

# CERAMICS IN THE EXPANDED FIELD



MASS MoCA

***Ceramics in the Expanded Field*** brings together a group of eight innovative artists who are reshaping the way we think about clay. A medium once segregated from mainstream contemporary art, ceramic has been enthusiastically—even feverishly—embraced over the past decade. This exhibition provides a small snapshot of the current state of the field, bringing together artists from different generations as well as from different backgrounds, some having been formally trained in traditional ceramic methods and others who have come to the medium from other disciplines. All use clay as one material and one language among many, integrating the once-siloed category of ceramic work with photography, video, painting, sculpture, and performance.

While clay has been used by artists and builders for millennia, ceramics has been undervalued due to its link to the domestic sphere, functional and decorative arts, women’s labor as well as Indigenous traditions and those of many marginalized and non-Western cultures. All the work in the exhibition challenges these entrenched cultural and artistic hierarchies. Indeed, each of the artists engages with other crafts and art forms that lie outside “fine art” definitions, including building trades, furniture and automotive design, metal work, nail art, basket-weaving, quilting, and more. This exhibition showcases the dialogues between the artists’ work in clay and the other modes of making within each artist’s practice that inform and feed off it.

These diverse artists also share an impulse to push the scale of ceramics—with MASS MoCA’s expansive galleries offering an opportunity to exhibit large sculpture and ambitious installation-based work. Yet, at the core of the works lay the vessel and the figure, forms long associated with the medium. They are reminders of the intimate, somatic relationships we have with clay in our everyday lives—from the bricks in our buildings to the dishes on our table—even the broken ones on the floor.

Shards and fragments have a role in nearly all of the works, recalling the archaeological records that ceramics provides of cultures past. Each artist invokes both the fragility and preciousness inherent in the medium, by underscoring or



challenging it, all the while reflecting the longevity of clay. At the same time, their employment of these fragments suggests the possibility of reconstructing something new from the pieces, from the past, from the multiplicities they represent—whether in an artwork or the culture at large.

All these artists emphasize how clay is deeply, quietly embedded in our surroundings and in our cultures. They draw out complex sociopolitical and cultural histories, from colonialism and patriarchal systems to capitalism and globalization, all of which are reflected in the material and the objects produced with it. Yet they also express an almost ecstatic joy and beauty in the face of it all—perhaps a form of resistance. Many of the artists look to both family and cultural heritage as inspiration and antidote, preserving stories and methods of making as they simultaneously introduce new ways of creating that give form to contemporary issues of identity and being—and offer alternatives for both.

# NICOLE CHERUBINI

Nicole Cherubini's works draw on thousands of years of pottery traditions. While celebrating the history of the medium, she breaks all its rules, from embellishing her urns with chains to adding color with hardware-store spray paint. Deconstructing how ceramics are made, she often separates its central elements, leaving raw clay visible and letting glaze drip and bleed to underscore its autonomy. Reveling in her materials, she draws attention to the fluidity of the glazes, which range from muddy to bright. Likewise, she draws out the sensuousness of the clay, emphasizing its malleability with visible fingerprints while proving its strength with impossibly tall, human-size vessels. Her works move between rugged and delicate, with ragged shards colliding with frilly layers of clay that look like cake frosting or old-fashioned petticoats. Yet, nothing is fussy or pristine. She lets unexpected cracks, holes, and fissures render the vessels non-functional; these slippages are the "magic" of her process.

While Cherubini has been working with clay for over two decades, for her the work exists in the space between sculpture and painting, where she is free to wield the language of abstraction, engaging with form, composition, color, and texture without the limited expectations assigned to the functional or decorative ceramic pot. With her baroque approach to abstraction—and her impulse to add more—Cherubini's work has been framed as a critique of the purity of Modernism, despite the fact that her sculpture is deeply influenced by Constantin Brancusi, one of the Modernist pioneers. Like her predecessor, Cherubini treats her pedestals as integral to the overall work, though perhaps more radically; by placing clay works on a pedestal, she confirms their heightened status as fine art. Her groupings on a single platform likewise mimic the iconic Brancusi presentations at the Museum of Modern Art, though Cherubini's own clusters



Nicole Cherubini, *stacked (installation view)*, 2019.  
Courtesy of the artist and Marisa Newman Projects

also reference the typical museum display of ceramics and functional objects, denied the space and status awarded to other mediums.

The artist has also included work inspired by the molded plastic shell chair by Charles and Ray Eames. She liberates these sensuous forms from their utilitarian purpose to celebrate their unique shape, while suggesting that aesthetics have their own purpose. Placing *Chair 5—turquoise with shard* (2019) on bronze chair legs that mimic those of a traditional wooden chair, Cherubini connects these industrially fabricated wares to handcraft, while referencing the original chair's prize-winning attribute—designed flexibly for various types of supports, from metal rods to steamed plywood. Cherubini further complicates the relationship of her work to functionality, with a group of new stools made for MASS MoCA visitors' use. The artist molded colored clay into shaped seats—some with backs—their round and square shapes referencing and replicating the forms assembled

on the pedestals. The colors of the clay blend and run, at times taking on the appearance of textiles or marbled paper.

In a second gallery, Cherubini's installation *stacked* (2019) features photographs and wall-mounted ceramics as well as hybrids of the two. The photographic prints are often turned on their sides or obscured by clay, veering them into abstraction. An image of her grandmother's collection of delicate china dishes stacked rather haphazardly in a sideboard is shown alongside an image of some of the carefully displayed paintings and decorative art objects from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (where Cherubini was an artist in residence in 2019). The installation democratizes the objects pictured as well as those in the room. The title suggests the lack of preciousness—value—of objects that can be stacked, while referring to the old-school slang for a woman's ample physique. It also might suggest the odds once stacked against an artist using clay in the fine art world.



Nicole Cherubini, *F-Print 3 (with Fountain)*, 2019.

Terra-cotta, earthenware, glaze, grog, pc-11, pine, ronan paint, with digital archival print on matte paper with custom frame.  
54 × 36 × 11 in. Courtesy of the artist and Marisa Newman Projects

# ARMANDO GUADALUPE CORTÉS

Armando Guadalupe Cortés' works engage the stories embedded in objects and materials. These include the traditions and folklore of Mexico, as well as his own memories of Urequio, a small farming town in Mexico where he was born. In his new installation *Castillos* (2021), Cortés envelops the gallery's columns in a wood and adobe structure. Reaching across both time and distance, the materials reference the traditional clay-based buildings of Mexico and how they are often adapted with the wood construction introduced by German immigrants (who farmed cedar) in the former Northwest of Mexico (today's American Southwest). This physical and metaphorical framework supports a collection of sculptural objects—many made with clay—that, like the hybrid architecture, reflect a mix of cultural influences. A mask made from an armadillo and worn for Las Posadas (pre-Christmas celebration), bottled folk remedies for snake and scorpion bites, and a crown of thorns speak to both Indigenous and Catholic rituals and traditions, expressing the complexity of post-colonial cultural identities.

Cortés' adobe structure also functions as a proscenium for a stage. The platform's circular form is repeated throughout the installation: in an alabaster grinding stone (a material historically used for windows), clay discs embellished with gold and obsidian, traditional mezcal bowls, and brightly colored feather balls (referencing Meso-American creation stories). Additionally, the stage is inspired by the shape of a cockfighting ring. Cortés likens the bravado and posturing of a cockfight, a sport that has a long history in Mexico, to the exaggerated masculinity performed in the culture. This national pastime is also the inspiration for a performance in which the stage can be seen teetering from side to side, forcing the artist and his brother, Juvenal, to enact the precariousness and balancing act of relationships—the awkward dance between men. The artist wears hand-hewn leather sandals which boast a blade like those attached to a fighting cock's dew claw. The artists' movements are recorded in the dusty layer of clay that covers the platform

surface. With each successive performance, more marks are left behind, creating a palimpsest of these ephemeral events, layered and blurred like memories.

Additionally, a video *El Descanso en la Gloria* (2017) documents Cortés performing with clay vessels tied to his long braids. The artist moves his head and body to maneuver his burden as he spins the stoneware in circles, dropping them thudding and crashing onto the floor. The work was inspired by a story handed down from his mother about the first church built in his natal village. It is a tale of a devoted widow named Enequeta who carried water for mixing adobe from the river up a steep hill to the workers. Cortés' performance, which is a reflection of endurance and gendered labor, is also an homage to the ability of the mundane to become not just myth, but a sacred ritual of devotion.



Armando Guadalupe Cortés, *Castillos* (detail), 2021. Adobe, cedar, and mixed media. Site-specific dimensions.  
Courtesy of the artist



# FRANCESCA DIMATTIO

Francesca DiMattio's work enthusiastically embraces pattern and decoration, exploring their relationship to notions of "the feminine." Merging her background as a painter with her work in clay, the artist has created a dynamic 25-foot long ceramic mural for MASS MoCA that draws from the rich history of tile. *Mosaic* (2021) interweaves traditions from different cultures and time periods, incorporating references to Roman tiles, Spanish Majolica, Iznik patterns from Turkey, Delft designs from the Netherlands, and more. Her combinations bring to mind a patchwork quilt or an expressionist painting as much as the mosaic of the title. Unifying the composition, which moves between two-dimensional pattern and perspectival space, black marks applied with help from the artist's two young children cut through the representational fragments and bring the eye to the surface. Simultaneously these painterly gestures make a nod to the traces of muddy feet, sticky fingerprints, and regular spills that are the haphazard ornamentation of domestic life.

Standing in front of this backdrop, the artist's "Caryatids," named after the carved female figures used as columns in classical architecture, are tall totem-like assemblages built with the same disregard for usual cultural hierarchies between high and low, and East and West, that are exploded in the mural. DiMattio irreverently combines historical artifacts with everyday items—all of which she builds in clay. An ancient Greek goddess emerges from a 40-pound trash bag in *Trash Bag Caryatid* (2021) which is covered in a bright yellow glaze motif inspired by the decorative porcelain produced by Sèvres, the French royal factory. Once again in these new works from the series, DiMattio foregrounds motherhood and domestic labor—from setting the table to picking up Legos. Made during the pandemic, the figures are both monstrous and majestic, with toys, rugs, and floral motifs mimicking those of German Meissen porcelain proliferating like a virus. The flamboyant hybrids turn standard notions of beauty and taste on their heads.

In the same vein, the monumental work *Chandelabra II* (2015) combines the form of a chandelier with candelabras and candlesticks, figurines, and floral motifs in a massive and exuberant three-tiered confection. Hanging from the ceiling on a thick, industrial chain, it is as awkward as it is impressive, its delicate, fragmented parts cobbled together and transformed into a wonderfully brutish, electrified Frankenstein-like innovation.



Francesca DiMattio, *Chandelabra II*, 2015. Glaze and luster on porcelain and stoneware, epoxy, steel frame. 120 × 96 × 96 in.  
Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York. © Francesca DiMattio

# JESSICA JACKSON HUTCHINS

Throughout her practice, Jessica Jackson Hutchins merges the everyday into her art-making, bringing objects from her own life—even her own home—into her work. Combining old furniture with clay vessels, Hutchins imbues her sculptures with the familiarity and humanity of lived experience. While the figure is often suggested in her work, the sculptures on view were created specifically with the body in mind. Designed to be wearable, several of the works take on the forms of clay aprons, a collar, or a tray. When not being worn or activated through performance, the ceramic sculptures sit on stuffed chairs from Hutchins' mother-in-law's house. Upholstered in plaid and bright flowers, one is missing legs, another is overturned. Like so much of her work, the installation brings up questions about domesticity, labor, and craft—elevating them to a space of fertile aesthetic, even spiritual investigation.

The video in the adjacent gallery presents a performance—titled *Restless Animal Kingdom*—which was developed in conjunction with an exhibition of these sculptures, staged in New York in 2020. Wearing the ceramics along with clothing

screen-printed by the artist, four dancers interact in the space with improvised movements and gestures. They lounge, they work, they commune. They serve beverages and food from the ceramics' recesses and cup-like protrusions. Liquids are spilled, coffee is flung on the wall, and lettuce and orange peels litter the floor, all of which make the scene reminiscent of the ape house at the zoo. Embracing the messiness, the work connects our own existence and search for meaning and survival to the animal kingdom of the title, while the cello music keeps things just civilized enough. The fluids, the languor, the bulbous vessels bring to mind the abjection of bodies, of sex, of babies—the fullness and imperfections of family life and its relationship to making.

Lastly, Hutchins' painting *The Way That You Live* (2015), titled after a Velvet Underground song, includes a folding chair and a commercially made lavender ceramic plate, both secured to a stretched canvas. The title suggests that the way one lives can be as artful as any other creative endeavor, its forms and labor worthy of consideration and contemplation.



Jessica Jackson Hutchins, *Restless Animal Kingdom*, 2020. Performance.  
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. Photo: Peter Kaiser

# KAHLIL ROBERT IRVING

Kahlil Robert Irving's work draws attention to the social histories embedded in our environment—and in the clay he has been working with since the age of 12. Based in St. Louis, which has some of the richest clay deposits in the U.S., along with a history of brick-making, Irving sees in each brick the labor by Black Americans to mine the material that built houses and wealth for white people. Inspired by ancient Antioch mosaics from the 3rd century A.D., which depict both myths and contemporary narratives of daily life, Irving likewise considers his own surroundings through his work—and the stories of race and class reflected in everyday objects.

Works from his **Many Grounds** (*Many Myths*) series feature horizontal slabs on which Irving presents images and decals of various “grounds,” such as concrete, pavement, stone, and grass. Familiar objects sculpted in clay protrude from this patchwork terrain—vases, bowls, an air freshener, a brick—which for a moment can look like remnants of an archaeological excavation, until they begin to take on the appearance of buildings. With these table-top landscapes, set against a wallpaper sky, Irving gives us a bird's-eye view of the cities that usually dwarf us, presenting us with an entirely new vantage point—a nod to the impact of the artist's own first experience on a plane. On the surface of one of these sculptures, ***Shifted Grounds** / Street fries + faces* \ [(*Architecture of Protest*)] (2019), Nike swooshes

act as stand-ins for shoes/people. Snippets from the news suggest “conditions on the ground”: a text reference to July 4, 1776, slavery, and Native American extinction abuts a photo of Patricia Okoumou, who climbed the Statue of Liberty on July 4, 2018, to protest the separation of families at the border. At the opposite corner of this work, a cluster of ceramic fries conjures the image of the Emerald City, while the bottom of a one-liter soda bottle shimmers in blue luster like a fountain. These works speak to both the pains and the pleasures of urban life, from violence to community.

In a nearby gallery sits *WONDER Land of many men, ro-man, Black and Black* (2019), a grid of hand-pressed tiles on a low platform. With bits of white clay embedded in the unglazed stoneware, this work resembles worn asphalt and a night sky—both sites of imagination and possibility for the artist. In tandem with this tile work, Irving presents related collagraphs which similarly take the street and its detritus as subject. The imprints of crushed cans, discarded spoons, and a liquor ad ripped from a magazine form an alternative set of constellations. Irving's many references to food and drink underscore the appetites expressed, the living done in the streets.

The artist's prints of construction fences are also displayed in the same gallery, prompting viewers to once again think about our relative positions: which side of the fence are we on?



Kahlil Robert Irving, *WONDER Land of many men, ro-man, Black and Black*, 2019.  
Unglazed stoneware and white clay, wood. 6 × 55¼ × 55¼ in. Collection of Dennis Freedman



# ANINA MAJOR

Anina Major mines the many shared histories across the African Diaspora to highlight what she calls “connections beyond trauma that manifest through the act of making.” Her work translates the art of plaiting, the basket-weaving of her Bahamian forebears, using clay in the place of palms. Her ceramic vessels archive the ephemeral craft of basketry—while celebrating the making and makers of a cultural tradition that has been co-opted by the desires and demands of the tourist market.

To recontextualize how one may encounter such woven vessels, Major has replaced the standard museum pedestal for her large sculptures with a long wooden dock—a symbol of the many ports where colonized cultures and identities are commodified and used for trade. Crushed shells and ceramic shards suggest the ocean floor—and the flow and force of both water and time. At the foot of the dock, the title of the installation, *All Us Come Across Water*, is lit up in blue neon like a hotel vacancy sign. For the artist, however, this beacon is not intended to lure tourists,

functioning instead “as a rallying call for those disenfranchised by the continuous fabrication of identity for foreign consumption.” The work’s title is inspired by poet Lucille Clifton’s children’s book about an African-American boy searching for his ancestry.

A video on a smaller dock plays a loop of the artist’s hands weaving clay. These motions repeat those of many women and men who came before her and plaited baskets to both keep a tradition alive and to earn a living. In the video, the artist’s decorated fingernails, created by Morgan Dixon, a well-known nail artist in New Orleans, function as a canvas for an ocean-inspired design, painted to appear as water and light bouncing off the waves. Nail art, like basket-weaving, while also a livelihood, is an art, an emblem often associated with Black culture, and a practice of self-expression. Even more, it is an act of self-care, an important part of both the creation and preservation of culture enacted in Major’s work.



Anina Major, *All Us Come Across Water*, 2021. Wood, shells, ceramic shards, neon, video, and glazed stoneware. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist

# ROSE B. SIMPSON

Rose B. Simpson's powerful androgynous figures crafted from clay and metal challenge both gender and Indigenous stereotypes. Wearing necklaces of clay beads, string, and leather, the nearly 8-foot tall sculptures of the artist's *Countdown* series (2020) are various shades of tan and ruddy red and are embellished with black markings on their face and body. Armless and sitting on metal pins, the towering forms conjure both vulnerability and strength. Designed to lean on a window or wall, they remind us of the support systems that sustain us as individuals. Simpson herself is deeply influenced by her community and her family of artists. Her materials reflect both her mother's work in clay and her father's in metal, with Simpson's sculptures bridging the two and suggesting the multiple identities that make up who we are as a whole.

The works' titles suggest both anticipation and a warning that time is running out. Influenced by post-apocalyptic theory and the vision of a future when we all might be in survival mode

like Native peoples are now, Simpson imagines how we might all be free to reinvent—or just be—ourselves. She grew up mostly off the grid in the Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico, learning to live like her Native ancestors. Through her work she asks how we might live sustainably outside a consumer culture, and how we can heal the trauma caused by colonialism and capitalism.

A wall-sized reproduction of a 1985 El Camino that Simpson restored herself functions as a backdrop to the figures. Titled *Maria* (2014), the car speaks to the influence of lowrider culture on the artist's work, along with her training in automotive and metal work. The Santa Clara Pueblo where Simpson lives sits just a mile from Española, New Mexico, the lowrider capital of the world. Simpson painted the car in a black-on-black design that pays homage to the blackware of influential Tewa artist Maria Martinez (1887–1980). Simpson, who is also Tewa, considers the custom car to be her “only attempt at traditional pottery.”



Rose B. Simpson, photograph of *Maria* (2014) printed on vinyl.  
Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco. Photo: Kate Russell

# LINDA SORMIN

Linda Sormin frames her experimental approach to her materials as an effort to “decolonize ceramic narratives”—that is, to free them from prevailing, mostly Eurocentric standards. Unraveling her training in traditional clay methods, the artist challenges values such as “wholeness” and “purity” in her work. She writes that she “pushes clay bodies beyond temperatures they are able to withstand, letting them twist and slump and lose their shape, even collapse.” Her use of broken ceramic shards and scavenged objects reflects these alternative values for making, as well as the fragmented way humans experience our own histories and traumas, both individual and collective. Sormin writes that through objects, raw clay, sound, and image, she gives form and voice to her ancestors, her family’s diasporic experience, and her own stories.

In Sormin’s installation *Stream* (2021), metal scaffolding reaches up two stories and intertwines with the artist’s clay forms, charcoal drawings, watercolors, and scrap metal (flattened oil drums, corrugated debris, and part of a spiral staircase). Embedded in this network are video monitors of varying sizes showing a gush

of abstract and familiar imagery, which moves like the water that is seen, heard, and implied throughout. The artist’s own visceral memory of wading through a river in Thailand (where she lived until the age of five and returned to work as a young adult) influenced the installation. Likewise, she imagines viewers “wading” through her cacophonous multimedia environment, which has three metaphoric levels—lower, middle, and upper—like the architecture of her Batak Toba ancestors in Indonesia.

Sormin’s towering architectural installation is also inspired by her experience of temples in Bangkok and the intricate floral arrangements and gold leaf that worshipers attach to figures of the Buddha. The bits of gilt and cut watercolor paper that the artist attaches to her ceramics reference these offerings—and the way they flutter and shimmer, enlivening the environment. She has also cited the particular influence of Wat Arun, the Temple of the Dawn, and its soaring spires decorated with Chinese porcelain glinting in the light. Sormin’s mash-up of materials conjures a complex mix of cultures and experiences shaped by migration and globalization.



Linda Sormin, *Stream* (detail), 2021. Metal, glazed ceramic, clay, video, audio, and charcoal and watercolor on paper. Site-specific dimensions. Courtesy of the artist and Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco

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## **Ceramics in the Expanded Field**

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Curated by Susan Cross, Senior Curator

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Cover: Armando Guadalupe Cortés, *El Descanso en la Gloria*, 2017. Performance. Courtesy of the artist

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