

# ALEXANDRE

ARTS+

## Not Consigned To the Realm of Craft



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Mention ceramic to most artworld ears, and a door slams shut with the word "CRAFT" emblazoned like a "danger" or "no entry" sign.

There are, as it happens, some pots on view at Alexandre Gallery, but they are subverted beyond any vessel-like function. "Your Beauty's Gold is Clay" — the resonantly cryptic title is a quote from a Sapphic poem by H.D. — works hard to distance itself from a traditional notion of a "craft" exhibition. The six artists respond in sculptural terms to a range of qualities inherent to their medium, often with wit, whimsy, and tenderness.

Clay is one of the most ancient and elemental of art materials, scooped out of the ground, worked three-dimensionally in the air, constantly wetted, ultimately fired. The tumultuous sense of its sucking energy from every direction comes across in the glazed ceramic works of Linda Benglis, which fuse the painterly and the sculptural in a Dionysian frenzy. "Olla" (1998) creates serpentine forms from pounded together strips of clay and fragmented tubing. The glazes are splashed on in urgent, generous dollops. "Ojos" (1995–96) collides forms that are like oil-lamps. Areas are blackened, presumably through deliberate overexposure in the kiln, which adds drama and bravura. All her ceramics convey a lust for speed.

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Nicole Cherubini competes with Ms. Benglis for the title of wild woman of the show. An exuberantly camp "G-Pot, Green With Branches" (2006) is willfully exotic in its array of materials and relentlessly inventive. And it is intent on digging fun at any hallowed sense of artistry — literally, as bits of tree and fake jewelry are dug deep into the terracotta. A massive pot sits astride a wood pedestal. The pot, however, looks to have been constructed statically, rather than on a wheel — it is a belligerently lumpen, goofy, plodding presence. The pedestal is a weird mix of ply and pine with a hole excavated on one side to reveal a cluster of ceramic objects. Elsewhere, the piece is decked with fake gold chains, Versace style.

"G-Pot, Blue With Ram" (2006) has even more fun with the pedestal, in Plexi and plywood daubed with Targel. The vessel is stuffed, around the rim, with layers of different colored rabbit fur. Ms. Cherubini loves to collide unlikely qualities of material — fine and kitsch — which pile on top of each other like players in a rugby scrum.

Kathy Butterly is in some ways at an opposite extreme from the gutsy, brash Ms. Cherubini, with quiet, quirky, intricate little pieces worked exquisitely in porcelain. But issues of scale and volume aside, they are sisters under the skin. If Ms. Cherubini is Versace, Ms. Butterly is more Issey Miyake, just as voluptuous and subversive in her way, bending miniature vessels into unlikely folds with impossibly delicate attention to detail. "The Last Straw" (2004), just over 4 inches tall, has a collapsed little cup in smooth gray porcelain, its crushed folds caught with gorgeous fluency. A yellow-glazed earthenware straw protrudes, and from within that, a tiny globule denoting liquid extrudes. "Cenote" (2004) also features a collapsed cup, its smooth exterior contrasted with a rough green interior, the verdant cenote of the title. On the lip hovers a matchstick form that could read as a diving board, or sacrificial artifact of some sort. Ms. Butterly's aesthetic is consonant with her name — rich and slippery.

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The octogenarian animalier Anne Arnold contributes a pair of fired and painted clay pet portraits, "Silky" and "Ishmael." Silky, a Yorkshire Terrier, wears his natural coat as an acquired fashion item: White, striated strips of clay ingeniously blackened along his back hang from the solid, smooth structure of his brown body. His shaggy mane reads almost like an Egyptian headdress. If these pets strike a note of cuteness that's alien to the edgy bittersweet of other women in the show, there is more chutzpah to the caricatural, vaguely grotesque heads by William King. The exaggerated facial gestures of "Now Who" (1973) and "New Teeth" (1973) in glazed terracotta recall the gormless extremes of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's studies in human expression.

Clay is a material ever ready to sink back to its own elemental unformedness: Jessica Jackson Hutchins exploits this with mildly melancholy humor in her series, "Relics From a Lonely Dinner Party" (2005). With titles like "French Bread Pizza Coffin on a Fence" and "Idaho Cliff With Cup," her five barely legible, sometimes abstract ceramics, arranged on a low pedestal, have the nonchalant ditziness of someone moodily moving tableware and food around at the end of a dinner party. Too tired to emotionally focus, her idle imaginings vacillate between whimsy and despondency.

*Until August 4 (41 E. 57th St. at Madison Avenue, 212-755-2828).*

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