

Art **Reviews**

Fierce and Fantastical Experiments in Ceramics

The ceramics-focused *Earth Oracles* is a garden of earthly delights, with sumptuous glazes and a mastery of the medium on proud display.



Sarah Rose Sharp June 12, 2022



Laurent Craste, "Adolf Loos' wet dream IV" (2013), porcelain, glaze, poker, 11.5 x 16.5 x 22 inches (all photos Sarah Rose Sharp/Hyperallergic, except as noted)

TORONTO — When ceramic artists place their hands in clay, they are echoing an expressive gesture that has been with humanity for some **20,000 years**. With all that in mind, you might think there is no new ground for contemporary ceramicists — but, as *Earth Oracles* proves, nothing could be further from the truth. The group show at Mayten's features 15 artists, each of whom has taken their ceramic practice in a unique and groundbreaking direction.

"Coming from Iran, we had clay and ceramics for thousands of years, not only for functional purposes, but artistic purposes," said Mayten's co-founder Farnoosh Talaei, who co-curated the exhibition with participating artist

Lindsay Montgomery. “We wanted to show how far you can go with the materials, and these are all out-of-the-box artists.”

In keeping with the gallery’s overall values of education and inclusivity, the group is highly diverse, in terms of age, gender, race, sexuality, and career trajectory. The show is quietly majority female, and features stars on the rise like Roxanne Jackson, mid-career powerhouses like Penn State University associate professor Shannon Goff, and early-career artists like Sami Tsang, just finishing her MFA at Alfred University in New York State. With such a varied group of radical ceramicists, the exhibition runs the risk of barely controlled chaos, but *Earth Oracles* is instead a garden of earthly delights, with sumptuous glazes, fierce and fantastical forms, and a mastery of the medium on proud display.



Shannon Goff, "Soubrette" (2019), glazed earthenware paperclay, white gold lustre, 19 x 13 x 11 inches

Standouts in terms of virtuosity include Dirk Staschke, who explores the genre of Dutch still life painting through wildly amalgamated ceramic works that combine porcelain, earthenware, and found pottery fragments into deceptively cohesive “paintings,” often surrounded by elaborate ceramic frames. The results are so immaculate that it might take an experienced potter to understand how difficult the effect is to achieve. The same can be said of a series of works by Laurent Craste, which feature traditional French porcelain vessels withstanding various abuses by metal implements. Different clays fire at different temperatures, and experience varying levels of shrinkage; the ability to master enough elements to combine them into balanced finished works is a great accomplishment. Likewise, one might be distracted by the ornate surface finishes on large vessels by Marissa Alexander, and miss the payoff she achieves by risking an incredibly thick coil and slab construction technique.

The exhibition also includes an array of satisfying finishes, from a series of objects by Sasha Koozel Reibstein that resemble moon rocks and feature velvety horns and oozing metallic tears emerging from a lacy, pumice-like matrix, to the intricately painted surfaces of Lindsay Montgomery's vessels, which recast classic tales with all-female protagonists, and challenge notions of female youth as beauty. Montgomery's grasp of historic decorative traditions is reflected in her form and cannily limited palette. These aspects have an ambiguous and sometimes anachronous relationship with her subject matter: for example, the character Stripe from *Gremlins II* stands dead center in a glade of cavorting bathers. Shannon Goff so deftly combines glazes that the same ceramic base seems to vary within a single work.



Lindsay Montgomery, "Hag Rebellion," detail (2022), tin-glazed earthenware 21.5 x 26.6 x 2.5 inches

Finally, there are some outrageous experiments with subject matter. Jackson's split heads in shiny pastel and metallic glazes contort animal forms into something demonic, fantastic, and yonic. Works by Linda Sormin shift in form and meaning from every angle, including a site-specific installation that places two of her ceramic works in conversation with a canvas spread across the floor and covered in found objects, paint, and scattered ceramic and glass shards. What appears to be visual and formal chaos suddenly reveals a tiger, a smiling face, or a torso, creating moments of recognition both compelling and disturbing. While Tsang's work is more or less instantly recognizable as figurative, her forms require the same long looking. The artist's voracious appetite for integrating mixed media, applying multilayered glazes, and creating intense textures is brought to bear on themes of intercultural and intergenerational disconnects. A Canadian-born child of a conservative Hong Kong family, she grew up in both Hong Kong and Canada, and has grappled with issues of cultural alienation and displacement.

All these are just glancing mentions from a show that weighs in heavily on the present moment in ceramics. *Earth Oracles* demonstrates that just because something has been around practically forever, it doesn't mean there's no room left to innovate.



Sasha Koozel, "Twilight Grind" (2021), left, and "Dark Disco" (2021), right, ceramic, 22k gold, flock



Sami Tsang, "Is this Growth or Stubbornness" (2022), white stoneware, glaze, engobe, glass, rice paper, ink, nail art, clay epoxy, 14 x 9 x 5 inches



Roxanne Jackson, "Indigo Kush" (2016), ceramic, glaze, luster 13 x 20 x 12 inches



Dirk Staschke, "Accumulation" (2021), ceramic, 28 x 24 x 4.5 inches (image courtesy Mayten's)



Charles Snowden, "Apotropaic Threshold" (2021), ceramic, IV pole, Paracord, 13 x 5 x 5 inches

Earth Oracles continues at Mayten's (165 Niagara St, Toronto, Ontario, Canada) through June 25. The exhibition was curated by Farnoosh Talae and Lindsay Montgomery.