

On September 14, 2017, FUSION: The Ontario Clay and Glass Association and the Issachar and Yehudit Benyamini Contemporary Ceramics Centre, in collaboration with HIT - Holon Institute of Technology, presented an evening of contemporary Israeli ceramics called *Outside the Jar: The Benyamini Contemporary Ceramics Center* at Harbourfront Centre, Toronto.

Featuring six ceramic artists/founders from the Benyamini Center, the conversation and image presentation focused on both studio ceramics in the 21st century; and artists who use the medium of clay to express thought-provoking concepts, incorporate innovative ideas, and take advantage of the latest technological inventions in the field of ceramic art and beyond.

For all who attended, the evening came about fortuitously. The Benyamini artists were in Toronto to take up a scholarship from the Lighton International Artists Exchange Program (LIAEP) for a study/research program at the Gardiner Museum, as well as a travel and research grant from the Holon Institute, when Yael Novak, the centre's Adviser on International Relations and a veteran FUSION member, approached FUSION about an artist talk. We saw a wonderful opportunity to enable cross-cultural learning in practice and craft among newcomers and friends.

Benyamini was founded in 2001 as a public non-profit organization by its trustees Ilan Meyer and Marcelle Klein, as set out in the will of Yehudit Benyamini. Both Yehudit and his wife Issachar were ceramicists; and their studio, in which they worked side by side, was the heart of their home for students and visitors. They believed that the way one performs the least important task is a

reflection of oneself, a belief the centre nurtures. The gift of the centre expresses Yehudit and Issachar's love of people, ceramics, and the arts. Marcelle Klein, who is also its Director, has led the development of Benyamini starting, as many arts centres do, with a derelict building in a run-down neighbourhood, the inspired work of many volunteers, and the patient building of funding relationships.

Today, Benyamini is the first contemporary ceramics centre in Israel: it offers the only ceramics teaching studio in Tel Aviv, a School of Ceramic Art open to students of all ages and abilities (including Master Classes); both international and artist-in-residency programmes; three gallery spaces; the First Studio scholarships for young artists; a reference library; and a record of presenting thought-provoking and evocative exhibitions that have toured the world. It also co-sponsors, with the Designer Crafts Foundation, the Benyamini Prize, awarded annually for work in media such as ceramics, jewellery, glass, textiles, paper and metalwork.

The Benyamini artists have different styles and ways of working with clay while staying true to, if not exploiting, the properties of different clay bodies and processes. Ravit Lazer, responding to overwhelming images of war in the news media, created an exhibition called *Routes of Destruction* to express life affected and afflicted by geopolitical conflict. She spoke of how being inundated, day after day, with photographs of destruction, and the sorrow of the survivors, has deeply moved her. She constructed a bombed-out city in miniature, complete with exposed interiors and rubble; then deliberately over-fired the structures, causing them to slump and crack, to further emphasize



Yael Novak
Photo: Ilan Amihai

how historic, social, economic, and cultural traditions are being destroyed. Much of our cultural heritage depends on home, family, and food; when these things are taken away, how can we pass them on to subsequent generations?

Adopting visual cultural icons from our everyday essentials, Yael Novak creates objects that comment on our contemporary culture of mass consumerism, and on life in the absence of boundaries. Collaging thrown porcelain objects with found readymade objects, often of metal or glass, she creates oversized objects that resemble something that could be used, suggestions from the utilitarian traditions of clay. Yet she pushes those qualities so far beyond anything that might be called practical: they become representations of desire gone mad in a society that has no confines or limitations. "Ceramics frequently engages in a conversation about utilitarian objects and domesticity that have social, political and cultural implications. I am very much part of this conversation.... My current work addresses issues of excess in modern life and engages in a humorous critique of humankind's endless cravings for more."

Shira Silverston combines her interest in the way fragments join to form variations of a whole, with an interest in domesticity and the trials and tribulations of a young artist. As a young mother she combines non-traditional materials with clay to convey the difficulties of maintaining an artistic practice while raising children and maintaining a household. For example, finding herself with dozens of baby



Ravit Lazer
Photo: Shachar Fleischmann



Shira Silverston
Photo: Leonid-Padrul Kwitkowski

formula measuring spoons and other plastic items manufactured for the care of children, she decided to incorporate them into sculptures, so making her work embody the very materiality and experience of not being in her studio. As a maker, it must be a difficult conflict to so deeply love one's children and husband, understand that caring for them takes away from creative practice, and still have the need to express oneself.

Shlomit Bauman told the story of her exhibition *Ran Out*, a solo show focusing on the depletion and exploitation of natural, cultural, and individual resources. She said most artists in Israel prefer to work with fine



Marcelle Klein
Photo: David Garb



Shlomit Bauman
Photo: Ilan Amihai



Ester Beck
Photo: David Garb

imported porcelain instead of S5, the rough indigenous clay local to the region. This was a shame, she felt, as the local clay had rich colour and texture and had been used for thousands of years. After months of research and thousands of tests using S5, she was running low on stock. On calling her supplier and finding out that the mine sourcing the clay had been closed, and that there was little more than a ton of it left, she said, "I'll take it all!"

So began a body of work that uses both fine white porcelain and the terracotta S5. Seeing in ceramics "a cultural research lab," everyday objects such as a cell phone, a megaphone, and a TV, became moulds; she

also salvaged teapot and fish moulds from a ceramics factory that had closed in the 1990s. She casted moulds atop each other, or attached them after casting. As well as being different in formal and cultural terms, the two clays shrank at different rates and vitrified at different temperatures, their different technical properties pulling and cracking the pieces in interesting ways.

Surely this was a metaphor for the conflict between tradition and modernization? "This creates a tension between the desire for likeness and connection, and the exposure of the differences and the distorted. These works deal with the loaded field of the extinction of natural, cultural and personal resources."

The evening ended with a live demonstration by Ester Beck. In her work, she is concerned with movement, flow and texture, and process is as important as the aesthetic result: "I search for the illusion of the pieces being in motion, evoking phenomena we observe in riverbeds or tectonic layers. The way I achieve this is by a technique involving a very physical and strong bodily dialogue with an initial block of clay, beating, scratching, stretching, smoothing the clay, till I achieve the wanted result.... and I try for the piece to convey this.... This process is in some ways a fast forward of what happens in nature's eroding forces over millennia."

Ester's work is also performative. Working with 300 kg. (16 boxes) of clay donated by Tuckers Pottery Supply, she created a powerful and unique vessel using unconventional tools and methods. Three different clay bodies were stacked into a cube on stage. Using an

oversized wire tool, two people sawed through the outside surface of the cube to create texture. Ester then took a giant wooden hammer and started pounding and widening a hole in the top of the cube to move the clay into an enormous vessel. "How far clay lets itself be stretched, how far it will go with me when forming it into the desired shapes, is an essential part of my dialogue with clay." To see a fascinating video of Ester using her entire body to create a similar piece, but on a much larger scale, visit her website at <http://esterbeckceramics.com/video.php>

This was an evening of engagement, enchantment, and extraordinary artistry and generosity. Thank you, Artists of Benyamini, for coming to visit.

FUSION gratefully thanks the artists of the Benyamini Center for their collaboration, and Harbourfront Centre for use both of the Brigantine Room and the services of their excellent audio/visual crew.

More information about the Benyamini Center, including the *Outside the Jar* presentation may be found on their website here <http://www.benjaminiceramics.org/en/benya-mini-center/> and on Facebook here <https://www.facebook.com/Benyamini-Contemporary-Ceramics-Center-406260776163721/>

The Benyamini artists are:

Marcelle Klein, Trustee and Director <http://www.aidaarts.org/artist/Marcelle-Klein>

Shlomit Bauman, Trustee and Curator <https://artaxis.org/shlomit-bauman/>

Ester Beck, Library and Research Centre Manager, esterbeckceramics.com

Ravit Lazer, Educational Director of the School of Ceramic Art <https://www.facebook.com/ravit.lazer>

Yael Novak, Advisor on International Relations and member of the Haliburton County Studio Tour (Pottery Lane Studio and Gallery), Ontario <https://artaxis.org/yael-novak/>

Shira Silverston, Content Advisor for Events, co-curator of its Poetry Slam, and an editor of 1280 Magazine <https://shirasilverston.carbonmade.com>

Chris Snedden has been a potter for over thirty years in Ontario and is currently serving as President of FUSION: The Ontario Clay and Glass Association.

Rest insured.
Save up to 30%* on auto with a State Farm® agent.

Jenny Rushforth, Agent
3569 Cawthra Road
Mississauga, ON L5A 2Y2
Bus: 905-276-2429
rushforthinsurance.ca

We'll find the best policies to fit your life and advise you of opportunities for potential savings.
Like a good neighbour, State Farm is there.®
CONTACT ME TODAY.

statefarm.ca®

*Conditions apply.
State Farm branded policies are underwritten by Certas Home and Auto Insurance Company.
© State Farm and related trademarks and logos are registered trademarks owned by State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Company, used under licence by Certas Home and Auto Insurance Company. 1710901CN

2018

KATHRYN WALTER
January 10 - 28

SUSAN WARNER KEENE
February 1 - 25

MARYANNE CAIN
SUSAN ECKENWALDER
March 1 - 25

BARBARA KLUNDER
DAVID McCLYMENT
April 5 - 29

BARBARA BROWN
MATTHEW KUDELKA
May 3 - 27

DONALD ANDRUS
KATJA JACOBS
May 31 - June 24

DAVID KAYE GALLERY

1092 Queen Street West (entrance on Dovercourt)
Toronto, Ontario M6J 1H9 Telephone: 416.532.9075
info@davidkayegallery.com www.davidkayegallery.com