prospects for the future of contemporary ceramics. There is a clear message developing in the unified ways in which these different artists work and think. They are articulating a new perspective, as I see it; perhaps, there are no limits.

–*Susannah Israel*

¹Schjeldahl, Peter, ed. *Shards*. Ceramic Arts Foundation: Santa Monica, 1994. “I became party to a conversation that is open and civil with no sacrifice of seriousness and passion.”

AARON BENSON MJD FELLOW

the architecture of balance

Plane geometry and plain geometry. Intricately related forms combining patinated stoneware with concrete and wood are pinioned with massive hardware. Linear elements extending into space explore and define new shapes. Meticulously layered patinas consider the effects of time and the signs of hard work. Cubic variants are resected and reconfigured to create new geometries. Concrete bases provide a stable foundation for the entire aggregation. Aaron Benson's structures reference trust, sanctuary and stability.

These bold combinations, joining three different materials, three different types of form and three different surfaces, are secured by large zinc-plated bolts. Benson chooses his materials to connect with his viewer's perceptions and experience. The textures of wood and concrete are familiar and people easily recognize the hardware. The conversation is all about the experienced world. The bolts provide contrast with

his color choices and give a jolt of the unexpected.¹ Creating a secure assembly with a trustworthy balance by juxtaposition of unlike forms, Benson asks, "How far can I extend balance with structural interrelationships?"

Benson's balancing act includes working on the Bray maintenance crew. I first saw him pruning a tree. Hours later, he was fixing the plumbing in the resident studio. Only when I located his workspace to schedule a studio visit did I realize he was the 2010–2011 MJD Fellow. We scheduled our meeting for the following day because Benson was leaving shortly to spend time at home. Benson's family is critical to his integrity as an artist. He and Allison Steele Benson, also an artist, have a lovely young daughter and infant son. The marriage partnership ranges from sharing the responsibilities and rewards of parenting to creative exchanges about art. Allison's commitment to the children's daily nurture and her support of Benson's residency are integral to the family's harmony and stability. I do not propose a simplistic interpretation of what these elements represent in Benson's work. I do find myself observing their interplay with deeper understanding of the relevance of the personal in his inquiry.

Building Parameters XI (Settled), 2010
stoneware, wood, concrete, steel
29" x 5.5" x 21"



Benson's early pieces are vertically symmetrical, some held in place by cables, like heavy factory machinery. Recent work inhabits more space. Every new element added shifts the visual balance, changing mass, line and surface into a new aggregate form. On closer examination of the work I see how the bolts that secure the assemblage can be read in the context of a mechanical pinion. Here is a sense of mobility and dynamic balance, creating a functioning new dimension where structural integrity is securely maintained by accommodating change. Perhaps this is a dynamic machine we're seeing in a moment of repose?

Upon completing the MJD fellowship year, Benson will depart the Bray for graduate study at Alfred University, where he is already planning to work very hard. He's started making houses in interlocking assemblies that fit neatly together but can also be dismantled. Some are upside down. Musing about the Bray resident experience, Benson says, "It's expanded my view to a life's worth of clay ahead."

¹Hickey, Dave. *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy*. The Foundation For Advanced Critical Studies: Santa Monica, 1997. "That subtle jolt of visual defamiliarization as a prelude to delight."

Building Parameters VII, 2010
porcelain, wood, concrete, steel
11" x 17.5" x 17.5"



NICHOLAS BIVINS MATSUTANI FELLOW

the practice of perfection



Nicholas Bivins makes functional handmade pottery, elegant and sublimely practical. The forms are spare, sleek and visually pared, with single lines of decoration and corner accents of color. Coffee and whiskey sets with trays combine function, design and precise presentation. The trays provide each piece its home. It is an invitation, not a constraint, a beautiful argument for perfection as a daily aesthetic experience.

The squared coffee cups fit the fold of the hand. The corner positioned opposite the handle is precisely where we put our lips to drink. The shape is based on efficient design, delivering the coffee in a "predetermined location, not an anonymous 360-degree curve." Bivins takes this seriously. To take coursework in computerized imaging during graduate school, he had to convince both the art and mechanical engineering departments to agree. Such determination sets the bar for Bivins' pursuit of "serving the work in its ultimate purpose."

Ultimate purpose is an unusual and provocative goal, leading into Bivins' favorite aspects of design. Design is how it looks and how it works, "a noun and a verb." Adding inutile features produces

excess, an unsatisfying compilation of nonessentials. Designing for efficiency is designing for what works best. But what is efficiency? A reduction to essentials, where essence is the spirit and the irreducible quality.

Considering efficiency pushed Bivins to question such traditional thinking as the round pot. Bivins enjoyed making utilitarian forms on the potter's wheel. He sees the wheel tradition, with its millennia of human history, as key in his evolution of utilitarian design. But with digital imaging, everything changed. Now the pots have their source in Bivins' imagination, as pure form. To make them, Bivins harnesses the complementary functions of the computer and the human brain. Where the computer exceeds in numerical computation, the human mind (excels) in pattern recognition and the intuitive leap to new solutions.¹ Hands-on remains integral for Bivins: "I am a maker. The idea is not finished until I make it." His process spans the gamut from generating the ideas to slip casting and glazing the work. Bivins defines intimacy in spatial terms: horizon, near and close. "At your hand is near," he says, "at your nose is intimate."

The lines on the coffee cups are intricate perspective drawings, each progressively diminishing in size down to the limit of the human visual range. These coded designs move the user from near to intimate. Close reading of the work rewards the user with awareness of its intentional complexity.

An inherent social consciousness and generosity inform Bivins' intentions. Notably, Bivins says user, a term of the digital age, not customer. The contextual implication is that these objects are needed and will be used. The maker's responsibility is to deliver the object designed to work best. This attitude is a subversion of art object commodification. Social conditioning associates quality design with wealth and social status, predicated upon the cost of excellence. Bivins overturns these expectations by delivering accessible utilitarian ceramic work, designed to perfection.

¹Cooley, Mike. *From Bruneschelli to CAD/CAM*, pp 197-207. *Design After Modernism*, John Thackara, ed. Thames & Hudson: NY 1988.



Saturday Morning, 2011
pots: porcelain, glaze, decals
tray: MDF, automotive paint
11" x 15" x 18"

Toasting Cups, 2011
pots: porcelain, glaze, decals
tray: MDF, automotive paint
10" x 14" x 10"



JANA EVANS TAUNT FELLOW

making art as if the world mattered



Jana Evans' workspace is a festival of usable ceramics in wheel-thrown and altered porcelain with drawn and glazed patterns. Evans is committed to utility for its power to "create an intimate relationship of use/reaching out to others in the form of a handmade cup, bowl or jar." The porcelain is a pristine canvas for her precise patterns. The pieces are grouped together in sets of stacking bowls, sets of tall cylindrical cups and sets of cups and saucers that accompany round teapots with flattened bases. There are many groups of these sets, a cornucopia of plenty, and their surfaces, too, have an exuberant multiplicity, with intensive patterns of circles and rings.

Multiplicity is the human condition that compels Evans. Suzi Gablik talks about the need for making art as if the world mattered,¹ and Evans is doing exactly that.

Her thesis show, "Potluck," involved the gifting of all her cups and provided a focal point for celebrating ceramics in the larger community, and supplied a food bank with 440 pounds of food. Evans says "the objects affirm the value of experience, demonstrating that ceramics can and should be used and owned by everyone."

The quality of the object in question is very important to Evans, who dedicates hours of meticulous work to getting the details right. Hundreds of fine lines are incised into the clay surface before color is laid in. Evans enjoys placing lines of a different color to change and accent the color scheme—these, she says, are colors that are "not behaving." The patterns are inclusive of the different colored lines—it's OK to resonate on your own wavelength. Like grace notes in music, they do not disrupt but enhance the whole with a touch of intrigue and "the unexpected factor." Optical effects occur, shifting of color and pattern; a horizontal band is actually made up of vertical lines. Evans finds the process of repetitive application releases energy, "like making a wish."

Such repetition of lines and complex designs brings to mind the Pattern & Decoration movement, but there is a critical difference. Evans' patterns never interrelate contiguously. Separate lines make up bands and hexagons; dots and circles are also separate. They are discrete individuals meeting on a common ground, providing a visual cue for the philosophy of the artist.

Deeply thoughtful and engaged in an introspective work practice, Evans remains keenly alert and receptive to influences around her. The generous curves of a 1950s Studebaker truck, in a photo on Evans' studio wall, are not simply a design reference; it's her grandfather's truck. An important figure in her life, he died at 95, while she was in graduate school. Always close with Grandpa Chet, Evans says that in his last years she learned more, through sharing photos, about the younger man who organized "pancake feeds" in his small town. Kind and generous, he was matter of fact about social consciousness and its practice. Evans carries this charge with her today.

¹Gablik, Suzi. *The Reenchantment of Art. Making Art As If the World Mattered: Models of Partnership.* Thames and Hudson: NY 1992.



Bowls, 2011
porcelain, glaze, underglaze
2.75" x 5" x 5" each



Espresso Set, 2011
porcelain, glaze, underglaze
2.5" x 3.25" x 3.5" each



MATHEW MCCONNELL LILIAN FELLOW

ruthlessly contemporary clay



Mathew McConnell doesn't want to make you a bowl or a cup on the wheel, although he certainly can. Utilitarian standards of appearance and function do not concern him. McConnell's exhibition, "Many Things New and More of the Same," reads like a museum collection of skillfully modeled and recognizable objects, all dark grey: Olmec figures, 30 taco sauce bottles, Brancusi's Kiss, preColumbian jars, Marilyn Levine shoes, kiln bricks, William the hippo, an uncanny replica of a slide projector and more, in no discernable order. What's happened here? What are these relationships? How does this all work? These are McConnell's reworked, "simulated, manipulated, exalted and subverted" objects.

McConnell begins by choosing a singular image or a form to recreate, changing the compositional format in an intuitive, transformative process. He calls his practice reconciliation. Why reconciliation? McConnell begins with investigating a specific work and eliciting the compelling element. His search is "ruthlessly contemporary," to avoid established icons of visual culture. McConnell describes his process of gathering: "at our moment in history, we have a tremendous human capacity for reproducing ideas; there is an infinity of 'stolen' sources. A known source is a

singular point. In quantum mechanics, the singular state is an uneasy one, but I can't reconcile something without pinpointing its origin."

Choosing and appropriating these models is the beginning of engaging in the topic. Once begun, all elements and decisions must work for the whole. Each part of making calls for the next step and commitment to the idea means the artist "has to do whatever it takes." The piece develops by reworking formal qualities of the source. McConnell is interested in line and grace that explore "a territory located between the realm of the observed and the realm of the self—if a unique object can represent the self."

The ekphrastic process is well suited when considering McConnell's work, as a method similar to his approach of formal remaking. Reconciling my thinking about art and ceramic practice with McConnell's fearless grab at current art topologies is a triple challenge. Writing about art changes the experience, according to art historians themselves.¹ Historically, ekphrasis was most highly valued when the written description of the art work was of such lyric beauty that it transformed how the object was perceived.

The scale of remaking, says McConnell, ranges from 1 to 99 degrees. When you take something, it's changed by that very action. Is it successful? Only the artist can make that determination, if it can even be made, "I am a constantly moving target," says McConnell, "and my sources are also moving."

Keeping up with McConnell's fast-paced thought process is like an aerial adventure in a county fair biplane, taking us through a series of loops, reversals and complete inversions of previous thought patterns. An object maker proficient in ceramics technique, McConnell offers an enticing glimpse into a future area of ceramics practice, strongly grounded in traditional knowledge and fully engaged with the larger world of art.

¹Hirsch, Edward. *Transforming Vision: Writers On Art*. Bullfinch Press: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1994. "There is always something transgressive in writing about the visual arts, in approaching the work in words. A border is crossed and a boundary breached as the writer enters the spatial realm."

Many Things New and More of the Same, installation detail, 2010
raku-fired earthenware
dimensions vary

Bas Jan, You're Not So Pretty Any More, 2011
mixed media
12' x 7' x 7'



COURTNEY MURPHY LINCOLN FELLOW

a poem in my hand



Poised and sturdy, Courtney Murphy's coffee cup lives on my desk, its warm yellow glaze satin to the touch. The vertical walls have seven drawings. Next to the handle are two drawings planted by a single dark brown line. I say planted because each line meets the terracotta clay of the base exactly at the edge of the smooth pale yellow glaze.

These are not botanical replicas, yet there is a sense of their growing upward. The left line ends in the pink interior oval in the center of the drawing—I'll call it a plant—a plant with two rings of light pink inside burnt orange, each defined by a clean line in brown. The lines look like print but are immersed in the glaze, a tactile contradiction to my eyes. I rub them often, absently. The second drawing is taller than its pink-and-orange companion, its double ring soft green with yellow glaze inside. There's a blush of yellow through the green ring.

Between the two drawings are four round brown dots. It looks like the drawings notice each other. The dots describe an arc, indicating motion, like tossing a ball up. At the apogee, the curve expands and descends. The drawings are talking to one another, in a language of icon, color and motion, but though that lexicon is not translatable, it says connection, with space to stand in and space between.

Murphy is a poet of form. Her latest work with terracotta has more volume; she chose terracotta over porcelain in order to increase scale. The big forms are round or oval, also glazed in warm white and yellow with iconic drawings. There is more space around the drawings. The oval forms could be simple boats, and some of the drawings could be abstracted sails.

Murphy's use of lyric form does not stop with larger scale and an opening out of the pictorial space,

however. She is engaged in a visual conversation about the affinity of like forms. Inside the large, straight-walled bowls are smaller forms, perfect replicas in proportion and surface of the pieces they rest within.

Murphy enjoys thinking about how variations in handmade work call to one person, making the choice of a piece an implicit agreement between maker and user. Her cups often have small, unexpected drawings that appear during use, hidden gifts of humor and individuality.

The gift to be found in the large new forms also requires interaction. Rubbing the lines on my cup, I think about the way the big bowls draw us in. The bottom edges are hidden in shadow, confounding our quick glance. Touched, they rock gently on softly rounded bases. It's startling to have a ceramic piece move, but don't worry. It's just a short distance, a gentle arc of communication, before the piece comes back to true. A balanced response to touch, the quiet resuming of repose, offer a larger poem to my hand, one that need not be contained.



Two Mugs, 2011
earthenware
3.5" x 5" x 3.5"

Nesting Set, 2011
earthenware
6" x 11" x 11"



The Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts

has always been an ongoing experiment, a place and experience with no artistic boundaries. The extensive facilities, the freedom to explore and the creative exchange that occurs within the community of resident artists provide a profound opportunity for artistic growth, both for individual artists and for the field of ceramics.

To further encourage the Bray “experiment,” Robert and Suzanne Taunt established the Taunt Fellowship in 1998. Inspired by the Taunts’ vision and generosity, others established additional awards, including the Myhre Fellowship in 1999 and 2000,

the Lilian Fellowship since 2001, the Lincoln Fellowship in 2004, the Matsutani Fellowship in 2006 and, most recently, the MJD Fellowship, established in 2007.

Currently, the Taunt, Lilian, Lincoln, Matsutani and MJD fellowships each provide \$5,000 and a one-year residency to a ceramic artist who demonstrates exceptional merit and promise, allowing them to focus more completely on producing and exhibiting a significant body of work during their fellowship year.

Individuals wishing to establish a fellowship at the Archie Bray Foundation are encouraged to contact resident artist director Steven Young Lee.

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Steven Young Lee

Past Fellowship Recipients

1999

Marc Digeros, Taunt Fellow
Sharon Brush, Myhre Fellow

2000

Eric Eley, Taunt Fellow
John Byrd, Myhre Fellow

2001

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John Utgaard, Lilian Fellow

2002

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2003

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Karen Swyler, Lilian Fellow

2004

Trey Hill, Taunt Fellow
Miranda Howe, Lilian Fellow
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2005

Koi Neng Liew, Taunt Fellow
Deborah Schwartzkopf, Lilian Fellow
Melissa Mencini, Lincoln Fellow

2006

Jennifer Allen, Taunt Fellow
Christina West, Lilian Fellow
Joseph Pintz, Lincoln Fellow

2007

Jeremy Hatch, Taunt Fellow
Brian Rochefort, Lilian Fellow
Renee Audette, Lincoln Fellow
Anne Drew Potter, Matsutani Fellow

2008

Kevin Snipes, Taunt Fellow
Donna Flanery, Lilian Fellow
Birdie Boone, Lincoln Fellow
David Peters, Matsutani Fellow
Nathan Craven, MJD Fellow

2009

Martha Grover, Taunt Fellow
Sean Irwin, Lilian Fellow
Gwendolyn Yoppolo, Lincoln Fellow
Kelly Garrett Rathbone,
Matsutani Fellow
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