



Contrasts in Clay: Susan Beiner and Kwok-Pong Tso

Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery

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January 31 through March 8, 2020



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Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery

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A Conversation with Susan Beiner

November 2019

Barbara Racker: Why did you pursue a career in the visual arts?

Susan Beiner: I have always been attracted to the idea of “wonder” and the making process since I was a young child. It was inevitable that I would fall into something in the visual arts. I was surrounded by painting, drawing, crafts and music, as well as a love of fine china.

It was natural for me to study the arts in school, but I didn’t really have a plan. Everything fell into place, and I went on the ride.

BR: What attracted you to clay as a material?

3

SB: I was drawn to use a material that I could form in three dimensions. Ceramics seemed to require extensive learning to understand it—various techniques, clay bodies, glazes, firings and kilns. I believe it offers much to enjoy and experience, almost infinite. Additionally, ceramic materials have been used for building construction and decorative arts since ancient times in cultures around the world, adding to its historical allure and significance.

BR: What interests you about porcelain?

SB: The history, purity and whiteness of it, as well as its strength and smooth buttery texture.

Porcelain has its roots in China, which has been a perfect place for me to work, study, learn, and live. I have traveled to Jingdezhen, China four times, the capital of porcelain. Porcelain developed in China over centuries where it started as soft paste porcelain before it spread throughout Europe in the 17th century. This has led to my investigation also in referencing the decorative porcelains in several European countries.

BR: What else has influenced your work?

SB: My work has always been influenced by the environment, and clay is my connection to the earth, an organic material. Every place I have lived, as well as visited, has been influential in my work, from the industrial city of Detroit to the very organic and light areas of Southern California. I explored a chrome surface on ceramic hardware as industrial elements moved into three-dimensional form. While in CA, the quality of light altered my color palette, and my form became influenced by the organic nature of the environment. In another way, I am influenced by my gardening in Arizona and the growth of my plants and vegetables. Utilizing first-hand experience of repetition and juxtaposition, I began hybridizing to create new forms.

Additionally, I am personally concerned about our environment, and make art visualizing pertinent environmental issues in an attempt to create an understanding and awareness of environment issues.

Susan Beiner, *An Allium Sensation*, 2018, porcelain and wood panel, 35 x 35 x 16 inches





Susan Beiner, *Dark Drop*, 2019, porcelain and wood panel, 22 x 22 x 18 inches

Environmental sustainability is at its root of the health, safety, and long-term integrity of the places where we all live, work, and play. We are increasingly realizing that sustainability isn't the purview of a single sector working in isolation, but rather a shared responsibility for changing how we live in relation to our natural environment and to each other. I believe that art dealing with environmental issues enhances our respect and our relationship with the natural world. There is no "planet B."

A few artists that influence my work are Petah Coyne, Mike Kelly, Liz Craft, Sarah Sze, Andy Goldsworthy, as well as the drawings of Ernst Haeckel and photos of Karl Blossfeldt.

7

BR: Is research important to your process? If so, what is the extent of your research? What is your process of planning and creating large installations? Do you have assistants? What is the hardest part and the most joyful part of your process?

SB: Yes, research for a large project is essential. My research can consist of a grant for a project or through my experience of private study. I research and absorb the subject I study to focus on an idea that covers the subject matter. I work on drawings to determine structure, configuration, forms, and surface prior to beginning the project.

Currently, I am working on a granted project funded by the Arizona Cancer and Evolution Center which explores the realms of connecting science and art. The arts in so many ways provoke curiosity and wonder, and this ignites a desire for explanation, as sometimes science results to art and art results to science. The project focuses on interpreting cancer research by visually translating scientific information into a ceramic art wall installation. In this case, my research centers around working with two scientists in their lab and discussing research on cancer. The launch of this project could open new fields of art/science research so scientists can visualize what they are discussing and better describe their findings to patients and the public-at-large.

Once the concept is explored, I begin creating prototypes to form plaster casting molds. Once the molds are dry, I can begin building the piece. Large projects take about two years to fully complete.

I do not have assistants which is most likely why the projects take a long time, plus my role as professor at ASU requires a significant commitment of my time.

The most difficult part of my process is visualizing the surface forms that represent the idea and creating the prototypes to build the piece. Once I have all the prep completed, the actual building is Zen, mindful attentiveness. However, many new thoughts “pop up” during the

Susan Beiner, *Everlasting Revolution*, 2019, porcelain and wood panel, 56 x 36 x 14 inches





Susan Beiner, *No Where Stand Here*, 2017, porcelain and wood, 18 x 25 x 22 inches

process of building, and I usually adapt to those ideas. Since I make all my work in modular units, the most rewarding aspect is seeing the piece completed and installed.

BR: You have recently written that your work refers to “the tension between the manufactured and the natural” and “alterations in the earth’s natural resources.” Do you feel an increased urgency to address environmental issues given the current administration’s environmental actions and policy changes?

SB: I think many artists are concerned with environmental issues and it has become a common thread amongst artists to explore these ideas. Political and environmental issues are interwoven. As the tension is high and escalating with our current administration, many believe we are rapidly approaching the “point of no return” towards the sustainability of our planet, which calls us as artists and common inhabitants to voice our concerns for future generations. I feel obligated to be part of that, so we can say that we did not stand idly by.

BR: The colors in your wall, floor and pedestal pieces range from just black and white to a mix of muted and vibrant hues. What do the colors signify in the work?

SB: Color adds a sensation, a human reaction. I think about using color as light infiltrates a space, and talks about the surface referring to the

content. I often research various plants to study their growth structure, and their bloom, which aids in decisions with shapes, building form, and color.

In the installation of *Expanded Hive* I strove for more of a honey color relating to the infestation of honey bees. In the final installation, the smell of beeswax permeates the space as the viewer walks around to discover the hive and the flora that is revealed beneath the layers of beeswax from the blue, green, and amber graphite drawings. I utilized a colored wall to connect with a natural environment transforming into a new landscape.

The white hues in *Unintended Consequences* and *Organic Dissolution* came from a period of time where I was thinking about sterility or non-pigmentation in plants, so blooms were not pollinated and the intensity of color had dissolved, a ramification of the human imprint on our ecosystem. Additionally, the idea of a whitescape as a landscape came into play.

In another installation piece titled *Synthetic Reality*, I utilized a myriad of colors to create rhythmic sequences as the viewer looks deeper into the surface of hybridized plant life.

BR: How do you juggle teaching and art making? Which is more important to you?





Susan Beiner, *Sidewalk Grass*, 2019, porcelain, 22 x 22 x 19 inches

SB: Teaching and making artwork concurrently has always been difficult. Whenever I am not teaching I am in the studio working. Ultimately, my work comes first. But inquiry and curiosity feeds my work, which in turn fuels my teaching.

BR: How has your work changed in the last 10 years?

SB: The environment has been a common thread through my work for the past 20 years. My projects change by the nature of their ideas, and I develop new means and methods of building and surface treatment as appropriate to the subject matter, so I am learning with every installation project. Lately, my work is looking through the lens of more scientific ideas that I then elaborate on for building wall pieces. Recently, after a trip to China and working with a yellow glaze, I became obsessed with this color as a more graphic view of my encrusted pieces. I formulated a new glaze which, instead of utilizing my usual multiple glazes to model the forms, I can use alone to unify them.

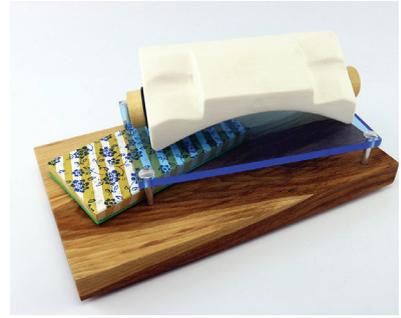
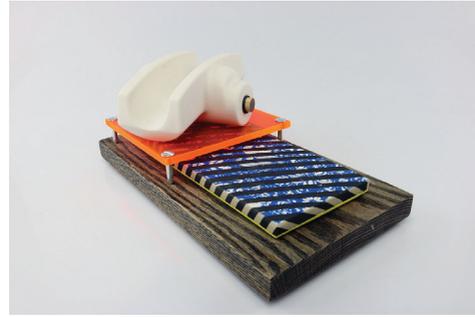
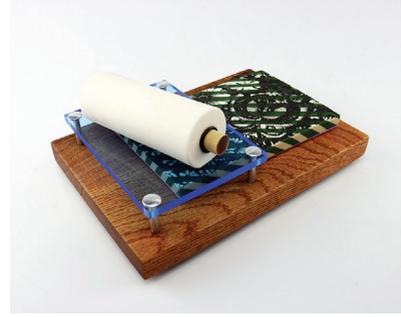
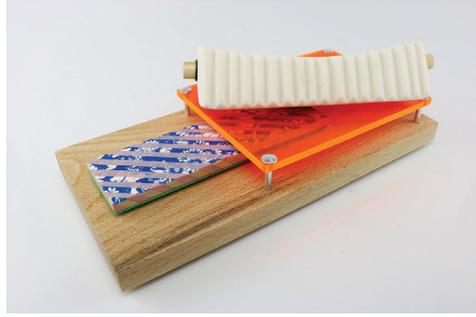
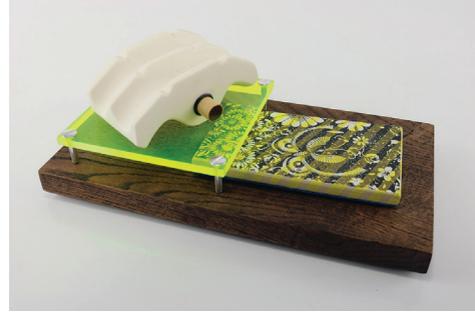
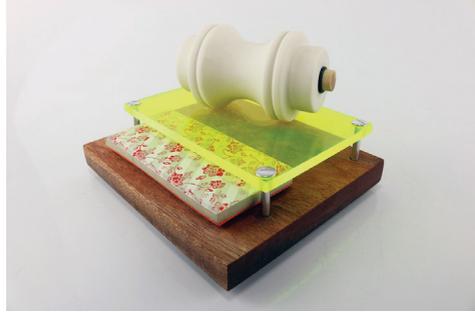
Susan Beiner has exhibited her work in solo and group exhibitions across the United States and Asia. Among recent solo exhibition venues are: Form and Concept Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico; Traylor Gallery at Berea College, Berea, Kentucky; Krasl Art Center, St. Joseph, Michigan; and Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, Houston, Texas. Recent exhibitions in Asia include: Taiwan Ceramics Biennale, New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum; Korean International Ceramic Biennale, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea; and Fifth China Shanghai International Modern Pot Biennale, China. Among her numerous residencies are: the Pottery Workshop, Jingdezhen, China; CRETA, Rome, Italy; Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, Jerusalem, Israel; International Ceramics Studio, Kecskemét, Hungary; Archie Bray Foundation, Helena, Montana; Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan; Wisconsin; The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and the Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Center, Skælskør, Denmark. Since 2006 Beiner has taught at Arizona State University where she is currently the Joan R. Lincoln Endowed Professor of Art. She received an MFA from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and a BFA from Rutgers University in New Jersey.

Susan Beiner, *Synthetic Reality* (six panel), 2008, porcelain, foam, and wood, 42 x 96 x 14 inches





Susan Beiner, *Synthetic Reality* (nine panel, detail), 2018, porcelain



Kwok-Pong Tso, #001 - #008, 2019, from the Moment of "Re"inventing - Culture Assembly: Tool Made Tool series, clay, wood, plastics, and metals

Kwok-Pong Tso, #006 (purple), #007 (yellow), 2018, from the Moment of "Re"inventing - Culture Assembly: Repress series, clay, wood, plastics, and metals, 9.5 to 11.75 x 5.5 x 5.5 inches



Kwok-Pong Tso was born and raised in Hong Kong, and in 2005 decided to come to the United States to begin exploring American culture and continue his education. In 2009 he completed his BFA at Northwest Missouri State University, and in 2013 he received an MFA from the University of Iowa. Pong is currently an Assistant Professor of Art at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas. He was named a Ceramics Monthly Emerging Artist in 2014 and National Council for the Education of Ceramic Arts (NCECA) Emerging Artist in 2016. Pong spent two summers as a resident at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana and has exhibited and published nationally and internationally including venues throughout the United States and in China, South Korea, Romania, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Among recent exhibitions are: *Fahrenheit 2018* at the American Museum of Ceramic Art, Pomona, California (juried by Patti Warashina); *The Moment of Re-Inventing: Cultural Assembly: New Ceramic Sculpture by Kwok Pong “Bobby” Tso* at Plinth Gallery, Denver, Colorado; and *Ceramic Work by Kwok Pong “Bobby” Tso* at the Blanden Art Museum, Fort Dodge, Iowa.

reason. Email doesn't help either; most people send emails expecting them to be answered right away. And then there are all the meetings and other stuff that goes along with teaching. All of that gets in the way of making art, but I still enjoy teaching. Nothing is better than seeing your students start to care about how to make a cool looking glaze, argue with you about how to make something or why they like this color instead of that color, all of which are very rewarding.

As for art making, I have pretty good luck with just closing my door and putting on my headphones. Usually I can get a few hours between classes, after classes and during the weekend. Being an artist is never like working a 9 to 5 job; you work when you can, you make time and you find ways to make art.

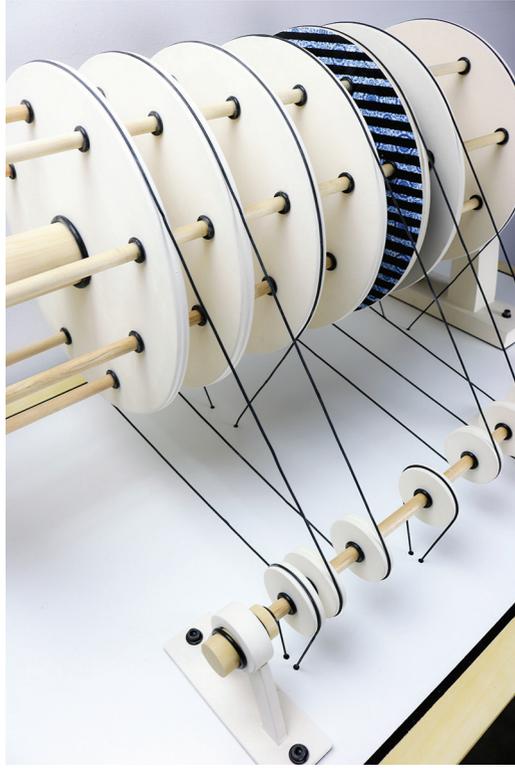


Kwok-Pong Tso, #004 (orange) #003 (baby blue) and #005 (peach), 2018, from the *Moment of "Re"inventing - Culture Assembly: Repress series*, clay, wood, plastics, and metals, 8.5 x 5 x 5 inches

Kwok-Pong Tso, #002 (orange), #001 (baby blue), 2016, from the *Moment of "Re"inventing - Culture Assembly: Repress series*, clay, wood, plastics, and metals, largest 11 x 7.5 x 7.5 inches



Kwok-Pong Tso, *Motionality Version 2*, 2019, from the Moment of "Re"inventing - Culture Assembly series, clay, wood, plastics, and metals, 50 x 24 x 48 inches



I read essays about contemporary craft, random books about design, etc. I travel to places like history museums to look at old tools and parks for space planning.

BR: What is your process for planning and creating your intricate objects? Do you have assistants?

KPBT: I draw in sketchbooks or on Post-it notes and random sheets of paper laying around. Then I usually start to create parts by finding something similar to make a mold of, or I make the prototype myself. I don't really have an exact plan when I start, nor do I expect my work to come out exactly like my drawing. I leave room for experimentation every time I create. I wish I had assistants, but then I am also a "if you want to get stuff done you have to do it yourself" kind of person. Besides, I think I would find it hard to give up the control part of creating my work. But I wouldn't complain if someone wanted to make my molds, so I can focus on assembling my work.

BR: How do you juggle teaching and art making? Which is more important to you?

KPBT: I don't know if *juggle* is the right word, because you can't. Teaching is demanding and takes every little bit out of you. Students don't seem to care about office hours and rarely have questions in class. But when they see you working on your own art they want to talk to you for some

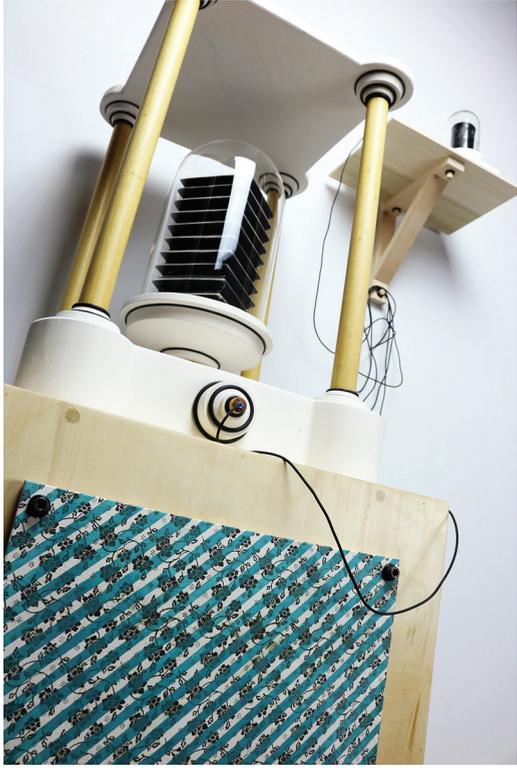
leaving the materials raw, were ways to express the qualities of balance, weight, and texture.

By showing each material in their natural form, it is my metaphorical way to speak about the complex relationship between humans and the objects we make. I use this as a gateway to speak about our connection with land, in a conceptual way, while trying to address humankind's need to control land and create artificial space. I make my work with minimal aesthetic and concise space, so it will be clear and allow me to talk about a composition that has simple components with a complex configuration in a formal way. This also represents the idea of one object fitting unexpectedly with another. I explore this unusual force that seems to be common in both the natural world and humankind's artificial environment.

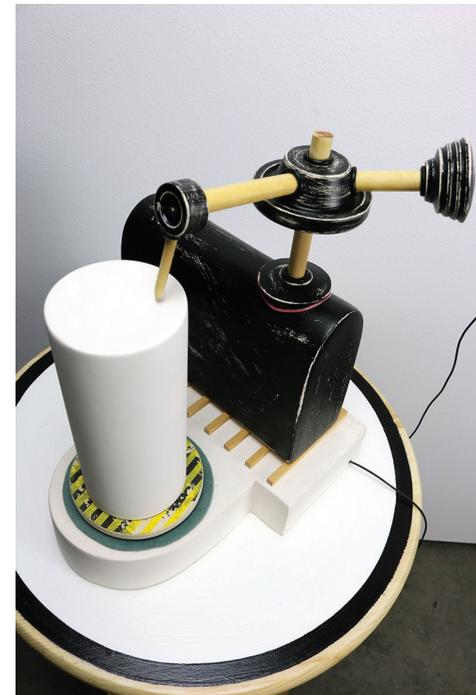
11

BR: Is research important to your process? If so, what is the extent of your research?

KPBT: Yes, it is important as I always think that I can't just make stuff; I want to have information that supports what I am trying to express. I have a lot of visual components in my work. I constantly look at images in books or magazines and read articles, for example, written by inventors during the Victorian era.



Kwok-Pong Tso, *Per-co-late*, 2019, from the Moment of "Re"inventing - Culture Assembly series, clay, wood, plastics, and metals, 60 x 21 x 32 inches



Kwok-Pong Tso, *Metricsgraph*, 2019, from the *Moment of "Re"-inventing* - *Culture Assembly* series, clay, wood, plastics, and metals, 60 x 21 x 32 inches

like the way architects Dwayne Oyler and Ferda Kolatan see and interact with space. Inventors like Arthur Jones or old magazines like *Scientific American Supplement* support the notion that one can create something that is totally out of this world simply by following their vision. Then you have artists like Nicolás Lamas and Do-Ho Suh who are highly technical with well-rounded ideas; they make it look so effortless and challenge your understanding of materials.

I am interested in the beauty of carefully made instruments, tools that help us discover and provide stability. I think man-made objects show us the importance of parts to a whole; each part is an object of its own, but they have to be able work together to function. Just like us humans; we have to work together to create something bigger than ourselves.

BR: You have written that your work “explores the relationship between nature and the weight of our materials in the form of man-made landscape.” Can you expand on that concept?

KPBT: I think a lot about the nature and weight of the materials in both physical and conceptual ways. It became a very important layer of meaning to my work. I wanted to be able to embrace an abstracted space and relationship that was created from this conversation by showing the viewer that the characteristics of different materials, and

am from. I feel like they want me to make it easier for them to relate to my work and be more obvious with my meaning.

But, I don't want to, nor do I think it is necessary to follow that logic or agree to that expectation. If being born in a British ruled city that is surrounded by Chinese tradition and culture wasn't confusing enough, living in the US makes the task of answering, "Where are you from?" even harder.

To me the truth is that each of the places we've been to teaches us something. I feel that my work is the result of combining all of those cultures and traditions that I experience. They act as guidelines, but they are not rules.

BR: Has the political turmoil in the US or in Hong Kong influenced your recent work?

KPBT: No, not directly to my work. I try to maintain a separation between my art and my point of view in politics. Instead, I focus on the issues of raising questions. I think for people to understand something, the key is to spend a lot of time asking questions that we don't necessarily want asked.

BR: What else has influenced your work?

KPBT: I mostly find the work of architects and scientists (inventors) interesting. These disciplines have a different point of view about the world,



Kwok-Pong Tso, *Armamentarium* (detail), 2018, from the Moment of "Re"inventing - Culture Assembly series, white earthenware, wood, plastic, paint, fabric, and glass, 76 x 24 x 48 inches



Kwok-Pong Tso, *Armamentarium*, 2018, from the *Moment of "Re"inventing - Culture Assembly* series, white earthenware, wood, plastic, paint, fabric, and glass, 76 x 24 x 48 inches

BR: What made you decide to move from Hong Kong to the US?

KPBT: Honestly, after high school as an exchange student, I thought that I would go back to Hong Kong, but I decided to go to college in the states because my experience was so eye-opening.

BR: In a statement about your new series “Re”inventing - Culture Assembly you write that “the freedom of being away from home allows me to reimagine and reinterpret historical perception and acts as a foundation for me to re-contextualize my surroundings and the ideas of existence beyond what tradition and culture say about who I am... ” Can you tell us more about that in terms of the components and aesthetics of the sculptures? (Are you referencing traditional porcelain patterns and shapes, yet negating or controlling their meaning? Is the work partially about contemporary appropriation? Are you assembling aspects of both cultures, Hong Kong and the US, into a new futuristic reality? Are you addressing cultural stereotypes?)

KPBT: The short answer to these questions is yes to all, and I mean it in the most respectful way possible. The longer answer to this question is that I have been told many times I don't make work like me (like I don't make Chinese work, or my work isn't personal enough). I sometimes think people are expecting me to put some cobalt blue drawing on a piece of white clay and talk about home or tradition because of where I

November 2019

Barbara Racker: Why did you decide to pursue a career in the visual arts?

Kwok-Pong (Bobby) Tso: When I was growing up with my grandma, I drew a lot because it was cheap; you don't need anything fancy, just paper, pencil and ideas. So naturally, visual arts seem to be the right choice for me.

3

BR: What attracted you to clay?

KPBT: I am always interested in making things and my original plan at the beginning was to become graphic designer or industry designer. However, the first time I tried clay, I failed completely. I really couldn't make a single thing, and that made me want it more. Clay was never easy for me and I always get a sense of challenge from it, which is what attracted me to work with clay.

A Conversation with Kwok-Pong (Bobby) Tso

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A row of white ceramic plates, each with a wooden dowel passing through a black ring. The plates are arranged in a line, and the background features a grid of black lines on a white surface. One plate on the right has a blue and black patterned interior.

Contrasts in Clay: Susan Beiner and Kwok-Pong Tso