



## Minneapolis, Minnesota

### Nancy M. Servis

The 53<sup>rd</sup> Annual National Council on Education for Ceramic Arts Conference was held in Minneapolis, Minnesota in March of 2019. Exhibitions featured a range of processes incorporating ceramics, including pottery, sculpture, installation, and performance. With over 100 official NCECA shows, diverse displays were accessible to viewers throughout the region. Lectures and programming occurred at the Minneapolis Convention Center, with select events taking place at alternative conference-related venues. Remarkably, a vast spectrum of art was on view during a very brief period of time. With the current popularity of expositions and art fairs, the annual NCECA conference, which this year drew over 5,300 attendees, offered an incredible diversity of ceramic art.

*Claytopia* was the thematic concept that guided exhibitions and presentations. Many shows delved into the region's *mingei*-inspired history, established by renowned potter, Warren MacKenzie. Loosely interpreted, the Japanese term *mingei* acknowledges the inherently beautiful art of the common people. It was coined by Bernard Leach's colleague, Sōetsu Yanagi, a philosopher from Japan who wrote, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*. MacKenzie, who apprenticed to Leach early in his career, applied this idea to his life and work in Minnesota. Rhonda Willers and Sarah Millfelt recalled MacKenzie's perspective in their *In Memoriam – Past Masters in the 2019 NCECA Journal*, where he is quoted as saying, "the pots that really interested us were the pots that people had used in their everyday life...if those are the kinds of pots from every culture that interest us, why would we think that it should be any different in mid-North America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century?"

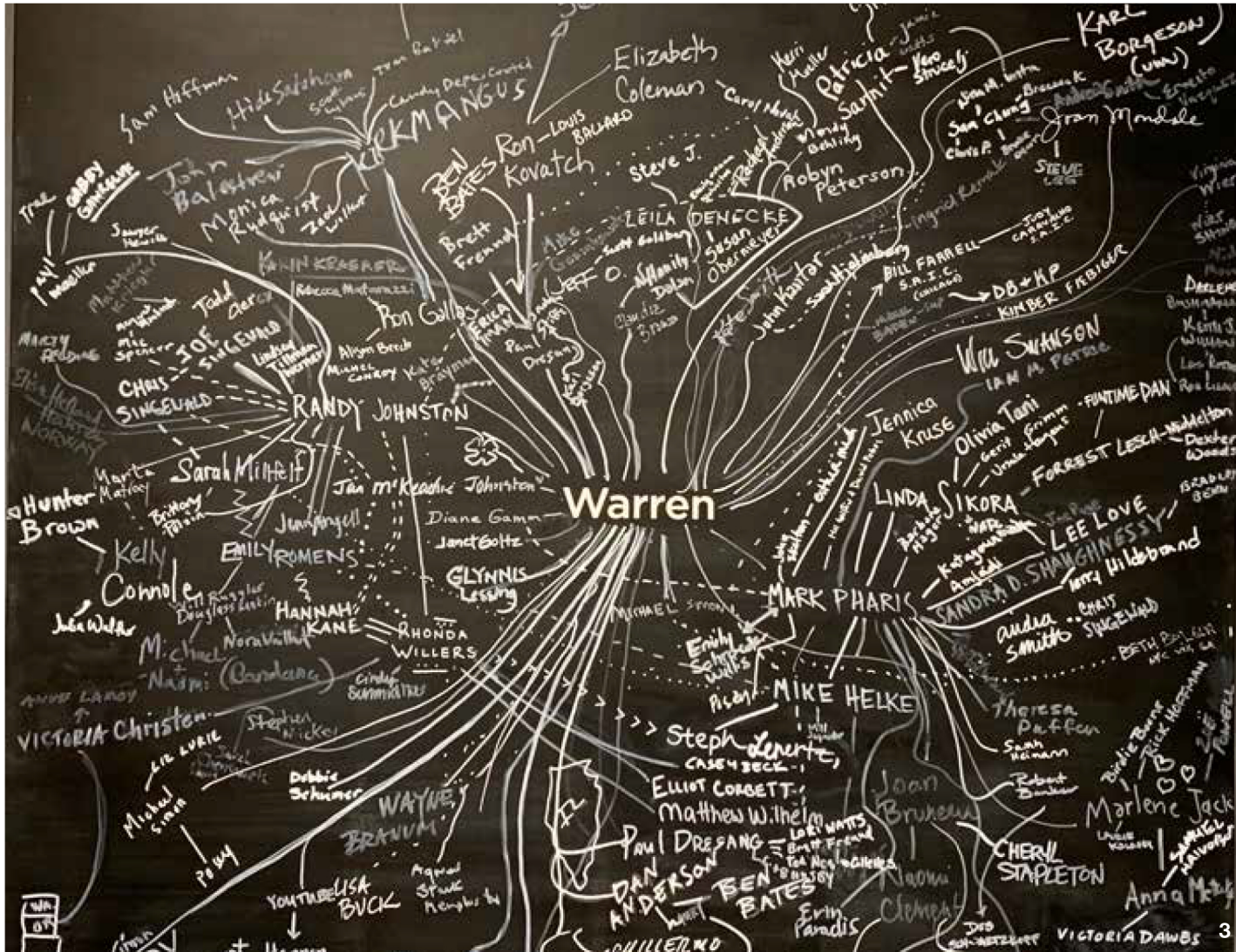
Between 1950-1952, following the publication of Bernard Leach's influential book, *A Potter's Book* (1940), MacKenzie and his first wife, Alixandra Kolensky, became the first American apprentices at the St. Ives Pottery on the western coast of Cornwall, England. Returning to Minnesota in 1953, the MacKenzies established their own pottery in the small town of Stillwater, and Warren began teaching ceramics at the University of Minnesota from 1953 until 1990. Many of his students are recognized ceramists today and change-makers in their own spheres of influence. MacKenzie died at the age of 94 just months before the conference, on December 31, 2018, yet he was present through his work in several exhibitions like *Kindred Spirits: Warren MacKenzie + John Reeve* at the Minnetonka Center for the Arts, and *Warren's Legacy* at the Northern Clay Center.

The Weisman Art Museum, housed in a building designed by Frank Gehry on the campus of the University of Minnesota, was the setting for NCECA programming and provided historical contextualization for the conference. *The Persistence of Mingei: Influence Through Four Generations of Ceramic Artists* was curated by Randy Johnston, one of MacKenzie's former students, and an established potter and professor in his own right. The exhibition's premise was based on MacKenzie's far-reaching influence, and featured works by forty artists. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue that clarified the theme of the exhibition. Four generations of makers were shown. Among them were Leach, Shōji Hamada, and Sōetsu Yanagi; Hans Coper, Lucie Rie, Tatsuzo Shimaoka, and Peter Voulkos; Akio Takamori, Mark Pharis, Jeff Oestreich, and Sandy Simon; Sam Chung, Maren Kloppmann and Jan Shellen-



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barger, and many others. Most pieces were fine utilitarian examples tightly displayed in wall cases. The dynamism of Rudy Autio's 1997 sculpture, *Dance Hall*, was appreciated as it stood unencumbered in the gallery.

A related and audience-packed panel discussion, "She, Her, Herself: Four Generations of Women and the Mingei Influence," featured seven women, each with work in the show. Moderated by Rebecca Sive, each artist discussed their ceramic practice as makers who initially found their footing in Minnesota, popularly referred to as "Mingei-sota." Margaret Bohls, Linda Christianson, Maren Kloppmann, Jan McKeachie-Johnston, Linda Sikora, Sandy Simon, and Rhonda Willers talked about their relationship to the *mingei* influence and expounded on the role gender played over four generations. The ideas referenced by the panelists spread throughout the conference, finding both connection and amplification with other presentations and exhibitions. Together, the exhibition, its catalogue, and the panel discussion gave contextual depth that attained a high bar of success, representing NCECA at its best.

The NCECA Annual exhibition, *The Form Will Find Its Way: Contemporary Ceramic Sculptural Abstraction*, was on view in the Katherine Nash Gallery, also on the University of Minnesota campus. Minneapolis-based curator Elizabeth Carpenter chose

work by international and American artists illustrating the use of ceramics as a catalyst for contemporary art. Five invited artists participated: Nicole Cherubini, Alexandra Engelfriet, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, Brie Ruais, and Anders Ruhwald. The remaining thirty-five artists were juried participants. The show's title referenced the transformative American artist, Peter Voulkos, and his 1957 juror's statement for the Annual Midwest Designer-Craftsman show at the Art Institute of Chicago. Carpenter contextualized Voulkos's concept, as noted in the NCECA Journal, by saying that the show "alludes to his feelings of freedom, wonder, and uncertainty as he allows clay to reveal the form of his work to him through skillful interventions and no-holds-barred experimentation." Consequently, large-scale installation, conceptually derived sculptures, and varied abstractions illustrated this premise. While some pieces were reminiscent of 20th century ceramic forebearers, others navigated the sieve of historical precedent. Dutch artist Alexandra Engelfriet's filmed, site-specific clay performance, *Fortiter et Suaviter* (2018), was notable for its tactile-driven narrative in an increasing digital age, while subtler work like *Mallet and Burrow: Lichen and Lizard* (2017), by Rebecca Murtaugh, referenced maker-ship through its physicality and geological references.

A standout exhibition was *Accumulation: New Work by Monica Rudquist and Judy Onofrio* at the Catherine G. Murphy Gallery



on the campus of St. Catherine University in the sister city of St. Paul. Onofrio's bovine bone sculptures and Rudquist's porcelain manipulations reference the vessel form as installation and assemblage. Installed in two intimate and opposing galleries with an intersecting lobby, this exhibition revised notions of materiality using clay. Onofrio's sizable works of reconfigured bone attained a spirited eloquence. Whether wall-mounted or separately staged on the floor or pedestal, her dimensional flourishes are exceptional in concept and execution. Their ability to exert resplendent volume, though not weighed down by density, freed the pieces from strictly material considerations. Associations with other media like basketry and textiles was evident, but their capacity to invoke ethereality was primary. Engaging both positive and negative construction, the sculptures reverberated through subtle shadowing, directing the interpretation of the show from tactile to conceptual and, for some, spiritual.

Rudquist, who considers Onofrio a mentor, retained ceramic language. Her repetitious wheel-thrown porcelain vessel forms that have been sliced and reformed created wall-mounted installations reminiscent of permeable architectural adornment. Rudquist magnified conceptualism through structural repetition and shadow. Both artists' works are solely rendered in shades of cream or white (the practice of glazing modestly is visible in Rudquist's work) that further unified the exhibit, contributing to the subtext that materiality is indifferent to artistic intent. Their dialogue constituted one of the more rewarding NCECA experiences, as both artists dually engaged strength and fragility while neither shying away from materiality nor being bound by it, either.

Sergei Isupov's one-person exhibition, *Surreal Promenade: Figurative Sculpture*, on view at the Museum of Russian Art, featured the sculpture of a mature artist dedicated to his complex narrative vision. Born in Russia and a graduate of the Art Institute of Tallin, Estonia, Isupov's over thirty works explored relationships depicted through fantasy and myth. Beguiling gestural figures presided in the gallery through innovative form, fine detail, sensitive colorations, and stylistic execution. Curious dialogues took place between people and animals, creating identities that find their origins in the artist's heightened contextualization. With a dream-like narrative, the biomorphic sculptures are consistent with the essential, surrealistic practice of making evocative and cryptic connotations while employing realistic depictions. These pieces are memorable in the best surrealistic sense and satisfying in their artistic success.

*Lost & Found: Reitz + Gustin Collaborations*, at the Minnetonka Center for the Arts, brought historical context to the spectrum of NCECA shows. The show intermingled fourteen individual works by Don Reitz, who died in 2014, and sixteen pieces by Chris Gustin, who is one of the most prolific artists of today. Gustin's expertly rendered cloud sculptures and vessels dynamically coexisted with Reitz's small columns and tea stacks. While the work of these two caliber practitioners asserted their artistic accomplishments, the show underscored the strong camaraderie within the ceramic community. Five of Don Reitz's pieces, left unfired at the time of the artist's death, were completed by friends, including Gustin, Dan Anderson, and others at kiln sites throughout the United States where the artist had fired work during his lifetime. Gustin recently wrote in Reitz's retrospective catalogue, *Spontaneous Response*, "Don was an amazing artist, full of vitality and energy that fed his work until the day he died. His curiosity was ever-present, not only in his clay-work, paintings and drawings,







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but also in the way he saw the world.” Sculptural dynamism pervaded this legacy exhibit.

The commitment to, and celebration of, the work of Don Reitz embodied the idea of an “arts ecosystem,” as mentioned by Tony Marsh in his closing lecture, *Three Years at the Shimaoka Pottery*. Marsh, who is a professor of ceramics at California State University, Long Beach, spoke to a packed hall of 3,500 people. After detailing his history as a young potter studying in Japan with Tatsuzo Shimaoka, he amplified the discussion of art residencies with an introduction to the Center for Contemporary Ceramics of which he is the Director. These contexts led to the essence of his presentation: finding artistic relevancy for makers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His question, “Are you engaged in a practice that is attempting to move the field forward, or are you engaged in a practice that’s attempting to live up to and maintain a historically high standard?” was one of many dualities he posed while giving the call to create rigor in ceramics as a craft and fine art.

Programmatic strength is achieved when concepts asserted in

NCECA lectures are explored in concurrent exhibitions. Oriol Calvo-Vergés, who is the director of the Ceramics Museum in Argenton (Barcelona, Spain), concisely presented “Spanish Contemporary Ceramics – The New Generations,” featuring several artists, many with global notoriety. This richly illustrated and detailed presentation was very satisfying to observe when considering the prevalent *mingei-related* history of Minnesota. While no specific exhibition was dedicated to this impressive legacy, a few works by Rafa Pérez were on view at the Northern Clay Center. As a practicing artist for thirty years, Pérez has rarely exhibited his abstract sculpture in the United States. His encrusted organic forms, comprised of white porcelain with black earthenware, seemingly peel away like bark off of a tree. Pérez describes this as volcanic resonance which renders the work as fragile while the firing process assures their elemental force. Both Pérez’s work and Calvo-Vergés’s presentation are cause for more in-depth international collaborations at the conference. Similar combined programming, like the lectures and exhibition hall installations by the five desig-





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CHRIS GUSTIN 1 *Cloud Series #1703*, 2017, stoneware, anagama wood-fired, 24 x 26 x 20" SERGEI ISUPOV 2 *Butterfly Catcher*, 2015, porcelain, slip, glaze, 16 x 9 x 7" Photography Courtesy of John Polak Photography & Ferrin Contemporary 3 Active drawing at the Northern Clay Center developed by those influenced by Warren MacKenzie RUDY AUTIO 4 *Dance Hall*, 1997, glazed stoneware, 25 1/2 x 28 x 16 1/2" Collection of the Weisman Art Museum - The Nancy and Warren MacKenzie Fund SARAH HEITMEYER 5 *Reduce Me to Silence*, 2016, porcelain, 60 x 60 x 3" Photo courtesy of the artist RAFA PÉREZ 6 *Untitled*, 2012, ceramic, approximately 16 x 14 x 8" 7 Installation view of Lost and Found at the Minnetonka Center for the Arts, Wayzata, Minnesota REBECCA MURTAUGH 8 *Mallet + Burrow - Lichen and Lizard (Red)*, 2017. All photos by Nancy M. Servis (unless otherwise noted).

nated Emerging Artists —Sarah Heitmeyer, Qwist Joseph, Nicholas Lenker, Lindsay Montgomery, George Rodriguez, and Sean Scott, informed both makers and critics regarding artistic ceramic ideas and practice.

Lastly, Winona Laduke, an internationally recognized environmentalist, a self-described Water Protector from the White Earth Reservation in northern Minnesota, and one-time Vice-Presidential candidate for the Green Party, delivered a rousing keynote speech expanding on ideas beyond the focus of ceramic art and education. She emphasized the importance of personal activism in a variety of sectors and reminded listeners that change in this world is inevitable; and that we, as sculptors of change, can be the ones to define it. Her bold and broad vision of affecting constructive societal outcomes for the future was a unifying legacy of the conference.

While exhibitions and lectures anchor the NCECA conference, recognizing leaders in the multidimensional art field brings deep reward. Each year, NCECA acknowledges select recipients who have excelled in unique arenas of ceramics. This year's Honorary Members of the Council were Doug Casebeer, Elaine Olafson-Henry, and Winnie Owens-Hart; Excellence in Teaching recognized Lenny Dowhie and Louis Marak; Regional Awards in Excellence were represented by Warren MacKenzie, Lyndel King and Em Swartout while Richard "Dick" Wukich" received the Outstanding Achievement Award.

**Nancy M. Servis**, is an art historian, gallerist, and author. For 20 years she served as a curator, educator, and arts administrator in Northern California. Her writings can be found in exhibition catalogues and international art periodicals. Presently, she is completing her book, *The History of Northern California Ceramics*. In 2019 Nancy was welcomed into the International Academy of Ceramics. For more information visit [www.servisarts.com](http://www.servisarts.com).

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