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Dirt on Delight

The subtitle of the show is borne out through objects that display a primal delight in the innate qualities of clay.

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Once you get past the title with its punning reference to clay, perhaps in its Freudian fecal sense, and to scandalous gossip, the most striking thing about "Dirt on Delight: Impulses that Form Clay" is the anti-hierarchical installation of the exhibition. The pattern of display, seemingly as arbitrary as a yard sale, transmits key ideas on an almost subliminal level. Aside from suggesting the characteristics of flux and growth through its branching, fragmented organization, it breezily refuses to tell visitors where or how to look or what to look for. "Dirt on Delight" ignores the wheezy old "sculpture-versus-function" debate that generally dominates the occasional penetration of materials-based art into venues like the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art. These overarching choices are not countered by the gallery handout and a brief wall text or by a few artists' taped responses to the question "How did you come to clay?" (accessible by cell phone and on the Internet). This novel (non)organization is disconcerting to some and liberating for others.

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[1/13] Installation view of "Dirt on Delight" at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

The design of "Dirt on Delight" eschews the expected modernist grid. More strikingly, it ignores walls as pedestrian guides and takes as its center an irregular branching form, a vague y-shape composed of three long rectangular pedestal elements in the middle of the enormous gallery. Around this center there are many occasional islands, for example Ann Agee's brown table, *Agee Manufacturing Co. (Winter Catalogue)*, 2008, stocked with all-white porcelain bouquets of pinked-edged blossoms and dainty feminist figurine groupings related to Dresden shepherdesses.

Convivium, 2008, the title feast suggested by a domestic dining table draped with an embroidered cloth that bears a crazy-collaged papier-mâché structure supporting ceramic vessels.

The “y” is home to numerous tabletop-scale works. In another of its angular bays, four of Betty Woodman’s largish slab-sided *Winged Figures*, 2007, are poised on individual raw wood stands. A few pieces are unexpectedly aligned with the walls of the room. These include Robert Arneson’s inordinately popular, more or less life-size, white-glazed John Figure, 1965, with a face in a toilet and a real footprint on the floor tiles. Arneson, a key figure in the development of 20th-century clay sculpture, has eight pieces in the show, mostly small busts—more than any of the other 21 artists.

Visitor circulation is necessarily inchoate and self-ordained, a situation which admits the real likelihood that some work will not be seen by some visitors. The subtitle of the show, “Impulses That Form Clay,” is borne out through objects that consistently display a primal delight in the innate qualities of clay, impulses often contrary to the historic subjugation of clay—hand-built, wheel-thrown or cast—to the maker’s will and skill.

The earliest works, all from around 1900, are mediocre pieces by George Ohr, perhaps the first ceramist to value and preserve through firing those graceful, organically goofy curves and loops that just happen when you work with clay. Ohr’s iconic vessels do not stand out among nearby pieces by artists of subsequent generations, but the grouping encourages consideration on a phenomenological level and suggests affinities that transcend time.

Several artists, like Arlene Shechet in *Good Ghost* and *LOLL* both 2008, and, from an earlier generation, Viola Frey, in expressive pieces like *Man in the Moon*, ca. 1976, present works that are pinched, scrunched and squeezed: heavily manipulated and deliberately coarse. Not to neglect contrary impulses, other works are ultra precise (even obsessive): Ron Nagle shows small minimal shapes with painterly layered, overglazed surfaces; Ken Price’s hefty elegantly twining but inescapably fecal *Zyko*, 2008, shares its perfectionism with Adrian Saxe’s witty molded paste shrimp with a tiny gold crown, 1985.

The influence of the 18th century, a fruitful moment for clay, is underplayed but evident. Jane Irish’s cast vases ornamented with contemporary vignettes were inspired by Spode. They were originally made to be parts of large installations. Jeffrey Mitchell’s resonant multipart structures, like the blue and white *Some Aspects of Landscape*, 1993, have obvious chinoiserie roots.

There are infinite ways to understand and to approach any material, especially one, like clay, with an ancient cultural heritage. The virtue of “Dirt on Delight” lies in a range of possibilities that is not tied to date, style or theme. Art-making skills are learned and deliberately deployed but, like handwriting, manifest themselves as personal and unique. Undoubtedly, the action of individual predilections, abilities and the unconscious on the production of all art is a given. It is delightful to see it so well illustrated here.