

MOMIUS

SPACE IS THE PLANE: CHRIS CURRERI EXPLODES HIS MEDIUM AT THE GARDINER MUSEUM

BY [ULYSSES CASTELLANOS](#) • [REVIEWS](#) • JULY 1, 2015

Walking into the foyer of the Gardiner Museum, one comes face-to-face with what appears to be a segment taken directly from an archaeological dig. That, or it resembles an open casket in a Victorian parlor (that long lost relative of today's living room). Either way, Chris Curreri's *So Be It* directs our gaze downwards where, at hip height, shards of grey-black pottery twist and contort around one another like the guts of animals covering the floor of a slaughter house, or the victims of a mass murder as they lay in an open pit. That an abstract work evokes so many analogies is a testament to its activating strength.

Arranged in a rectangular shape, it quickly becomes apparent that the forms of clay are not broken, but unrealized vessels, held together by thin clay "tendrils" that intertwine the larger bodies in a haphazard fashion, like earthen snakes holding the mass together. And even though, within its parameters, chaos reigns supreme, the edges of this mass are perfectly rectangular, coinciding with the rectangular shape of the plinth, whose top surface has the dimensions of the "golden rectangle" and which has been painted black like the clay it supports.

What also becomes clear is that, contrary to first impressions, the twisted ceramics in *So Be It* are not "fresh" clay, but have been glazed over, possibly several times, to appear like wet clay, and then fired to set them in their final form(s).

There is something orgiastic about the way in which the unrealized pots of sculpture intertwine. Like the insects, earthworms, and other vermin shagging each other over partial skeletons in Jake and Dinos Chapman's *SEX II*, Curreri's pots appear to engage in a brutish sexual intercourse (or perhaps an elaborate biotechnological thought process). Like an unidentified alien-race hybrid between carbon-based and silicone-based life forms, Curreri's clay figures are frozen in mid-motion, but one gets the feeling that something is about to go down. Because while there is

something peaceful about these clay shapes, there is something ominous, too. I think of the “pod” in *Alien*, how elegant, simple, and deadly is its nature.

Yet in contrast to the grotesquerie of the Chapman brothers’ sculpture, Curreri’s piece takes on a certain uncanny abstraction, reminiscent of the feeling of Louise Nevelson. Her inscrutable monochromatic wooden forms echo the sense that these tendrils of matter, which feel alive, cognizant, self-aware, and part of a teeming cycle of life and death.

The other half of Curreri’s binary installation accentuates the cyclical thematic of the work: directly in front of the sculptural piece is a series of black-and-white photographs taken at the Gardiner Museum’s clay studio with a 35 mm SLR chemical camera. The photographs depict a process that loops onto itself: rejected, unfired pots are thrown into a pile where they accumulate and form a tangled mass resembling the “unrealized” pots in Curreri’s sculpture.

These unfired pots are shown in different states of “maltreatment”; they have been thrown down, slapped about, lumped together, deformed, depressed, sometimes shoved inside bags (an image reminiscent of the post-mortem treatment that is meted onto the broken bodies of torture victims by their captors), then pressed into a pugmill, and the material that was once mounded and setting becomes usable again, wet and pliable.

The wetness of the clay in the photographic images is echoed by the “wetness” of the clay pieces in the sculpture, but where the clay in the sculpture is in a state of stasis, that which is depicted in the photographic images is in a constant state of flux.

Moreover, Curreri’s wet clay photos have been partially solarized, which sets them in direct conversation with the fired clay of the sculpture. A process that was popularized by modern masters like Man Ray and László Moholy Nagy, solarizing involves the exposing of certain parts of the print to light during the development process, so as to create a kind of “negative” image. Curreri achieves this by stopping the image from forming completely, washing off the developer in mid-process, covering part of the image, exposing the desired area with a pen light, and re-immersing the print back in the developer.

Thus, for Curreri, the clay studio becomes an analogy for what goes on in the darkroom, where the latent image is malleable until the moment that it’s fixed. The firing of the clay becomes akin to the fixing of the photograph.

Compellingly, *So Be It* is situated next to the Mesoamerican exhibit, with its fine examples of Inca, Moche, Chimu, Mayan, and Aztec clay artifacts. Curreri's unrealized vessels remind me of the broken pottery and clay objects found in archaeological digs, and on display are some of the finest examples of pre-Columbian ceramics: the Moche – who was, arguably, the Andean region's answer to the Assyrians of ancient Mesopotamia (an iconic Moche ceramic image shows a figure that has been flayed alive and tied to a dead tree stump, as a ravenous bird picks away at its exposed eyeball) – created such highly-detailed, realistic ceramic portraits as to rival anything that the Greeks and Romans produced. The Mesoamericans, to a great degree, worshipped through death, and human sacrifice was at its culture's center. Human lives were given to gods in order to ensure life in an ongoing feedback-loop of tribute payment through that most valuable of human commodities, our own life blood, and redemption by means of the renewal of the life cycle (affecting the crops, the people, and the state). It is a Bacchanal of creation and destruction echoed beautifully in Curreri's piece. How refreshing that a contemporary clay sculpture-cum-photo exhibit can be in direct conversation with 1,000-year-old Mesoamerican ceramic *objets d'art*. *So Be It* produces rings.

In opposition to traditional ideas of “art vs. craft,” when it comes to a traditional, ancient material like clay, Curreri simply treats the materiality argument as so much unnecessary baggage and goes straight for the jugular, the idea. He is more interested in the concept of the artist-as-researcher, and the exploration of the creative process(es) across media, as a way of facing one's fears/discomforts at being in that scary place, the studio (whether ceramics studio or darkroom), busying himself in experimentation, in much the same way that a physicist tests different gasses for their density and composition through light refractions.

While disputes over the medium's merits, lineage, and status rage on, Curreri explodes these concerns by making content the *thing*. And in the current atmosphere (so rife with quibbling) one can't help but cheer for someone who brings a gun to a knife fight, armed, as it were, with a good thesis, and precise execution.

-Castellanos, Ulysses. “Space Is The Plane: Chris Curreri Explodes His Medium At The Gardiner Museum”, *Momus*, July 1, 2015.