



Lidded Jar by Melissa Mencini.

SURFACE TREATMENT

What: "Ceramic Showdown: Gesture, Surface, Expression"
Where: STC Library Art Gallery, Bldg. F, 3201 W Pecan Blvd
STC Visual Arts Gallery, Bldg. B-103
When: June 12-August 9, 2019
Hours: 7am-9:30pm Mon-Thurs, 8am-7pm. Library Art Gallery
8am-3pm Tues., Wed., Thurs. Visual Arts Gallery
Info: 956) 872-3488

Clay in Every Way

Academic and professional ceramicists exhibit differing styles of clay work in STC's double summer exhibition.

BY NANCY MOYER

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

Continuing the summer ritual at STC, two clay exhibits are happening simultaneously in the 13th annual South Texas Ceramic Showdown. In the Visual Arts Gallery, ceramic collaborations by students and faculty from thirteen colleges and universities are on display. The Library Art Gallery features the work of two professionally known ceramicists, George McCauley, who maintains a studio at his home in Helena, Montana; and Melissa Mencini from Austin, a full-time studio artist and educator. Both exhibitions are noteworthy.

The student-faculty collaborative show reveals ceramics styles from diverse educational institutions. There is a predominance of hand-built works here, both sculptural and functional, some of which are excellent, but many come with a feeling that ideas are still at the incubation

stage. A three-part piece from Texas A&M-Kingsville lacks internal coherence, but the stunning third part contains innumerable and beautifully made clay butterflies whose anticipated flight is foiled by a large mesh net reaching the ceiling.

McCauley and Mencini, both established artists, throw functional vessels; McCauley also works with slabs. They postulate opposing aesthetics. Immediately upon entering the gallery, we notice that their works are displayed in close proximity to each other, underlining the reality of their artistic disagreement - a battle between elegance and the relaxed fit is being waged here. McCauley's relaxed style seems to mock the formality and painstaking precision that is seen in Mencini's highly controlled designs. McCauley flows with the natural rhythms of the material, while Mencini bends the material to her will.

There is an Asian influence alive in McCauley's ceramics; his bowls and arrangements with utensils speak of personal ceremony. Not only chopsticks, but spoons and forks live in the world of his plates and bowls. "I used to throw really well, but now I have a different attitude about it, and I make all the utensils," he professed. "To me this is kind of ceremonial, but not about the tea ceremony; it's our own ceremony." The pieces are comfortable and endearing, inviting a spontaneous relationship. They are about the immediacy and the act of making, with not much regard for academia or technical considerations. "I'm more interested in the flaws than the flawless," he added. And truly, although a master of various clays and wood firings, his finished pieces seem to scoff at ultimate control, as in "Dish with Fork" with its casual attitude and carefree patterned fork.

With Mencini, control is to be lauded. Precision thrown porcelains are decorated in tightly controlled, botanical-like decorations of flowers and other observations of nature. Her works are elegant in their exactness and seen as being part of a formal event. She is intent on making work that will be lived with and used to serve food; the notion of interacting with food, objects, and people on a daily basis brings a social celebration to Mencini's table. "As formal as my work is," she explained, "I deal with a lot of imagery from pop culture that takes the seriousness out of the work by bringing in a playful aspect of existence, to remind you to sit back, laugh, and enjoy your surroundings." Mencini relies on playful surface motifs such as birds, insects, flowers, and vines. Tiny natural motifs of 23k gold epitomize her playful control. These pieces are dignified; they would not prop their feet on your coffee table. McCauley's works would, but you wouldn't mind.

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