

Kahlil Robert Irving engages in a kind of deconstructive cultural mapping, most often through the medium of ceramic, to investigate the ways in which material, visual, and political histories collide. His sculptures suggest bricolage — objects constructed from a wide range of materials that in art are most often classified as “mixed media.” But upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that his sculptural forms — cast from Styrofoam food containers, soda bottles, cans, and other found materials — are entirely ceramic. The forms are destroyed, then pieced back together as assemblages that blur the boundary between decadence and the grotesque. The active process of re-collaging mimics abstraction but also can be considered a kind of frozen pixelation. The exhibition *Ephemera* — a title that inherently implies process and points to the act of collecting — features five of Irving’s sculptures.

Irving’s work brings to the fore critical questions about signification: How, through the process of abstraction, can you signify and conjure histories? And what is the relationship of those symbols to the history of ceramics, colonialism, and contemporaneity? Irving’s approach invokes the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, whereby signs function as substitutes and placeholders for the real.¹ Although there is no specific use value for these abstracted works, the iconography is meant to draw parallels between contemporary life and colonialism. Take for instance *Downtown Norfolk Nebraska, 1998* (2017), where images of recognizable symbols and brands such as Vess (a reference to St. Louis) and menthol cigarettes appear alongside traditional Asian porcelain design patterns, the crisp floral decorations of Meissen porcelain, and details that recall familial memories such as flowers, pineapple, and paisley. Irving notes, “There is a meaning and purpose to thinking about colonialism and porcelain production from China.”² The transportation of Asian ceramics to Europe resulted in the replication, adaptation, and modification of Asian motifs — an act that, depending on one’s view, is the product of a racist system. Looking at Irving’s sculptures, the densely layered stories unravel, posing more questions than answers. They are a mediation on the intersections of social economics and race relations, and porcelain as a concretization of privilege and wealth in colonial history. This history is conjoined and complicated by Irving’s own identity as an artist of color within the ceramic arts and the politics and struggles of contemporary existence for underrepresented communities.

A unique component of Irving’s work at the Nerman MoCA is its method of display. His three-dimensional sculptures, for the first time, are presented in vitrines, and thus discursively situated in close proximity to the history of exhibition making — a history with its own relationship to wealth and privilege. But the works reject the usually pristine presentation of vitrine display, for instance by pressing against the glass, or because of their visibly sticky glazing, or through their asymmetrical or imbalanced postures. Cone packs, a temperature measurement tool in the field of ceramics, are also in the vitrines — a direct reference to the ceramic field’s processes as well as to time and temperature more broadly.

Changing the presentational dynamics creates a different affective and discursive interaction, heightening the visibility of these familiar symbols, repurposing and magnifying the iconography of the everyday. Irving’s works are not only memorial objects but also historical case studies that investigate cultural tensions, particularly those that emerge from urban communities. As constructions they provide a platform for reexamination that carries a kind of cathartic, liberating song-cry.³

Notes

¹ See Jean Baudrillard's philosophical treatise *Simulacra and Simulation: The Body, In Theory: History of Cultural Materialism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981). Baudrillard also speaks to the way in which symbols and signs surpass the real and exhibit a kind of hyperreality. His notion of the sign also bears a relationship to ideas of functionality and use.

² Author interview with the artist, October 10, 2017.

³ Rapper Jay-Z's single "Song Cry" (2001) adapts segments of the chorus of Bobby Glenn's "Sounds Like a Love Song" (1976). The introductory lyric begins, "I can't see 'em coming down my eyes / So I got to make this song cry." As the story unfolds, the rapper describes the events that led to the undoing of his first marriage, which coincided with his wealth and fame. It represents a grappling, a moment of confrontation, respite, and reflection, much like the discourse crafted by Irving.