

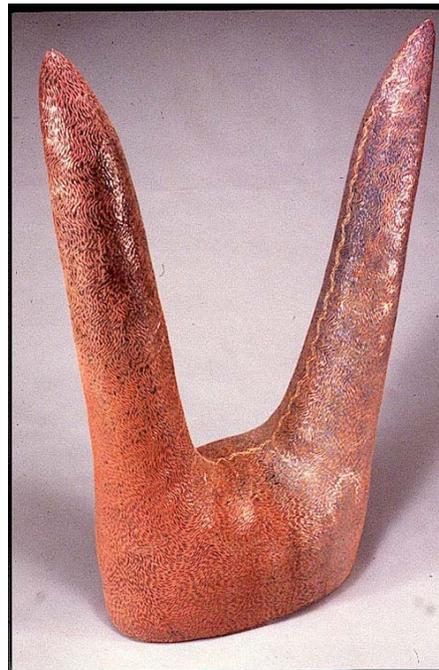
LOVE BETWEEN THE ATOMS: EVA KWONG

Roald Hoffmann

The first impression of the retrospective of Eva Kwong's ceramics (at the Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art at Alfred University) is far from the atomic. Other qualities strike me -- the playful, the organic, the color: Here three small vases with cactus-pear bulbs and tuberous chimneys rising from a polka-dotted color field; there two large horned structures -- "Yellow Flow" and "Rapture," near four feet high, with fluid glazed striations carved through many layers of colorant. The organic theme grows from bulbous protuberances and little knobs, emerging from placid, even bulky substrates.



Big Bulb with Hidden Vase, 1997
8.5" h x 5.5" x 11"
stoneware, wheel-thrown, colored slips, salt-glazed



Yellow Flow, 1991
48" h x 33" x 15"
stoneware, coil-built, colored slips, salt-glazed

Kwang's palette, crafted mostly through colored slips, is derived, she says "from the stained images of electron microscope slides." To me, the pastel blues, pinks and yellows also seem southwestern. These ceramic sculptures are witty; the artist has had fun, she does not take herself too seriously, color and shape play off each other.

While the shapes have their mysteries, they are not forbidding. Instead, one is drawn in to wonder at the technique. In the vases, the raised and playful, even juicy, crimson spots combine beautifully with the surface texture. The spots really take a shine to the salt. Here is what Kwong writes about the process:

"The spots are like calligraphy to me, and they are about the process of painting the viscous slip onto the semi-moist surface of the clay. Each stroke is the same movement of the arm repeated, but reveals itself to be slightly different. Each the same and yet unique simultaneously."

As I look closely, I see the fractal complexity in seemingly simply decorative areas, the way I see it in the surface of a Shino tea bowl.

The quietness that comes from contemplating detail in Eva Kwong's work is a prelude to perceiving in many of her pieces a tension, often erotically charged, Perhaps "Una" and "SoftCell" show this most directly.



SoftCell, 2003
6.5" h x 12' x 6.5"
porcelain, wheel-thrown, salt-glazed

Each is made up of two equal size modified spheres, separating, but most definitely not separate. Wood-fired and salt-glazed, the clay body is visible. In the shapes might be a hint of mitosis. I feel repose, and I feel tension. I would like to touch the spheres; have they been put in an enclosure just to prevent me from succumbing to this temptation? These are two of the few porcelains in the Alfred show.

A formal quality beautifully explored in Eva Kwong's work is balance. To have it one needs more than one thing. In "It's a Small World," a tiny sphere nestles atop a large apple-like object. In several smaller pieces, at the ends of a soft-looking sea cucumber/bananoid tube are balanced organic or geometrical objects. The composition is definitely not representational; one is led to think of the relationship of the two objects – will they tip, will they be absorbed by their organic bridge? I feel that Eva Kwong has built in these (my favorite is "Between Us") a remarkable link between her emotions, the work of her hands, and what we feel.



It's a Small World, 1982
14" h x 17" x 12"
stoneware, coil-built, colored slips, glazed



Between Us, 1989
3.5" h x 16" x 5"
stoneware, hand-built, colored slips, salt-glazed

Some of the most highly charged of the objects in this beautiful show are smaller and solid-feeling abstract shapes – “Flush,” “Fossil,” “White Blushing Peach.” These are modified, elongated and creased spheroids, sometimes fluted, sometimes with bilateral symmetry in the deformations, with great surface interest from glaze, slip, wood fire and salt glaze. I feel the urge to seek likeness (and why do I feel that?), coming up with hearts, shmoos, and sleeping birds. But in the end I rest satisfied with their erotic abstraction.



Fossil, 2002
5.5" h x 8" x 5.5"
porcelain, wheel-thrown, wood-fired



Lumi, 2001
4.75" h x 5" x 6.5"
porcelain, wheel-thrown, wood-fired



Orange Blushing Peach (not in Alfred show)
7" h x 7" x 8"
porcelain, wheel-thrown, salt-glazed

Here is what Eva Kwong says about the making of these wonderful objects:

“I started making peach forms in the early 80s for the fertility series. They were solid and were patted into shape by my hands as I did not know how to make them hollow back then. They took a few hours of holding in my hands, as I cannot put them down till they set up a bit. Then it took a few weeks to months for them to dry. It is only a few years ago that I suddenly figured out how to make them hollow on the wheel. I think these new ones are better as they have a sense of breath to them, and they do breathe in the kiln with a tiny hole at the tip. I thought of the peaches as a feminine form but when you rotate them as in "Fossil," it appears more masculine. They have the duality of being feminine and masculine at the same time.”

To me these sculptures are an embodiment of desire.

“Love Between the Atoms,” the title of the show, refers to attraction between oppositely charged components. A necessary, yet sometimes precarious balance, for in molecules there are also like charges repelling

(nuclei and other nuclei, electrons interacting with each other). There is bonding in the clay body, a new balance then made irreversible by fire.

It's a long way from polka-dotted cactus pears and the domes of St. Basil's cathedral to charged geometric abstractions. The path, Eva Kwong's, takes clay into the realms of wit, eros, tension, and peace. Throughout there is this feeling that we are welcome to come along.

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