

# Transcendent

Michelle Gregor  
David Kuraoka  
Don Reitz



April – May 2011 Pence Gallery, Davis, California

**T**RASCENDENT IS CURATED BY KATHLEEN HANNA and features ambitious new work by three American ceramics artists: Michelle Gregor, David Kuraoka and Don Reitz. They represent three distinct generations with a common passion for the process and practice of ceramics, including that elusive element that Peter Voulkos so rightly termed “the courting of the accidental”.

Gregor made the work for the *Transcendent* exhibition in an intensive studio work period during her research sabbatical from San Jose City College, where she runs the ceramics department and teaches courses in design. Gregor travelled throughout Europe to

see important work from periods and cultures that historically support sculpture, especially the figure. Her take on this time-honoured style of representation is beautiful, fluid work that celebrates humanity in the 21st century. The power of the work lies in its visual beauty and connection to figurative art across

time and around the world. It is a rare pleasure to engage with her work.

Gregor is a neoclassic ceramics sculptor with a contemporary flavour, inspired by the urban diversity of the San Francisco bay area and informed by previous travel to

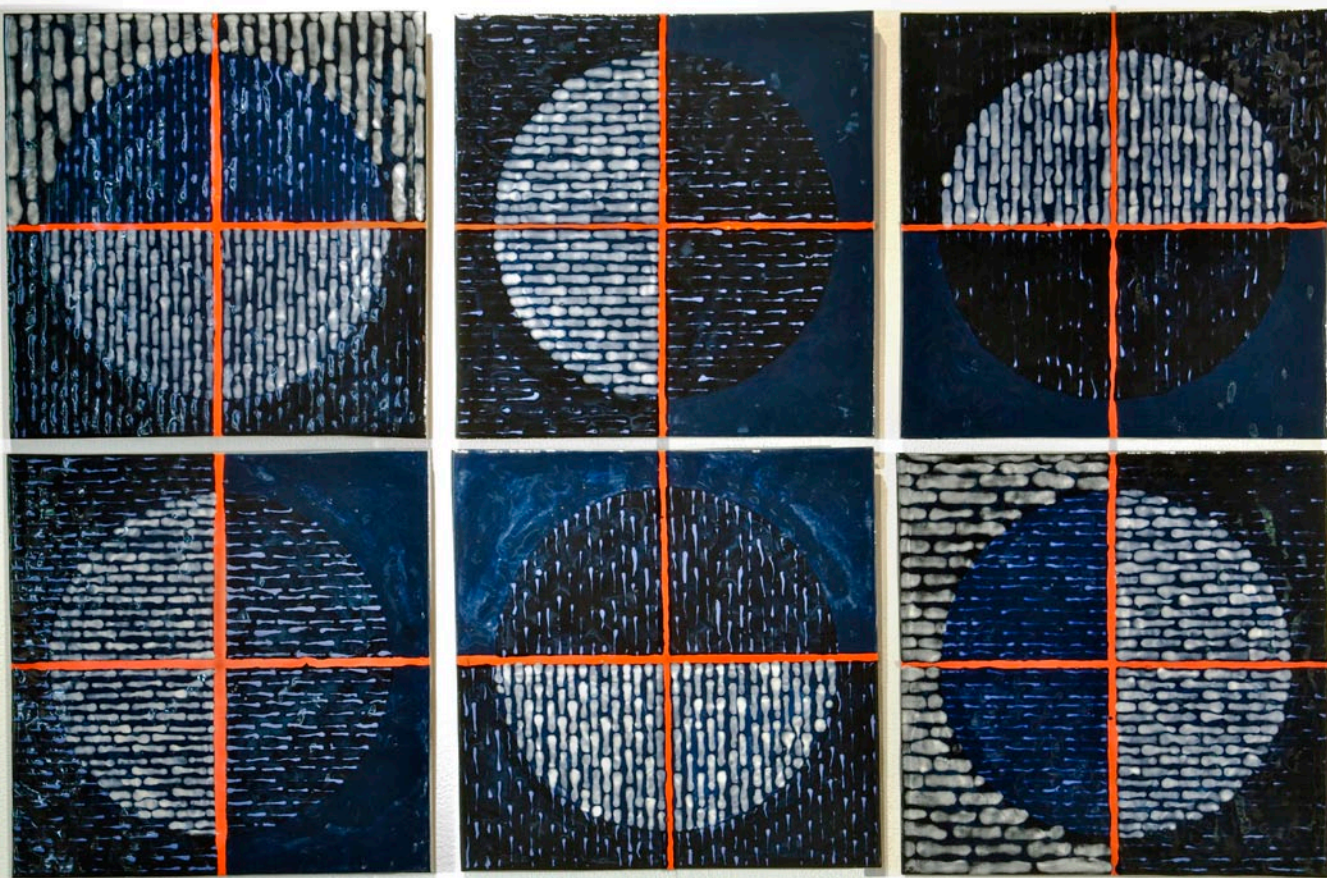
Bali and southeast Asia. The profiles of her lovely early works show kinship with Gandhara stone temple figures of the 4th century. The artist’s figurative work is distinctly heroic and robust, with sensuous volumes, lively muscularity and soft areas of vivid local colour. Interestingly, Gregor makes not even a nod to ceramics Funk traditions; exhibiting in Davis, the heart of California funk town, she is doing her own thing with grace and quiet power.

The life-size figures steal the show completely, despite the appeal and strong composition of their smaller companions in repose. They are distinctly European in sensibility. Their sense of motion is created by full, abstracted drapery that stands in for legs and feet and carries the movement visually down to the floor. There is direction in their gait and purpose in their walk. They are fully self-aware and celebrate that fact. These women are going places and they know what to do when they get there. We can see them in a plaza in Italy doing the marketing, buying bread in France or debating the virtues of the newest play in Barcelona. They are strong and confident with a sense of their place in the world.

The new pieces in *Transcendent* make a visionary leap from Gregor’s previous series. The new figures form a

## *A Review by Susannah Israel*





Facing page, top: Michelle Gregor. *Girl with Birds (Detail)*.

Facing page, below: Michelle Gregor. *Girl in White Dress*.  
Clay, stains, glaze, oxidation fired. All Gregor photos by Linda Fahey.

Above: David Kuraoka. *Moon Phase*.

Oxidation fired with commercial glazes.

Below: David Kuraoka. *Working in the studio*.

All Kuraoka photos by Carol Kuraoka

harmonious group, with proportions, gesture and surface beautifully unified. Gregor has applied the glaze more freely with exuberant brushwork. Her palette has expanded with more reds, orange and light yellow, with delicate shading from light to darker values. This artist has always been bold in her definitive use of black, which she uses to advantage here again. A subtle smoothness of the facial features combines with a soft, consistent surface, acting as a perfect canvas for the application of colour and value to define each piece as an individual. Michelle Gregor distills the best of figurative art traditions worldwide, mixed with contemporary influences, to give us the personal expression of an artist whose first allegiance is to beauty.

Kuraoka's renowned pedagogical approach has successfully fostered a strong work ethic in the practice of the many fine artists he has taught at San Francisco State University. He expected to see new work in the studio at all times and he set the bar high with his own dedication to practice. Now, retirement from teaching finds him continuing to work in the studio at full strength, a master artist at the top of his game. The Kuraoka legacy is a rigorous expectation that his students pursue personal vision with discipline and focus, thus developing both a unique perspective and the technical expertise to carry it out. "What do you have to say?" is his question.

Kuraoka's new work is a continuation of two ongoing series: wall tiles and large, wheel-thrown closed forms. The earlier tiles are a product of that

most ineluctable process, pit-firing, further attesting to the ongoing investigation of form and surface that has characterised Kuraoka's lifelong work. The flat format provides a clay canvas with which Kuraoka composes. The artist courts unpredictable imagery by arranging elements together such as wire, wood and metallic salts; the movement of flames in pit-firing creates delicate, complex marks in conjunction with subtle, warm tones.





Above: Don Reitz. *Triptych*. Salt-fired stoneware wall tiles.  
 Below: Don Reitz. *Midwest*. Salt-fired stoneware.  
 All Reitz images courtesy of the Pence Gallery.

Round forms with textured tops are another Kuraoka signature. Early thrown wheel work had a flattened curve, recalling the tension of a convex meniscus at the top of a glass of water, just before spilling over. Kuraoka consigned these pieces to the vagaries and risks of pit-firing as well. He developed a strong palette based on contrasting velvet blacks, areas of white, cherry and the particular soft yellow of sodium fumes. It is notable that when a series of the forms were cast in bronze, the foundry was excited about the patinas Kuraoka developed and applied to the bronze surface, based on his knowledge of pit-firing alchemy.

As the new work evolved, the forms grew more vertical (up to five feet) and became larger versions of their predecessors. These forms are *puissant* with volume and they occupy space at a human scale. The surfaces changed as Kuraoka began painting on a rich surface of layered glaze patterns in a powerful palette of black, red, white and blue.

It is well-known to students of ceramics that the plastic properties of clay are endowed by its submicroscopic structure, which developed over geologic time during the formation of the planet itself. And there is a molecular quality to these intricate surfaces. The tiles have recurring lines, that open to become ovals, surrounded by exquisite edges; complex patterns made up of more patterns. The tall closed vessels confound our gaze by the visual softness of the glass surface, because the layered application subtly fuses the repetitive blooms together in a fluid composition that seems to still be melting as we watch. We look into it as if we could actually find, on the intricate surfaces of Kuraoka's lissome forms, the submolecular structures that make up the works at their most elemental level. With the development of these sumptuous glaze surfaces, David Kuraoka has created new skins for his sophisticated forms.

Don Reitz's refined and mature body of work at the Pence presents us with elegant elements drawn from two previous lines of inquiry. Reitz is truly a grand master of ceramics. His work is known for the dynamic energy of the powerfully wheel-thrown forms that have been his signature for decades. Reitz has evolved many series in his lifelong *oeuvre*, chief among them are large forms with cylindrical necks ascending from a round base, which are recognised for their authoritative strength and the abstract expressionist sensibilities of his early training. Reitz applies slips and salt fires his work, further advancing their surface expression with impasto painting and the arresting variations of atmospheric firing.

Salt firing is a technique Reitz has pursued and mastered: In the early 1970s, Reitz was at the height of his exploration of salt glazing, firing his work at his studio in Dodgeville, Wisconsin; teaching at University of Wisconsin-Madison and presenting workshops



around the country. Reitz loved salt glazing because it creates a thin, subtly textured surface that enhances the gestural quality of the marks (he) made in wet clay.

Slip-decorated tiles with drawings, mounted on the wall, allow us to meet them face to face. I find this latest work compelling. The tiles grab us and draw us in for a closer look. Reitz was severely injured in an accident years ago and he has discussed how he was sustained by collaborating with his niece. Confined to bed, he exchanged drawings and ideas with the child, working with her playful imagery. Reitz applied these drawings to his plates and tiles, generating a series of work with a new graphic sensibility. He has described this collaboration as his path back to health at a difficult time. Reitz has typically combined incised drawings, relief images and brilliant, expressively applied colour to his platters and tile forms. In this exhibition, the graphic impact is made more sophisticated by a rarified composition, with breathing room for all the images.

Reitz has winnowed and culled the density of his images so that we are contemplating the exact two or three elements he wishes. The graphical impact of the less dense designs makes the work stronger and the overall painting on clay is masterful. Recent work at Mission Clay has provided Reitz with a large canvas (12 x 4 ft terracotta cylinders, extruded for use in industry) and perhaps this is part of why he is composing his work with more space. The relationships established in the wall pieces are sophisticated beyond the exuberant dance of Reitz' earlier work. The clarity of these forms derives from the simple way the elements have been condensed. They linger in the mind.

Reitz has re-presented his thrown work, now sliced in to rings and recombined with cylinders. This work allows us into the interior space of the pieces and also introduces a sense of access to the cylinders where characteristically the viewer of thrown work is never admitted. This rarification of form is masterly and comes from the refinement of elements over more years than many viewers have yet to count. Now these abstracted cylinders and bases are open to our gaze; he is letting us into the work, sharing it at an artistic level, a generous and lovely balance of technique, play and command of the material. At a time when many of his peers are no longer working much, if at all, Don Reitz leaves us eager to see more. Much more. And he shows every promise of fulfilling that wish.

The curatorial creativity that brought us this remarkable exhibition is an important and unusual factor. Pence Director Natalie Nelson added a crucial ingredient to the quality of the exhibition in working with



Don Reitz. *Bowls*. Wood and salt-fired stoneware.  
Image courtesy of the Pence Gallery.

Hanna who is a distinguished curator with fine knowledge and impressive credentials in contemporary ceramics. Hanna's interest in curatorial practice and exhibition design began while a graduate student at San Francisco State University, where she organised a cross-disciplinary group called "The Exhibitionists" to implement alternative spaces on and off campus. Art Department Chair Margery Livingston commissioned Hanna to design and install the university's graduate exhibitions.

Nelson invited Hanna to work with full authority and freedom in curating *Transcendent*. Collaboration among ceramics artists is common; kilns must be loaded and fired, clay and glazes mixed and creative exchange has long characterised the art form by its generous flow. Collaboration among curators is more rare. I like to think of the profound satisfaction it provides Kathleen Hanna and Natalie Nelson to conduct this discourse in their own fields. Their generous inspiration has brought us a powerful and inspiring aesthetic experience.

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Susannah Israel's work is widely shown and appears in private and public collections around the world. Israel has received a Virginia A Groot Foundation grant, an NCECA Resident Scholarship to Archie Bray and a Distinguished Faculty Service Award for curriculum, among other honours. Recent work with colourful theatrical costumes are in the Yingge Ceramics Museum in Taiwan. She is the only artist from the US to win the Fletcher Challenge Premier Award for her piece *Lobo California*, now in the permanent collection in New Zealand. Israel holds an MFA in Ceramics from San Francisco State University and currently teaches for Peralta Colleges in Oakland.