



Entertainment / Visual Arts

Chris Curreri practises his hand-eye coordination

Gardiner exhibit highlights his hobby of making pottery, which he finds more like picture-making than he might have imagined.



Chris Curreri with his installation at the Gardiner Museum, where the Sobey-nominated artist is having a show of his photography for Contact alongside a sculptural piece in black clay. Both are drawn from a serious sideline of pottery making, which he sees as a perfect amalgam to his picture making.

By: Murray Whyte Visual arts, Published on Sat May 02 2015

The month of May in Toronto, in the art world at least, tends heavily toward the photographic, what with the Contact Festival gathering momentum the past couple of decades and infiltrating ever more art venues with its picture-taking priority.

So it's maybe with a little surprise that, on a recent bright spring day, you'd find Chris Curreri, one of the city's — and the medium's — rising stars unpacking newspaper-stuffed boxes filled with clusters of black potted clay in the foyer of the Gardiner Museum, home to all things ceramic.

Maybe, but not really. For the past few years, Curreri, a finalist for the Sobey Art Award last year, has been taking pottery classes with fellow artist and friend Stephen Andrews, and a synergy between his image-making and clay-moulding emerged in his mind early on.

“I think of them similarly,” Curreri says, carefully placing hunks of the hardened black ooze on tabletops. “For me, working in a darkroom, there’s this idea that an image is malleable until it becomes fixed. Clay works the same way.”

At the Gardiner, Curreri is opening *So Be It*, an exhibition of recent photographs he made in the Gardiner’s potting studio downstairs. For the first time, though, he’s also showing his own hand, however able (“I can barely make a decent cup,” he laughs), with a 1.2-by-2.4-metre installation of black clay over which he’s been labouring since December.

It’s an eerie, darkly luminous thing. Deflated bowls and pots lie in heaps amid snarls and fragments of the material, conveying a quietly menacing sense of dread.

The provocative leap from eye to mind isn’t hard — a charred boneyard, maybe, or a trough of spilled entrails — and here he makes one of his priorities his most explicit. Curreri has always strained, and purposefully, at photography’s two dimensions, translating with aplomb the visceral intensities of a sensual world. Making pictures of the Gardiner’s studio in moody black and white, he embraced the medium’s own tactile qualities.

That’s where the similarity comes in: printing in the darkroom, Curreri embraced the medium’s inherent unpredictabilities. Some pictures are simple and straightforward, like the suggestive extrusion of raw clay from a pipe; others, like a particularly expressive cluster of slumped vessels, he’s deliberately left undercooked in photographic terms, with the bottom of the frame fading into darkness.

“It was so intimate, making them,” Curreri says. “There was a duration that gives me a really different relationship to them; I remember how hard it was.”

In a heavily digitized world of instant, click-and-send photography, this is old school thinking and Curreri, not yet 40, has about him the air of both anachronism and prescience.

At the centre of the glorious mess that is *Contact* — 200-plus exhibitions, taking place in anything from major museums to obscure cafés to, in one case, a semi-outdoor affair on Toronto Island — is a show at MOCCA that gloms onto the idea of photography as material, tangible and real.

Its proponents? Younger artists, for the most part, exploring the medium’s forgotten tactility as a response to our instant-everything world. Curreri may not fall in this camp entirely, but the notion of picture-making as a changeable, fickle process resonated with a recent project and here’s where the Gardiner comes in.

As a neophyte pottery student, Curreri became fascinated with the frustrations of the form and attracted to its failures. Every class would see aborted efforts — pots, bowls and cups, still wet, collapsed and deflated, not quite able to hold their forms — heaped in mounds to be recycled to virgin clay for the next go-round.

“I realized I kept taking pictures of them with my phone and showing them to people: ‘Look at this, it’s so amazing,’” he says. “I had been thinking about bodies a lot and the clay just had this fleshy quality to it. I realized it was something I could work with.”

A heap of clay, whether virgin or freighted with failed intent, had the same inherent possibilities as making pictures. For Curreri, though, the seeing has been in the doing.

“Because we live so much online right now, I think, there was this attraction for me: it’s so physical,” he says. “I think of it as in a place of potential. They’re not calcified, acceptable things; they’re still in flux. I like that.”

Chris Curreri: *So Be It* continues at the Gardiner Museum, 111 Queen’s Park Circle, to May 31.

- Whyte, Murray. “Chris Curreri practices his hand-eye coordination”,
Toronto Star, Saturday, May 2, 2015