

Art **Reviews** Weekend

More Now than Then: When Art Reaches Back



by Thomas Micchelli
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Joyce Robins, "Two Multi-Color Balls" (2002), clay, glaze, paint, 3 x 3 x 5 inches (all photographs by the author for Hyperallergic)

The current group show at Canada, *Anthropocene*, casts a very wide net. The term, which means “new human,” is the name given to the current geological period, which began with the transition from hunting-gathering to agriculture, leading to the foundation of formal societies.

But the exhibition, for the most part, doesn't directly deal with civilization's birth or its exponentially dire assaults on the world's ecosystems. Rather, it is a lively, hedonistic miscellany of a summer show that highlights several artists whose work in clay stitches the exhibition together and provides a link

to humankind's earliest manifestations of industry.

Sally Saul's glazed ceramic "Traveling" (1998), which greets you at the gallery door, is one of the exhibition's few overt gestures toward the primitive. (Al Freeman's "Modern Stone Age," 2014, made from tree branches, rope and an orange drop cloth, and Megan Petras's Lascaux-like "Black Hands," also 2014, in fabric dye on canvas are two others.)

Saul's sculpture depicts two diminutive figures, a man and a woman, their faces and hair styles too oddly modern for their bodies, which are naked and covered in fur. The couple's expressions, disconsolate and anxiety-ridden, also come across as more now than then, as they trudge, arms around each other's shoulders, across a patch of flowered turf.



Sally Saul, "Traveling" (1998), glazed ceramic, 17 x 10 x 7 inches

If it weren't done 16 years ago, "Traveling" would seem custom-made for the show's theme, collapsing 8,000 years of human development — from the figures' animal-like bodies to their worried, modern-day heads — into a single piece.

Although nothing else in the exhibition is as explicitly relatable to the Anthropocene age, there are light, teasing connections throughout. Three other richly textured glazed ceramic pieces by Saul sport exuberantly colored forms that swell outward in a

Venus of Willendorf sort of way, while the similarly bulbous glazed earthenware amphorae of Elisabeth Kley, bedecked in floral patterns of green, white, orange, blue and black, recall not only their ancient Greek forebears but also kitschy mid-20th-century home furnishings, one version of the past coupled onto another.

Kley's three vessels are placed, in an almost too-perfect juxtaposition, in front of Alicia Gibson's madly scrambled "Counterintuitive" and "Feminist Narcissism" (both 2014), two paintings in oil and mixed media that combine physical objects with painted patterns, shapes, images, letters and words, including the artist's first name in "Counterintuitive" and fragments of the title in "Feminist Narcissism." In another instance of doubling the past, these paintings look like an early American Modernist's response to Cubism, à la Joseph Stella or Marsden Hartley, detonated by the Wild Style of the 1980s.

In contrast, the two paintings beside Gibson's, Adrienne Rubinstein's brushy and colorful oil-on-canvas renderings of flowers, "Pollination 1" and "Pollination 2" (both 2014), are so resolutely old school in their hybridization of Henri Matisse and Blaue Reiter that their stylistic anachronisms somehow feel fresh and vital. Another strange but agreeable combination can be found in Chris Hood's two Jasper-Johns-meets-the-New-Casualists paintings, "Interloper Day Glo" and "Trying to get to Tijuana" (both 2014), in which a flagstone pattern is interrupted by squiggles, scrawls and the outlines of mushrooms, flowers and snails.

Elizabeth Kley, "Large Green Lotus Three Part Bottle" (2012) and "Large Gold & Lime Three Part Bottle" (2012), both glazed earthenware, 35 inches tall; Alicia Gibson, "Counterintuitive" (2014) and "Feminist Narcissism" (2014), both oil, mixed media on canvas, 60 x 46 inches

If the paintings by Gibson, Rubinstein and Hood seem to conflate the recent past (that is, recent in terms of art's 30,000-year history) with the present, Bram Bogart's mixed-media piece "Loretta" (2009) fuses the primordial with Minimalism and gestural abstraction. Resembling two scoops of muck dredged from the La Brea Tar Pits — one painted white and the other blue — the piece exerts a muscular, magnetic force through the sheer weight and depth of its commanding chunkiness.

But the sculptures in clay, more than any of the show's other works (which also include mixed media pieces by Sarah Cromarty and Peter Harkawik and an oil painting by Stuart Lorimer), by dint of their connection to the human hand's earliest forays with a pliable material, present the most cogent sense of continuity across the Anthropocene age.

Joyce Robins, whose solo show at THEODORE: Art in Bushwick, Brooklyn, was **reviewed** in these pages by John Yau on June 15th, contributes six works in clay, glaze and paint (dating from 1994 to 2011) that explore the interactions between



dazzling color and coral-like perforations on convex circular and oval plates. Not to be missed, however, is her droll “Two Multi-Color Balls” from 2002, which protrudes from the wall like a misplaced, radiantly hued doorknob.

Bram Bogart, “Loretta” (2009), mixed media, 12 x 14 inches

The convergence of ancient and contemporary embodied in the wall sculptures of Nicole Cherubini (whose work is also featured in *OK Great REALLY this is ALSO RIDICULOUS* at DCKT, running through August 22nd, which I wrote about two weeks ago) is

exceptional in its understated intensity. The four works — three hexagons and one heptagon, all from this year — are composed of just a few simple elements: in two of the pieces, “Square Root of Four” and an untitled work, those elements are joined along natural-looking cracks and fissures with the inevitability of geological formations. The other two, “O’ Dome” and “Amarillo,” however, venture far afield from their primeval roots.

In the lovely, monochromatic “O’ Dome,” two twists of gravity-defying white clay are fixed in high relief on the front of a slab of ivory-colored earthenware, while in the jarring “Amarillo,” the hexagon’s orderly fields of white and red-flecked yellow are disrupted by a runny, muddy mass of ocher on the right side and a sputum-like blot on the left, streaking and smearing the red-and-yellow field. In these two works, Cherubini, with discreet indirection, taps into the twin impulses of elevation and desecration that individuate humankind from the rest of the animals, but which also make its future so problematic.

Anthropocene continues at CANADA (333 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through August 22.



Nicole Cherubini, "O' Dome" (2014),
earthenware, glaze, pine, oil paint, 20 x 18 x 6
inches

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