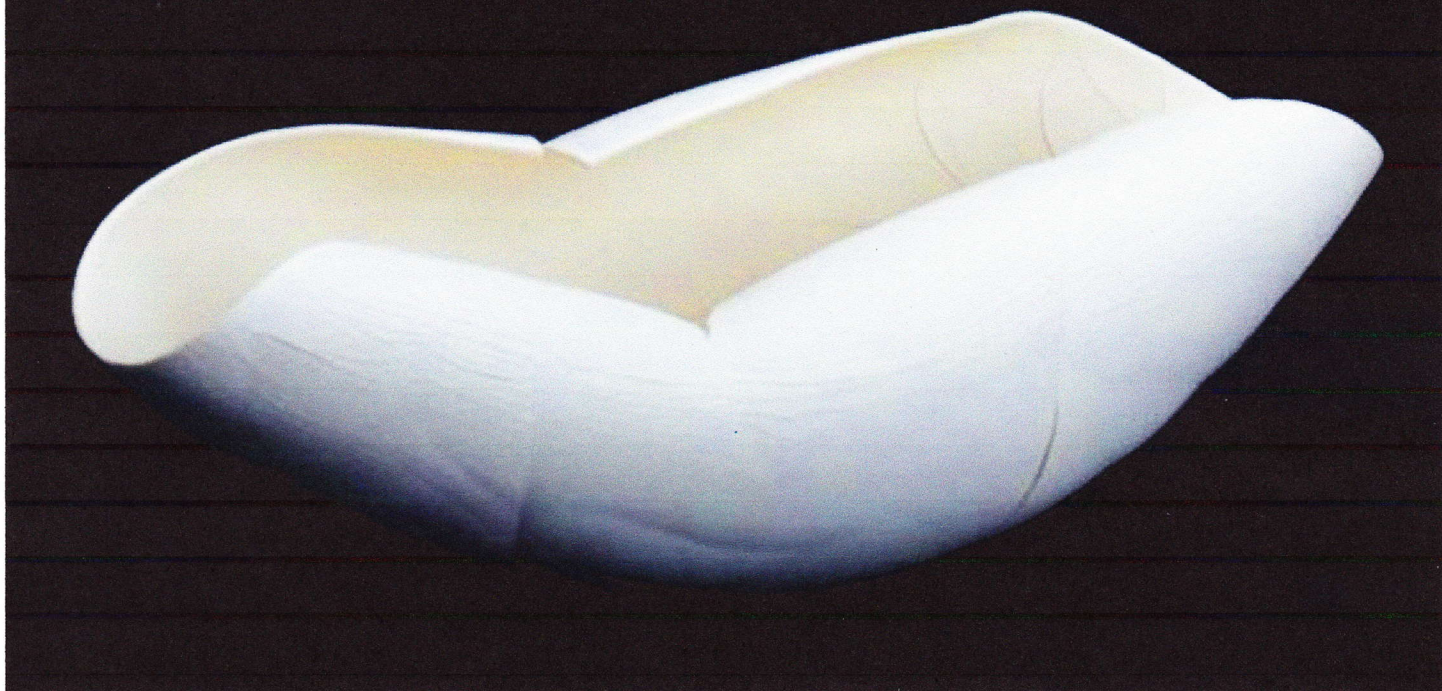


GYEONGGI INTERNATIONAL CERAMIC BIENNALE 2015

# WHY I KEEP GOING



Paula Murray, Canada, Detail, Moving Towards the Light.

by Paula Murray

**K**oreans know how to celebrate ceramics. The Gyeonggi International Ceramics Biennale is an event of incredible scope and scale. I have had the privilege of participating three times since 2009 and wanted to share some of the reasons that keep drawing me back.

This Ceramic Biennale has multiple components and runs concurrently with potter's festivals throughout the province of Gyeonggi. May 2015 marked the opening of the 8th International Competition. Over the last fifteen years the Korea Ceramic Foundation (KOCEF) has established a competition that is regarded as the largest and most comprehensive of its kind in the world. It has become a stage for exploring new horizons in the development of contemporary ceramics, setting new paradigms with broad participation from internationally acclaimed ceramists. This year the Biennale featured six exhibitions in three different cities, a symposium in Seoul, and artist talks and workshops. The main event, the International Competition, was held an hour's drive from Seoul at the Icheon World Ceramic Centre. This venue also hosted an international invitational

exhibition entitled "Convergence and Transcendence", intended to seek and suggest the future of ceramics. Work from Limoges France was on display as well as many works from the KOCEF permanent collection in the Toya Museum.

The Traditional East Asian Ceramic Art, and the 4th Beautiful Korean Ceramics were exhibitions presented in Gwangju. These exhibitions were very much about the vessel; showing ceramics that connect the cultural heritage of Korea, Taiwan and Japan and the spirit and beauty of traditional Korean ceramics suited for modern times by artists today.

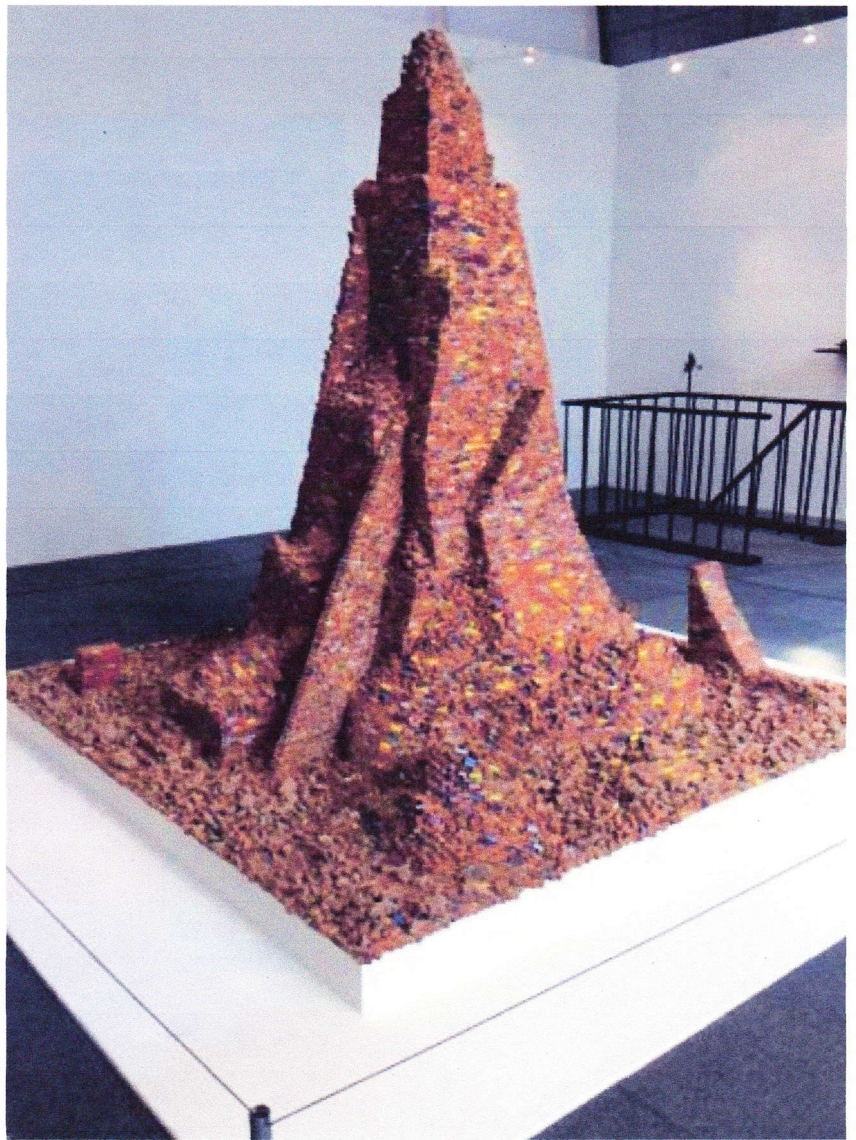
In Yeosu, Multi-coloured Stories to Know offered a variety of works that were the result of collaborations between Korean ceramic artists and artists from other genres including lighting, fashion, and animation. A very moving exhibition of exceptional work made by the disabled community underscored how deeply working with clay is integrated in this society.

The context in which the exhibitions are presented is profoundly rich. Gyeonggi is a province in South Korea that abounds with historic kiln sites. Thousands of people flock to these festival sites where families can enjoy the





Paula Murray with Mr. Lee Wan-Hee, Chairperson.



Andrew Burton, UK, Gold Prize, *Things Fall Apart*, 200 x 200 x 220 cm.

exhibitions; and can partake in fun and games, live music, fireworks, good food, observe the firing of a wood kiln, and purchase the wares of hundreds of potters.

Many exhibiting artists find the means to attend the opening week of the exhibition. In previous years we were all offered the chance to take in a cultural tour of Korea. This was a great opportunity to develop friendships and connections from around the world. I was disappointed this year when it was restricted to invited guests only. However, I found ample time within my week to establish a wonderful network despite this. In 2013 and again this year there was a wonderful exchange opportunity when I presented a talk about my work for participants and students.

I am moved by the reverence the Koreans have for their cultural heritage and how they draw on this strength to keep ceramics relevant in society; by embracing the present and looking to the future. This attitude is reflected in how the KOCEF is continually evolving its vision, aspirations, and

processes for the international competition. From its inception until 2009, the competition was divided into two categories: ceramics for expression and ceramics for use. These boundaries have dissolved and have been replaced by an interest in contemporary ceramic art as it is developing in parallel with change in the contemporary visual art world. This year, an international committee was selected, who agreed upon a preliminary jury to select the work included in the competition, and a second jury was selected to allocate the prizes. Previously, the juries were often comprised of academics and practicing artists. This year, the jury of 11 people included art critics, curators, and artistic directors well acquainted with the overall trends of contemporary art. There was no discussion amongst the jurors. Names, biographies and countries of origin were withheld. Only the artist statements and images were available to consider. A total of 2,629 entries by 1,470 artists from 74 countries were received. Originally 108





Jenna Turner, Canada, *Subversion*, 360 cm x 360 cm, wallpaper

pieces by 101 artists were chosen, but 11 withdrew due to the prohibitive costs of installation and shipment to Korea. A second group of jurors came on site to determine the ten prizewinners, which comes with significant cash; the Grand Prize being \$50,000 USD.

Given that the call for this competition looked towards the future of ceramics, it was interesting to observe that several of the entries were devoid of clay. Conceptual aspects of work were given more attention than technical aspects. Of the works that passed the preliminary screening, about 60 were made of clay, 25 works were mixed media, eight were films, and five were installations.

The tired debate of art versus craft - beaten to death - had no place in this forum. There was strong interest in works of social, economic, and political commentary; of the tension between industry and labour; and of decay and waste, as evidenced by the top prizewinners. Grand Prize winner Neil Brownsword's fabulous piece, *National*

## FUSION MAGAZINE SPOTLIGHT FEATURED EMERGING ARTIST

### Cheng Ou Yu

I begin my making process by combining contemporary Western approaches (trying to work towards innovation and originality) with the influence of Chinese traditions in ceramics (a high level of respect for historical forms and using repetition and technique to reach the ideals of "quality" and "beauty").

I use pottery techniques to inform my design process and this is one of the core concepts in my studio practice. I use molds as a method of exploring and generating new forms, by interchanging various parts of the mold itself. This has become a game that introduces an exciting element of play into the making. Molds, for me, are not about mass production. My process is inefficient yet flexible in several ways. By changing the mold parts each time and shaping the objects by hand, each piece is unique. This allows the user to get a sense of making through the details I leave on each piece.

As a designer-maker, I am also working on the possibilities of using visual language to explore the relationships, feelings and situations between me and other people. In Canada and China, we have contrasting understandings of the generation gap, how couples disagree, and so forth. Sometimes the distances between people are invisible but still strongly felt. In my vase series, each form has a different identity, yet there is a connection between the objects. They are diverse; the relationships are strong.







Neil Brownsword, UK, Grand Prize Winner, *National Treasure*, 250 x 250 x 250 cm, Ceramic, Performance, Video, Tools.

*Treasure*, addressed the decline of the ceramic industry in Stoke-on-Trent, England, and questioned the value and relevance of intergenerational skills through the use of performance, film, and repurposed remnants salvaged from the factory.

The daylong symposium that preceded the opening of the exhibition was very thought provoking. Several papers challenged contemporary practice rooted in process. When I spoke with Dr. Jorunn Veitberg, professor in Bergen, Norway and Gothenburg, Sweden, she suggested that the inclination towards incorporating new media with clay had come about because contemporary society does not know how to read ceramics. Kyoungsoon Park, the artistic director of the Biennale wrote in his comments "I am concerned that works of exquisite and delicate technologies are perhaps being neglected." We observe a proliferation

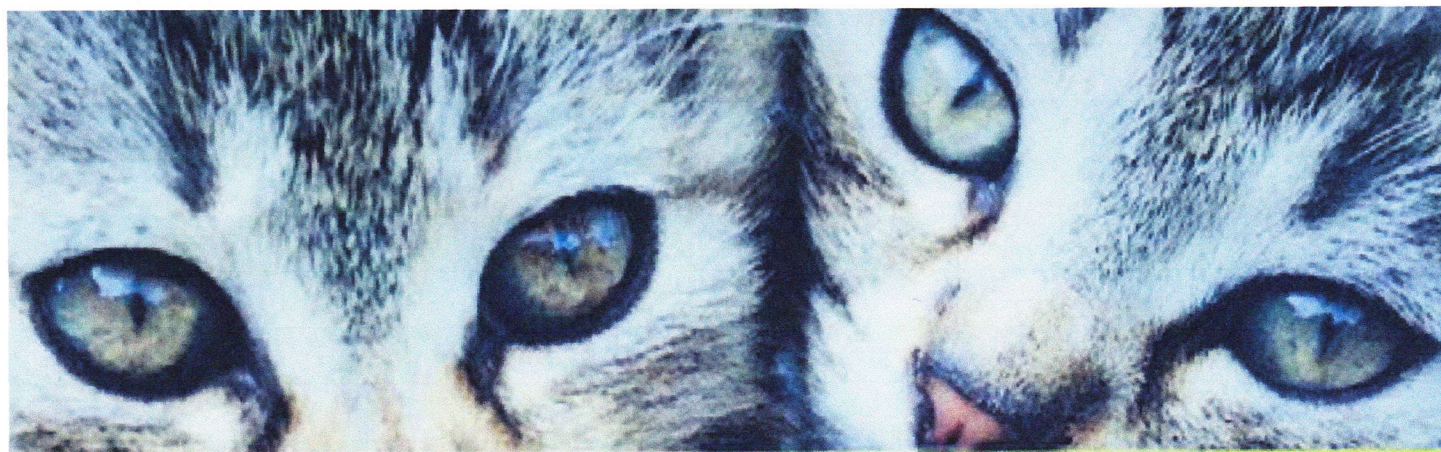
of literal imagery and narrative content in contemporary practice. Our fascination with new media, new technologies, 3D printing are very seductive. The broad spectrum of contemporary practice was all represented here to experience and consider.

I work alone in my studio. It is good to be challenged, to stretch and re-examine one's choices. It is exciting to view my work through an international lens, to see where it fits or where it doesn't, or how it contributes to this discourse. The line added to my C.V. is indeed a great honour. More importantly the stimulation I receive from participating in this forum and how it informs my work when I return is central to why I find the time and money to make the work, ship the work, and go. It is an investment in my professional development that I feel is a good one.





Paula Murray, Canada, *Moving Towards the Light*, 250 x 150 x 40 cm, ceramic



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