



The New Materiality:

FUSION's Inaugural
Breakthrough
Exhibition



Above, Fig.3,
Evan Morris, *Bystander*

Below, Fig. 4,
Samantha Tsang,
Young at Heart

Breakthrough: An Exhibition of FUSION's Emerging Artists presented the work of 28 emerging clay and glass artists from across Canada. A first for FUSION, it was held in conjunction with the organization's Annual Conference – this year held at Wilfred Laurier University – as well as with the 25th Anniversary of The Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery and the 50th Anniversary of the Waterloo Potters' Workshop. It's a big year! Hosting the exhibition was the university's visual art centre, the Robert Langen Art Gallery. I made my way there on a quiet Monday in June.

So what does the work of Canada's emerging clay and glass artists look like? Incredibly accomplished, for a start. For materials so laden with the baggage of function and utility, clay and glass – the stuff of earth – are rendered in their innumerable iterations as versatile as any sculptural medium. The time-honoured vessel has given way largely to conceptual work that is both relevant to our time and expertly handled, technically. A few of these pieces rose to the top for me.

If Zara Gardner's work were installed in a coral reef, you might not notice it. Her vessels are primarily white, textured with small, barnacle-like protrusions, and delicately hued in aqua blues and earthy yellows. They would be flawlessly camouflaged. Her forms are porcelain replicas of a plastic pop bottle, also, sadly, a familiar sight in the sea. This collection of five vessels, entitled *Reproduction* (Fig.1) reconciles her love of nature with its rapid decline, producing a hybrid object compelling in both its beauty and tragedy.

At first, I overlooked Heidi McKenzie's porcelain and ceramic faceted, geometric shapes during my first round of the exhibition. Randomly printed with decals in sepia tones of old Canadian postage stamps, moreover, I assumed they would not hold my attention. When I re-approached them, however, I

began to see their poignant beauty. The forms themselves are seamlessly constructed into approximately 24 irregular, 3D polygons. And I found more images: those of brown-skinned children in hockey helmets, riding bicycles, and standing before wide-open landscapes.

The work, entitled *Postmarked* (Fig.2) is perhaps, most literally, about the geographic distance a postmarked letter or package travels. But it suggests, more intimately, a story about McKenzie's own identity; reading more deeply, reflections about the psychological distance between a racialized childhood experience and a Canadian identity, itself a questionable construct as seen in the iconographic imagery of the postage stamp, with its images of moose, loons, polar bears, the Queen, John A. Macdonald, "Indians" in head dress, and teepees. In a later email exchange with Heidi, she confirmed her "sense of alienation having grown up in a white community in the Maritimes in the 70's, at the corners of Canadian-ness, always trying to fit into a landscape where I didn't see myself reflected." I was humbled by the level of care in the work's execution, as well as by my own initial inclination toward dismissing it.

A contingent of artists worked to bring imaginary beings to life. Evan Morris' hand-building skill was certainly something to behold. *Bystander* (Fig.3) is a four-legged, tailed, creature that I thought must be a merging of clay and miscellaneous machine parts. Made simply of stoneware, every detail was meticulously constructed by hand to resemble used fasteners, pipe, and wire. The work was uniformly dusted with a powder blue. The uncanny likeness of spray-painted, anthropomorphized, inanimate objects conjures Tim Burtonesque narratives or, at the very least, suggests how such a sculpture could be a prototype for a stop-motion picture.



Fig.1, Zara Gardner, *Reproduction*. Image Credit: Jenanne Longman

Young at Heart (Fig.4) by Samantha Tsang is a series of six wall-mounted, humanoid characters. Their enlarged heads atop diminutive bodies liken them to babies, but their faces are old and wrinkled. Except for their proportional similarities, I cannot detect any particular narrative amongst them, but their nonsensical behaviour is endearing. One holds a carrot in each small hand. Another dangles a bra or bathing-suit top. Their oversized heads are decorated with polka dots, stylized plants, and Chinese script.

And lastly, the elaborate *You Must Carry My Bones Up From This Place* (Fig.5) by Joon Hee Kim, though largely still mysterious to me, kind of blew my mind. This work was a gothic-art-meets-day-of-the-dead-meets-gingerbread-house sort of altar. In the basic form of a rectangular dwelling with a pitched roof, and about the size of a child's dollhouse, the work is symmetrically decorated with skeletons, cherubs, lizards, horses, and a selection of semi-spherical and lacy protrusions. The roof appears to be a removable lid, under which a layer of stark red can be detected. Made entirely of porcelain, it is otherwise bone-white and detailed with blue glaze, gold lustre, and mother of pearl.

I promptly google-searched Kim, originally from South Korea, to find an impressive proliferation of casting works in both metals and ceramics. Another search revealed that the title of the work references a biblical passage about the sons of Joseph carrying his bones with them out of Egypt. Kim's "multilayered casting process" echoes the work's multi-dimensional appeal: it's an amalgam of influences, of cultural references. As noted in her artist statement, the work wishes to convey "the persevering burden of human relationships, behaviours...and reflecting personal and mysterious aspects of life." Well, I'm hooked.

When I view shows like *Breakthrough*, I often wonder how that age-old debate about craft versus art is coming along. In a brief chat with FUSION president, Chris Snedden, he offered that while these artists have demonstrated "outstanding technical ability, the works are largely conceptual, and each participant has their own distinctive narrative, their own influences, and biases."

The artists featured in *Breakthrough* are adept in both camps. Inventive and highly skilled, they merge clay and glass with non-traditional materials, infusing materiality with critical thought and new meanings. Perhaps



Fig.2, Heidi McKenzie, *Postmarked*. Image credit: Jenanne Longman

this best describes the work and practice of contemporary ceramic and glass artists: Here is a new fusion; where fine and decorative art, imagination and expertise, daring and functionality, question and comment, are becoming a new language to convey the beauties and challenges of our times. For a full list of the participating artists in *Breakthrough*, go to FUSION at clayandglass.on.ca. To see more of the artists'

work noted here, go to www.instagram.com/zara.gardner.artist www.heidimckenzie.ca and www.junniekim.com

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Fig.5, Joon Hee Kim, *You Must Carry My Bones Up From This Place*. Image credit: Jenanne Longman

Breakthrough: New Space for Emerging Artists

Breakthrough, FUSION's inaugural exhibition for emerging artists, was held June 1-29, 2018, at the Robert Langen Art Gallery on the grounds of Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo ON. FUSION created *Breakthrough* for early-career artists, specifically those who are currently students or within five years of their training, part of FUSION's commitment to provide space for new voices in Canadian visual and material art.

Excited by a tremendous response – 48 artists from across Canada submitted 126 pieces for consideration – *Breakthrough* invited 28 artists to show their work. Vibrant, varied, engaging: this work surveys sculptural and functional work, as well as its cultural engagements and technical accomplishments, from the next generation of clay, glass, and intermedia artists.

FUSION thanks all artists who participated for a show both beautiful and challenging; and is grateful for the support of exhibition sponsors the Ontario Arts Council, Craft Ontario, Tucker's Pottery Supplies Inc., The Pottery Supply House, and Chris Snedden.

Breakthrough Award Winners, 2018

Best in Show: Daumante Stirbyte

Best in Clay: Joon Hee Kim

Best in Glass: Jennifer Glasser

Craft Ontario Affiliate Award:

Zara Gardner



Breakthrough, gallery view, Robert Langen Art Gallery,
Image Credit: Jenanne Longman



Reid Ferguson, *Forwell and Lexington*, glass and concrete bowl
Image Credit: Craft Ontario



Layne Verbeek, gallery view
Image Credit: Jenanne Longman



Jennifer Glasser, gallery view
Image Credit: Jenanne Longman