

Recenter: Decolonize the Clay

Lauren Sandler



(Image hands) From Cuneiform tablets to biomedical implants, from the tiles on the space shuttle to the bricks that African-Americans slaves used to build the White House, from the earth out of which we harvest our food to the ubiquitous cup on the kitchen table, clay as cultural material permeates our lives. Clay has the ability to deconstruct hierarchies and move toward an art form of collaboration. The pervasive nature of clay lends itself to address a multitude of theoretical, social, and political issues. This plurality is most apparent when we see the hands that have worked it, hear the voices, and understand the abundance of narratives.

Clay remembers, tells stories, transcends boundaries and geographies, and highlights hidden cracks and intricate textures. A ceramics discourse through the lens of race, gender, class, age, legal status, sexuality, disability, religion, and nationality dismantles systemic inequities, and empowers communities erased and rewritten in the cannon, classroom, gallery and museum. Diversity alone does not decenter dominance, but leaves "others" included at the margins and perpetuates tokenized representation with oppressive institutions protected from critique. Instead

we must unravel clay and let the full scope and breadth, across time and space, of global ceramics emerge. Multiple systems of knowledge thrive as communities and individuals possess faculty with a variety of approaches and unique methodologies. Artists, educators, makers and students, our stories, layered, coiled and re-centered, live in the clay.

The NCECA program invokes the legend of Lewis and Clark and paints an epic of heroic explorers forging a landscape of discovery and manifest destiny. However, the country was not a blank white canvas to be commanded by military might, brutalized under the rhetoric of “civilizing” duty, and mapped with missionary zeal. Instead the earth embodied thousands of years of complex histories, Indigenous nations with sophisticated cultures, elaborate technologies and medicines, trails and canal networks, myriad customs, languages, and objects woven through the clay. The fabricated tale of Lewis and Clark perpetuates a colonizing narrative and power structure, obscures facts, and removes the intricate spectrum of unique lives in the clay. It ignores the experiences of York, an African American slave born in Virginia, given to Clark from his father, separated from his wife, and not provided freedom at the end of the journey. It erases the skills and knowledge of Sacajawea, a Shoshone woman taken by Hidatsa peoples and sold to a French-Canadian fur trader. She worked as translator and guide, a teenager with a child. Within one hundred years of Lewis and Clark’s journey, every Native nation they encountered was displaced and put on reservations.



Pearlware



Colonoware



Shoshone

(Image three pots) To tell the full story we need the Pearlware teapot of Thomas Jefferson who ordered the expedition; the Colonoware of York; and the flat bottom pots of Sacajawea. When we create and distribute a mythology and remove historic veracity, we commit cultural genocide. The West African proverb states, "Until the story of the hunt is told by the lion, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." We must hear the lion, not just the hunter.

To understand the history of clay is to understand the history of colonialism. The global migration of ceramic objects, cultural practices, materials and techniques, reveals theft, appropriation and erasure through imperialism. Empires take land, resources, and commodify culture. They enact policies that criminalize cultural traditions, enforce assimilation, and exploit labor, skills, knowledge and materials. They display wealth and control by collecting ceramic objects as exotica to be possessed. Lewis and Clark under the command of Thomas Jefferson established the role of the collector along their military expedition. They accumulated hundreds of Native American objects that were brought back to Monticello, and later acquired by

museums. The museum claims the space to house heritage, possess tradition, tell dominant cultural narratives and conceal truths. This legacy continues in our museums, galleries, and academia. We must disassemble clay, critique the journey of ceramics, and give historic context to objects in contemporary spaces.

This year a community gallery showcased a Totem Pole and Plate show "to make clay more accessible to the collector [with] pieces that could go in your yard or living room..."¹ This exhibition ignored the colonial history of Totem Poles and the legacies of cultural appropriation and exploitation of Indigenous peoples. Totem is Ojibway in origin. In the US, as part of efforts to Christianize, "civilize," and forcibly assimilate Indigenous people, Totem poles were stolen and sent to museums and collectors. Identity and culture continue to be bought and sold without consent or contribution from artisans, teachers or members of Indigenous communities.

Today, many "encyclopedic museums operate as a cabinet of curiosities"² with arts organizations as the new explorers and artists as "foot soldiers of colonization."³ These institutions open artist residencies and galleries in neighborhoods that are not new frontiers waiting to be discovered. The artist as colonizer displaces residents in long established communities with art histories of their own. Art washing and gentrification changes the composition, demographics and resources of neighborhoods. Artists maintain a unique position to critique power as targets of oppression, as well as perpetrators. Artists, galleries, and museums can instead recognize their accountability in dislocation and partner with existing communities. According to the Melon Foundation⁴, today, 91% of museum board members are white. Although 28% of museum staff are people of color, the majority work in security, maintenance, and human resources. Among museum curators and conservators, 84% are white, 6% Asian, 4% Black, and 3% Latinx. The power of collecting removes context from objects and imposes

mastery. Encyclopedic Museums display within a colonial frame an embedded hierarchy of anonymous artisans and define worth via consumption dictated by patrons. They homogenize complexities and define tradition as a monolithic unchanging culture. To remain viable, the museum must instead reflect its environment: from board members, curators and employees, to artists, audience, content, and methods of presentation. The museum has the opportunity to function as a town hall and inspire. This creates reciprocal places of cooperative education and transformative change. When we look to the clay, wedged histories in objects reveal stories masked and misrepresented. Multiple narratives amplify the expansiveness of ceramics, and manifest a thriving ecology of art and ideas.



The Volume of Flint: Not a Nestle Colony

(Image Flint) My work questions assumptions of normal, power, worth, and how we view others due to difference. Through fragmented forms, allegoric containers and mundane assemblages, I explore mutable topographies of interior obfuscated terrain and exterior dominant perspectives to

share stories erased by legacies of capitalism and colonialism. In this liminal space, I question our fixed narratives of capacity and demythologize status to expose contextual power ascribed to those with more access and greater means. This piece highlights Flint's water crises and Nestle's colonial practices. The discursive vessel conjures the individual and collective body, and the axis upon which viewpoint and significance turn.



Stone Soup Spoon Theory

(Image Stone Soup), In my piece, “Stone Soup Spoon Theory,” I entwine the folk tale “Stone Soup,” in which each villager contributes a morsel of food that creates a meal to feed an entire town, with the analogy “Spoon Theory,” used to describe how people with disabilities sometimes feel, in which one has a limited number of spoons to get through the day. Both stories highlight our interdependence on one another. We all have nourishment to offer and resources we need. Communities in which we nurture responsibility to one another, where we learn from partnership and listening, strengthens all of us. I collaborate with my partner who lives most of her life inside because of her disability. Adding a ramp does not make this space more accessible to her. It

provides an illusion of diversity, of access, without changing the room's complexion. The dominant structure of privilege remains in place, demanding an extra-ordinary, simultaneously hypervisible and invisible body. What is her contribution when she feels overlooked, unseen, and misrepresented? She is not in the room, but she is in the clay, pinched into the narrative.

Disability upends the fallacy of independence. We are precariously connected, reliant on clay bodies that absorb and mold, stretch and hold. Institutions are strengthened, made more dynamic, flexible and elastic, when a multitude of complex aesthetics, perspectives, and experiences build objects, express visions, provide imaginations, and contribute voices.



What if the Dandelion Told the Story of Tea?

(Image Dandelion) With archetypal forms, bifurcation depicts colonialism, as parasitic teacups proliferate to engulf a water bowl. In my piece, "What if the Dandelion Told the Story of Tea?" I investigate cultural histories, as prosaic landscapes emerge. My work occupies the struggle at the precipice where oppositional elements converge. In ceramics we have the opportunity to

chronicle the story of the dandelion, the story of spoons, the story of the lion through clay. What if the story of clay were told from the perspective of cobalt?

I am a white person of mixed Italian and Jewish descent. I have a master's degree in art. I am an educator working with university students. I have a partner, family, and friends. I have a lot of privilege. My role is not to invite others into existing dominant spaces of oppression to which I have access. It is not to gate-keep and maintain historically white institutions. My job is to disrupt the mechanism that furnishes window dressing at the margins, that reinforces exceptionalism without indicting societal culpability, and keeps limited narratives, canonized untruths, and mythologies in place. And always my job is to listen, to learn, to grow. My pedagogy embodies the concept I learned from my mentor, Chris Staley, that of the liminal servant, with fluid roles for teacher and student. Together we strive to build a responsive environment that encourages vulnerability, accountability, cultivates critical self-inquiry, and social justice.

I am also a lesbian with a disabled partner. I am an adjunct who commutes two hours each way, with no job security or benefits. Marriage would not give me health coverage, or assistance and support for my partner. Rather it reinforces existing hegemonic institutions without providing real change. Why should marriage be a requirement for economic, legal, and medical support but health care, education, housing, food, and water are not fundamental rights provided to all individuals regardless of romantic partnerships, employment or legal status? I live in a rural, economically devastated area that is 1/3 Black, 1/3 Latinx, and 1/3 white, with no industry, no public transportation, and limited social services. A county named for an expedition ordered by George Washington that dispossessed, killed and acquired the land of the Indigenous Haudenosaunee people who lived there. The largest institutional structures are the prison and a

multi-disciplinary center for people with disabilities. One punishes and isolates, the other cooperatively partners. We have choices as communities: to criminalize, stigmatize and incarcerate or support, empower, and collaborate. Our collective endeavor is to ensure that we all have resources and access, an interdependent web. We cannot permit institutions to privatize and profit, placing the burden on individuals, defining meaning through productivity. It is our task together to dismantle this corporate model and revision coalitions of intersecting struggles and sustenance.



Tuskegee University

(Image Tuskegee building) The historically black university, Tuskegee University is known for brick structures like this. With limited funding, students and faculty constructed a kiln, made bricks, and designed and built classrooms and dormitory buildings using the raw materials present on campus. Today 70% of university faculty are adjuncts; economically vulnerable, without benefits or security. We teach at universities where student debt, generational

responsibility, access to health care, personal safety and legal status dictate student decisions. A corporate culture dictates life as a teacher, student, and artist. The university built through indentured labor, excluded individuals and exploited communities. With a tradition to empower the elite, the university constrained parameters of scholarship, arts and philosophies, and entrusted the distribution of knowledge to a few over the many. The contemporary neoliberal model enshrines this classism and cannon. It denies access and opportunity through public defunding, becomes a place hostile to broad learning and experimentation, and reifies oppressive methodologies and paternalist environments of racism, misogyny, ageism, classism, religious persecution, homophobia and ableism. In this environment we lose support for the arts, the germs of critical thinking, and the potential to challenge injustice. This is not a sustainable university, nor is it a place for healthy arts education to thrive. The onus for arts and education financing must be a state responsibility, not at the bequest of the neoliberal funder, a noble missionary constructing the world in a hierarchy of benefactor and exceptionalized beholden. Instead let us fundamentally dismantle the notions of both austerity and privatization that position the artist and student as contest winner begging for scraps in a market of panicked scarcity.⁵ The National Center for Educational Statistics states that full-time professors are 84% White, 4% Black, 3% Latinx, 9% Asian/Pacific Islander, and less than 1% Indigenous American.⁶ Ceramics, often devalued, can function as a platform to give voice to those who experience marginalization. Students carry significant resources as knowledge producers and agents for change. As educators and students, mentors and makers, we can come together from disparate locations at the nexus of art and social engagement.

Privilege affords one the ability to use material without knowledge of its journey to one's hands. It is not a burden to investigate, rather a responsibility and opportunity. Through the study

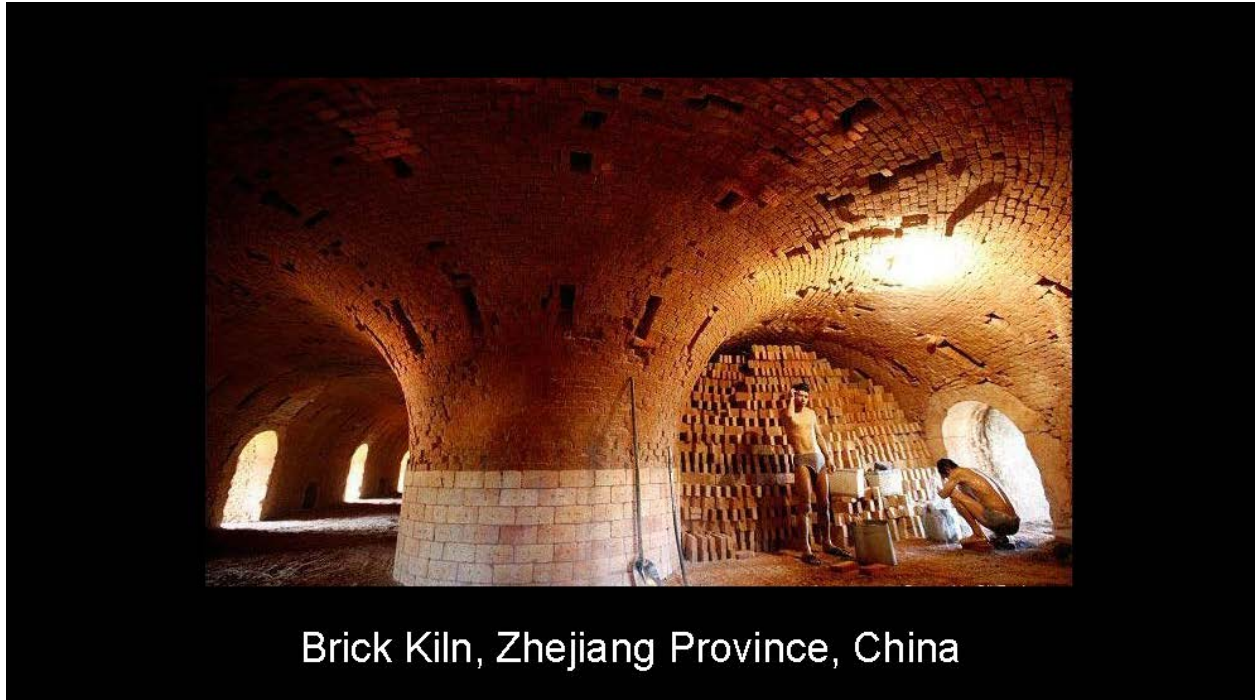
of ceramics, the elements in our clay, the particulars of flux in our work we unearth stories and transform ourselves and one another. Clay remembers, informs, and speaks to those of us not in the room. Clay provides depth and information if we listen. What if the chronicle of clay were told from the perspective of a brick, or cobalt, with transparency from earth to table? Ceramics uses minerals extracted by chemical companies through human rights violations and toxic environmental conditions to provide cobalt for our kilns, batteries, and glazes. The same material becomes worthless or valuable, criminalized or sacred, painful or pleasurable dependent on privilege, power, and place. Where does our clay come from? Who is in the clay, the long coil to our hands?

Fifty percent of the world's cobalt, a common material used in ceramics, comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Multi-national mining companies with soaring profits, exploit raw materials, and use children to work 12-hour days⁷ to extract cobalt used in batteries, phones, computers, military equipment, drones, and in our glazes. The United States extricates raw material wealth through repressive policy, human rights violations, and engages in regime change to support corporate investments and a military industrial complex. The artist CEO utilizes this material, the labor, and bodies.

Clay as material object contains enormous global political, social, and economic content and context. The clay brick is omnipresent in ceramics, in our kilns, schools, architecture, galleries and artwork, but a brick is never just a brick. From mud bricks in Jericho, fired bricks of the Ming Dynasty, and adobe mosques in Mali, from Ancestral Puebloan homes, sacred stupa in Sri Lanka, Houston's Yoruba patterned roads, and ancient palaces in what is now Sudan, bricks cross continents, culture, and content. Bricks build homes for shelter, roads that connect, establish communities, and hearths to cook food, nourish bodies, form vessels to contain treasures, and

preserve the dead. Bricks also construct borders, walls, and towers to imprison, enclose, exclude and oppress. Clay bricks are shaped by the hands of millions of unnamed individuals.

Fingerprints pressed, lives embedded in the clay.



(Image China bricks) This image is of a kiln in China, the worlds largest producer of bricks, with two laborers washing themselves inside the kiln. Today in India, second to China in brick production, an unregulated industry of 10 million bonded laborers toil to produce “blood bricks,” who make 2000 bricks a day.⁸ We cannot unsee, unknow, unspeak, undo the content and context of the brick, the labor chain to supply global demand for shopping malls, factories, and technology. Privilege presumes that we are all on equal footing; democratization is not equity. Look to our bricks, our elemental clay, the components and constituents, with knowledge and recognition for information, discussion and action. Ceramics is the site and the act of resilience and resistance, criticism and commentary. The material in our fists holds a global history and contemporary presence, objects loaded to address sweeping and specific, subjects and themes,

and revolutionary endeavors.

In Western art there is a myth of neutrality of the "white cube," a false notion of aesthetic objectivity, and that material practice can be separated from cultural context.⁹ The ideals of White male supremacy rely on universally embracing its authority as convention. Trace the lie from museum to academia to the art world at large. Consider the structure of AP Art History instruction, with an image set that shows 65% work from the "Western tradition" and 35% from the rest of the world.¹⁰ The Metropolitan Museum of Art has 4% female artists. MOMA has 7% women artists.¹¹ In 2015, the Whitney Museum Inaugural exhibition, "promising fresh perspectives" showed 70% male artists and 30% female, 80% of European descent, 10% Black, 5% Asian, 4% Latinx, and one Indigenous American artist.¹² Responding to public outcry, the 2017 Whitney Biennial, endeavored to improve representation for gender and people of color and included discussion and protest about power, authorship and appropriation. In U.S. academic ceramics, many view the American studio pottery tradition as the default, with Eurocentric history informed by the Arts and Crafts movement and an East Asian Orientalist aesthetic. This composition erases vast realms of past and contemporary practice and neutralizes its own presence as normative. Works that fall outside of this dominant narrative remain denigrated as "primitive" or categorized as identity art, othered, dismissed, devalued, fetishized, and marginalized because of cultural demarcation. A re-centered contemporary ceramic pedagogy, moves from legacies of appropriation, exclusion, and consumption, to a location of accountability and equity.¹³ Decolonization demands cultural competence across biography and geography, millennia and medium, material and practice, to understand nuanced references and expertise in specific vernaculars where artists self-determine their work.



Roxanne Swentzell



Rose B. Simpson

(Image Swentzell and Simpson) Powerful ceramic artists recenter the canon. Roxanne Swentzell, focuses her practice within the spaces of the Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico. An artist of significant merit she shows her sculptures globally, locally, and works within her community. Swentzell destabilizes the dominant narrative and path, and redefines the successful working artist. Swentzell asks, "What if we made us important closer and closer to home...not for tourists or art collectors" [but for the people here?]¹⁴ Swentzell's daughter, Rose B. Simpson, also a ceramic artist of great skill and expertise, continues and transforms this generational ethos.



Sana Musasama

(Image Musasama) Sana Musasama's scarred and torn clay objects, “echo little girls, who once played with joy before they became soldiers in someone else’s war...to make us look closely, in homage and honor of the Unknown/UnNamed.”¹⁵ Her work is "... guided by social consciousness, humanitarian activism, and meaningful interaction with people of many cultures.”¹⁶ In Cambodia she works with girls sold into sexual slavery, teaching craft skills to help them find means of support. She uses clay as a means to teach and bring attention to people’s lives.



Kukuli Velarde

(Image Velarde) Kukuli Velarde uses imagery and objects of pre-Columbian civilizations to speak to her Indigenous ancestry. Entwining personal and historical legacies, she re-creates narratives exploring gender, identity, racism, colonialism, where the indigenous reclaim power and possess ownership of a stolen and appropriated aesthetic.

To decolonize clay, we must hear the clay bodies in the room, the loud and quiet, buried and excavated, and those not in this room at all. We build curriculum, investigate material, indict content, and convey context. We work in collaboration with numerous intersectional positions to empower, where communities possess centrality and agency. As curators, we partner with community not speak for the community. As students we dialogue with our schools for representation and justice. As deans, we hire professors of color and create forums for supportive mentorship. Ceramics is made by and for the people, from workshop content, to panel discussions, and themes at conferences. This is our clay and our institutions, from NCECA, to online social-networks, community art centers, schools, and museums. We make art in libraries

and laundromats, vacant lots and parking spots, prisons and parks, farm stands and factory floors, hospitals and hospice, in bars and barbershops, benches and beds, locked inside and left outside.

We are always in the clay.

We are in Portland, the whitest big city in the United States. When Oregon banned slavery, it concurrently required all African Americans to leave the territory, and white male married settlers were given land taken from dispossessed Indigenous Americans.



York Statue, Lewis and Clark College

(Image York) To comprehend the present we must understand history. There is a statue of York at Lewis and Clark College, made from clay, cast in bronze, with Clark's maps scarred onto York's back, a symbol of the weight borne by York during the expedition. When we decolonize the clay we call for artists and activists, educators and students, makers and thinkers, accomplices complicit in the struggle, not to save or co-opt, but for mutual trust through recognition and responsibility.¹⁷ Decolonization is not a metaphor. Progressive change cannot mean ignoring structural inequality, or preserving historic inaccuracy, and denying institutional accountability

by providing symbolic representational diversity.¹⁸ Together we imagine visions of clay, create objects into actions, hand-build economies of solidarity with clay bodies, networks and communities that have always existed, always resisted, always created for just distribution of power. It is in the clay, we just need to listen.

¹ Blue Line Gallery

² In Mainstream Museums, Confronting Colonialism While Curating Native American Art | Shelia Regan | Hyperallergic, June 26, 2015

³ Hipsters and artists are the gentrifying foot soldiers of capitalism | Stephen Pritchard | The Guardian | Sept 13, 2016

⁴ Art Museum Diversity Survey | Association of Art Museum Directors | July 29, 2015

⁵ Make Art! Change the World! Starve!: The Fallacy of Art as Social Justice-Part I | Yasmin Nair | December 14, 2009

⁶ National Center for Education Statistics

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⁸ Blood bricks: how India's urban boom is built on slave labour | Oliver Wainwright | The Guardian | Jan 8, 2014

⁹ The Freedom to Oppress | Kim Eunsong, Maya Mackrandilal | Contemp+orary | Apr. 19, 2016

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¹¹ Taking the measure of Sexism | Maura Reilly | Artnews | May, 26, 2015

¹² Breaking Down the Demographics | Hrag Vartanian | Hyperallergic | April 14, 2015

¹³ Color in Clay: Who's Making Work Now | Namita Gupta Wiggers. | 92nd Street Y Virtual Clay, Jan. 21, 2015

¹⁴ Roxanne Swentzell, Living Portraits of New Mexico Artists | New Mexico Culture Net

¹⁵ Sana Musasama Website | sana-musasama.com

¹⁶ Sana Musasama Facebook page

¹⁷ Undercommoning Within, Against and Beyond the University-as-Such | Jun 4, 2016

¹⁸ Hamilton | Alex Nichols | Current Affairs | Jun 29, 2016

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