

La Scène Française Contemporaine

[French Contemporary Ceramics]

Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris

A Review by Dr Audrey Whitty



Saverio Lucariello. Untitled.



Kristin McKirdy.



Kristin McKirdy.

The events surrounding the 44th general Assembly of the International Academy of Ceramics in Paris in September 2010 culminated in a thought-provoking and visually stimulating event at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. The exhibition on French contemporary ceramic art was the best of the entire series of exhibitions specifically set up for the meeting of and conference surrounding the IAC General Assembly. The integration by the Assistant Curator at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Frédéric Bodet, of the best of French contemporary ceramics amongst pieces of historical decorative and applied art within the museum displays was a highly successful attempt at such an exhibitionary technique. It gave the viewer the opportunity to appreciate both the aesthetic beauty of many pieces along with the pinnacle of various historical applied arts across different media. In other words it gave a context not often seen with contemporary ceramics and on such a scale. The idea of using the world-renowned collection of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs was inspiring and, acting as backdrop to both emerging and more established French ceramic artists, it provided a feast for the senses in terms of display and any subconscious associative links with

decorative arts from the past.

There were several amongst the 69 artists who deserve specific mention, either due to their artistic prowess or because of the advantageous display of their work by Bodet. The work of the Canadian-born American artist Kristin McKirdy was sensitively displayed in many period setting rooms. Her elliptical-shaped and ovoid (humanoid) forms in glazed earthenware ranged from being 'spilled' over a Louis XIV console table to being neatly arranged across a 1930s architectural office by Michel Roux Spitz. The tightly controlled smooth surface textures evident on McKirdy's work is indicative of her influences, which range from Scandinavian ceramics of the 1950s through to the 1970s, as well as British studio potters such as Hans Coper and Lucie Rie. This strong emphasis on the physicality and form of the finished product in ceramic art was ideally suited to display on such surfaces as a marble-topped console table and a high gloss finished Art Déco office interior; in many ways it added to the appreciation of McKirdy's sculptural form and placement, as so many of her works consist of numerous components of varying shapes and sizes.

The most impressive out of all displays in the



Saverio Lucariello. *Vanitas*.



Anne Rochette. *A chacun sa montagne*.

Musée des Arts Décoratifs was Michel Gouery's enamelled terracotta statues in the Middle Ages Department. The triptych-like arrangement of *Rifi Fifi Loulou* was particularly suited to the backdrop of the historical decorative art objects on exhibition in the same room. As one reviewer has said of Gouery's figures they "appropriate the material [ceramic] and make it look like something completely other than what it is: Gouery's weird beings which look so smooth and glistening as to be organic". It is their folded creased edges that give the impression of textile, that lend Gouery's statues a sense of the ephemeral but, on a monumental permanent scale, and it is this successful hybrid, which intrigues the onlooker to such an extent that one must resist the urge to stroke and touch. Gouery is a master manipulator of what the eye initially registers as one specific material, only to subsequently realise that it is another entirely different medium. His playful use of humorous titles (when he chooses to adopt one for his works) gives a playful twist to a staggering feat in ceramic art in terms of his interpretation of the human figure.

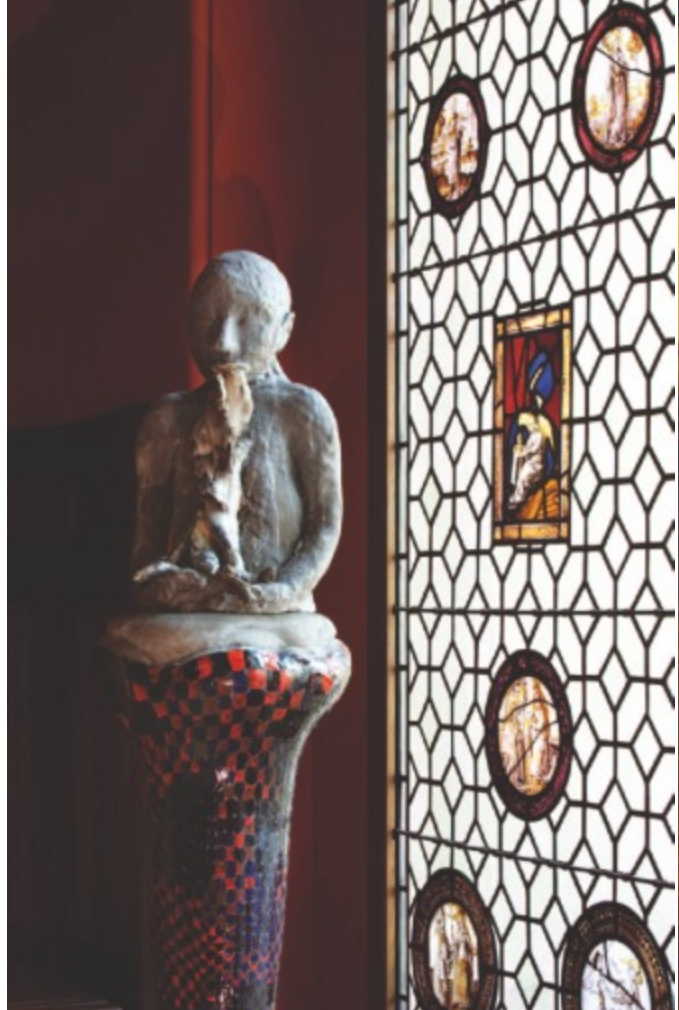
The enamelled terracotta sculpted figures of Italian-born Saverio Lucariello were like Gouery's

work, displayed in the Middle Ages Department. Lucariello's piece entitled *Vanitas* was effectively placed in front of a large scale tapestry, whose muted tones highlighted the flesh-like tone in Lucariello's two-headed sculpture in a sensitive and visually stimulating way. Even though Lucariello works are on a smaller scale to Gouery's (62 cm in height versus Gouery's 119 cm), the same sense of the monumental was imparted to the onlooker. This time, however, the more usual maiolica-like texture associated with traditional Italian ceramics was evident as can be seen in the glazing around the bone structure, cheeks and eyes of Lucariello's two-headed *Vanitas* basket-shaped piece. In terms of exhibitionary arrangement, it was in the display of this artist's work that the curator Bodet most excelled.

The works of the sculptor Anne Rochette at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs were beautiful masses (*A chacun sa montagne*, 2006 and 2005–2010) of enamelled terracotta exhibited, as with Gouery and Lucariello's pieces, in the Medieval (Middle Ages) section of the museum. Rochette is the ideal combination of both the French and American traditions of contemporary ceramic sculpture. After graduating from Beaux Arts in 1979, Rochette undertook a MA at New York



Foreground: Wade Saunders. *Convey*.
Background: Maarten Stuer. *Mouvement Cyclique*.



Anne Rochette

University and returned to Paris in the 1990s. She is now a professor at the École des Beaux Arts and has completed such commissions in the Southern Hemisphere as that for the Australian National University, University of Tasmania and Canberra's International Sculpture Park. The use of form, colour and placement is critical to her success, and the layout of her *A chacun sa montagne* in the museum by Bodet, emphasised the three-dimensional aspect necessary in the viewing of Rochette's work. The highly glazed texture and spiral-like shape within the mound of these pieces gave a sense of prehistoric (to be more precise, Neolithic) architectural form. This sense in turn, ironically, gave an overall intimate effect when standing over the piece, looking at it from above.

American-born artist, Wade Saunders' piece *Convey* was exhibited at the Palier d'Orientation section of the Museum along with the work of **Maarten Stuer**. Their work within a landing area was well chosen in terms of scale. Saunders' work measuring 164 cm in height and 164 cm in diameter was well situated, the latticed brick effect of the ceramic wheel-like structure ideally suited to the width of this corridor/ crossways part of the

museum building. Born in Berkeley, California, Saunders studied at the University of California, San Diego. His work is represented in major North American museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He now lives in Paris and teaches at the Parsons School of Art and Design and the Institut d'Études Politiques. He describes his sculptures as being emblematic of where in the world he is then currently working, as he likes to travel. Saunders does not only use ceramic in his work but he also incorporates wood, granite, plastic, bronze, textiles and organic elements from the plant world. The use of colour in *Convey* was striking and, in true Saunders fashion, was not overpowering and evasive but subtle and harmonious.

Similarly, Stuer's sculptural forms are monumental architectural-like shapes, which seem to fill an entire room with the strength of their presence. No surprise that Bodet also chose to display Stuer's work *Mouvement Cyclique* in the Palier d'Orientation. Japan-born but a Flemish artist, Stuer originally graduated from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Antwerp, Belgium in graphic arts, drawing and



Michel Guery. *Rifi Fifi Loulou*.



Michel Guery. *Rifi Fifi Loulou (Detail)*.

lithography. In the 1990s he moved to Barcelona where he learned how to work with ceramics and in 1995 moved to France where he now lives in Caupenne d'Armagnac. In the words of Jan Van Alphen, Stuer "attracted attention because his works are so closely linked to the ecological concerns of our time. Starting from the base element, earth, he broadens the context of the substance clay to its widest possible dimension: our world and the universe". Stuer's *Mouvement Cyclique* embodies this context in that the physical groundedness of the piece becomes animated with the swirl-like effect of its form, thereby creating the illusion of an artwork that will change and morph with its environment. The decision to place such a strong statement work in the corridor/ crossways of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs was well taken and the resulting effect as one entered the exhibition made for a promising start.

The above selection of artists are just a few examples of the numerous high quality works that were exhibited as part of *La Scène Française Contemporaine* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs where the marriage of the contemporary with the past was sensitively and successfully achieved. The importance of such

a landmark exhibition to have taken place within the environs of a national cultural institution can not be overstated and it is hoped that other major European and indeed North American cities might follow the lead of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. It gives food for thought and stimulating suggestions for the exhibitions of the next IAC General Assemblies in Santa Fe (2012) and Dublin (2014) and, for that reason alone, we must congratulate the French organisers of IAC 2010 for their unique and well-developed exhibition of the best of French contemporary ceramic art.

Dr Audrey Whitty is Curator of Ceramics, Glass and Asian collections in the National Museum of Ireland (NMI), Collins Barracks, Dublin, Ireland where she is responsible for approximately 30,000 objects. She has written extensively on both historical and contemporary ceramic art and is the sole author of a major forthcoming book on the Albert Bender Collection of Asian Art in the National Museum of Ireland that will be published in 2011. Dr Whitty has curated several exhibitions, including the visible storage facility at the NMI, Collins Barracks which showcases 16,500 artefacts from the museum's collection of international decorative and applied arts.