





P U S H P L A Y

*The 2012 NCECA Invitational*  
January 19, 2012 — June 17, 2012  
*Bellevue Arts Museum of Bellevue, Washington*

## CURATOR'S STATEMENT

Linda Ganstrom *NCECA Exhibitions Director*





The NCECA Exhibitions Director holds a four-year term advising, organizing, and curating the NCECA exhibitions program and serves on the Executive Committee. In her second term as NCECA's Exhibitions Director, Linda Ganstrom is a Professor of Art and Design at Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kansas and has been working in the field of ceramics for over 30 years as an artist, educator and curator.

*Push Play.* This familiar command to participate in the open-ended activity of play offers a blend of anticipation spiked with trepidation. Butterflies and desire focus the mind and body in the present. Will play engage or bore, exhilarate or exhaust, transport or devastate? So whether daydreaming, stepping into the studio or onto the stage, tossing out a bet or a ball, competing in sports or immersed in a book, film, the virtual world or entering an exhibition; you are in play, alive and open to life.

This exhibition explores play from multiple perspectives: the creative process, viewer engagement and subject matter. The role of art has changed. Long in service to religion and decoration, the arts are embracing an expanded role as entertainment. The museum encourages a form of play or active participation by engaging patrons in the provocative, engrossing experience of art. Contemporary trends exploring the subject of play in developing personality, gender identification and roles, moral and ethical standards, interpersonal relationships, social roles and education pique curiosity. Art is obviously created from work with a playful attitude. *On the Edge*, the 2012 NCECA conference theme interfaces with this investigation by searching for ceramic works that go beyond the obvious to reveal underlying patterns, challenge preconceptions, expose motivations and enlighten behavior regarding play. Through works of great power, the artists selected push play to new heights of meaning, mystery and relevance. The invitation to engage these works is open, just *Push Play*.

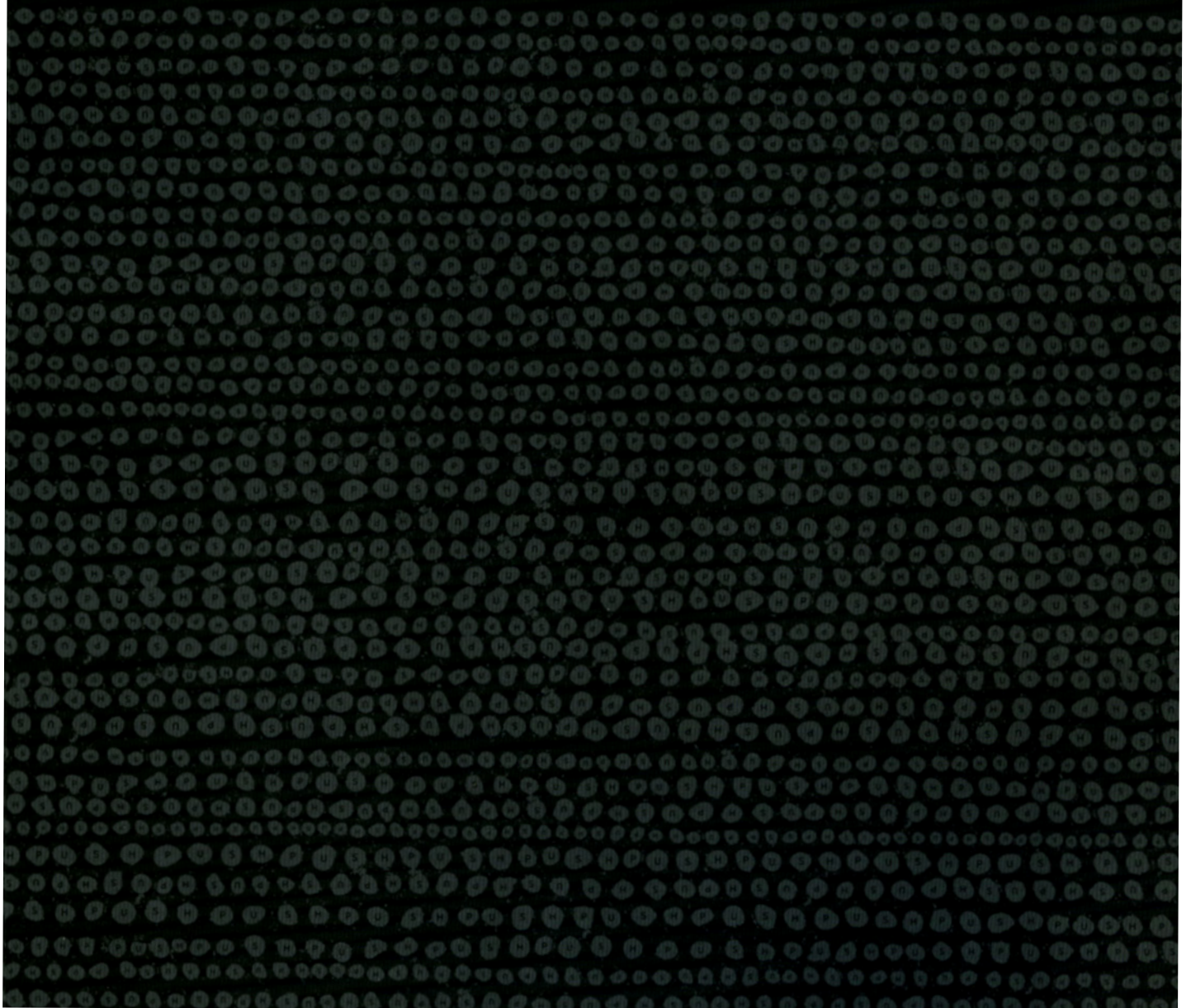
#### Behind the Scenes Acknowledgment

Producing a major exhibition such as *Push Play* is similar to producing a play. As Director, I searched for the most appropriate venue partner and was eager to begin production with Bellevue Arts Museum and their Director of Curatorial Affairs, Stefano Catalani who offered NCECA a great space and a long run from January to June 2012. His probing questions and insights helped shape the cast. I developed a curatorial concept and gathered talent. Established artists known for addressing the subject of play were invited to create works and an open call was extended in early 2011. Over 200 artists responded to that call submitting approximately 2,000 works of art. Thanks to every artist for contributing their creativity and talent to this strong pool from which the rest of our cast was selected. As all the work was extremely worthy and engaging, those who were not selected are no doubt performing as stars in other productions. The 35 artists starring in *Push Play*, thrill, chill and entice the audience to see the world through their eyes. The dedicated, professional staffs at NCECA and BAM contributed their expertise, time and creativity in all the behind the scenes work—developing contracts, designing the exhibition, packing and unpacking, installing, insurance, creating promotional materials, working with our artists and staging a fabulous reception. All are richly deserving of the deepest appreciation. *Thank you.*



## CURATOR'S STATEMENT

Stefano Catalani *Director of Curatorial Affairs, Bellevue Arts Museum*





Stefano Catalani joined Bellevue Arts Museum in 2005 as Curator and was appointed Director of Curatorial Affairs/Artistic Director in February of 2010. He has conceived and organized numerous acclaimed exhibitions exploring the dynamic field of art, craft and design, including the much celebrated *BAM Biennial 2010: Clay Throwdown!* Six exhibitions curated by Catalani have gone on nationwide tours to other museum venues. During his tenure at BAM, Catalani has written and/or contributed to nine exhibition catalogues published by Bellevue Arts Museum; among them an award winner from the American Association of Museums. At Bellevue Arts Museum, he focuses on "craft as a cultural signifier," stressing the social implications of craft.

Bellevue Arts Museum is honored to host *Push Play: The 2012 NCECA Invitational* in conjunction with the 46th Annual NCECA Conference, *On the Edge*, held in Seattle, Washington from March 28 to March 31, 2012.

It is a great honor indeed to be selected as the venue for such a momentous exhibition, for in the minds and eyes of the curators, the work of the invited artists captures the immediacy and the fluidity of the present of ceramic art. It aspires at pointing at and hopefully revealing directions, skills and intentionalities which, although germinating now, will unfold in all their potential only in the future.

I remember the trepidation I felt when the idea of hosting the exhibition at BAM was first put forward for consideration at the end of 2009. That subtle and even unnerving feeling of agitation, however, was soon to be replaced by a sense of satisfaction, more so if one considers the great wealth of museums spread throughout the Puget Sound region. I am very proud that a venue such as Bellevue Arts Museum, which although only few miles from downtown Seattle is geographically located outside its cultural boundaries, was chosen to be the host. It was hard not to go out and boast with the museum's members and supporters during those few ensuing months between securing the 'deal' and the official announcement.

The first contact with NCECA representatives happened in late 2009 during the run of *Robert Sperry: Bright Abyss*, a major retrospective organized by the American Museum of Ceramic Art, Pomona, CA of the functional and sculptural work of one of ceramic's great innovators and visionary figures. At the same time, as the Sperry exhibition was in full swing, the museum's curatorial feverish activity was all focused on selecting the 33 artists for the first edition of *BAM Biennial 2010: Clay Throwdown!* which, as one infers from the title, brought Northwest clay and ceramics into focus to great critical and popular success, highlighting the work of artists in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Alaska and British Columbia. In this perspective, the selection to be the hosting venue for the NCECA Invitational comes as recognition of Bellevue Arts Museum's dedication to ceramics and its role in shaping the discourse around contemporary clay in the Northwest and beyond.

The theme of 'play' is not peregrine to clay. We may live in a time in which playing seems mostly to be experienced by both young people and adults through an electronic interface, yet clay remains an ancestral and visceral interface, mostly oriented towards adults. Playing with clay brings out the child in each one of us, the child that first explored the world of dirt or other soft materials. Childhood is associated with a sense of unfiltered reality: it is the time when we are exposed to experiences for the first time and their vividness will remain with us for a long time. Clay, in my opinion, offers adults such liberating potential: to be able to tap and release an energy and a strength which is deeply rooted in memories of exploration and freedom of those early years of our lives as human beings. The artists featured in *Push Play* experience such emotions each time they get to touch and start 'playing' with clay. From that moment on, the unconscious but not unknown pleasure of the material is dovetailed with ideas and interpretations of play. This is the double richness *Push Play* offers to its audience.

It has been a pleasure to work with Linda Ganstrom, with whom I co-curated this exhibition. Linda deserves all the acknowledgment and praise for she is indeed the real powerhouse behind *Push Play*, carrying out the conceptual burden as well as clerical duties of putting together an exhibition as ambitious as this. I felt that from the start Linda was able to sense my intuitions and incorporate my suggestions, put them at work, and engage in the collaboration with patience. I truly appreciated being part of this team.



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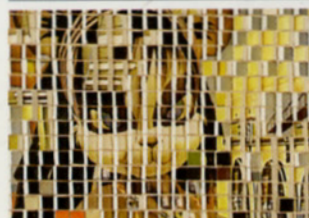
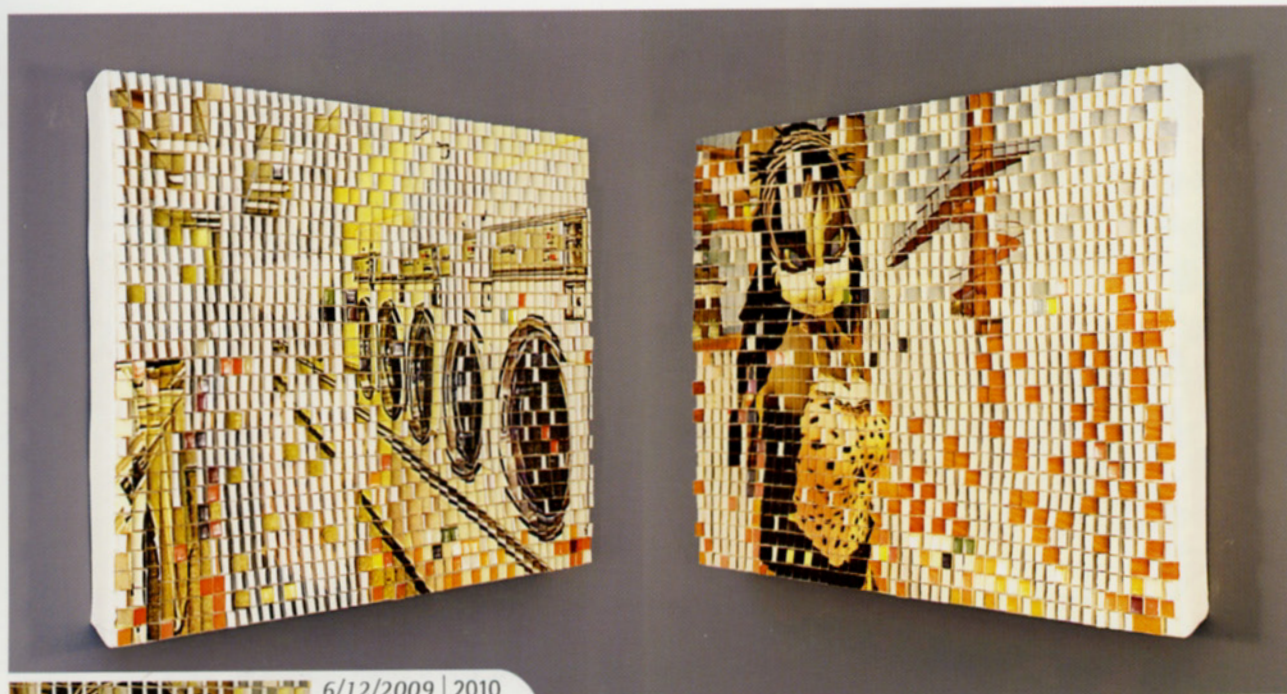
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6/12/2009 | 2010

Screen printing on earthenware  
19.5" x 30.5" x 2.25"



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## MEGUMI NAITOH

### 57 | Boston, Massachusetts

*My current work references mosaics and tile murals. In 2007, I became concerned with **Second Life**, a 3D virtual world/login community and kept a record of my daily activity, reflected in the title of my work. **Second Life** is created by its residents and inhabited by millions of global users who create communities for PLAY, entertainment, friendship, education, and business. Although users can express their identities by creating custom avatars, the environment is established to keep the residents' anonymity, elevating the playfulness of the virtual social interactions. By creating two vantage points and presenting images from both the real and virtual worlds in one piece, the work expresses the integration of real life and virtual life, and how we quickly weave through these two worlds on a daily basis.*

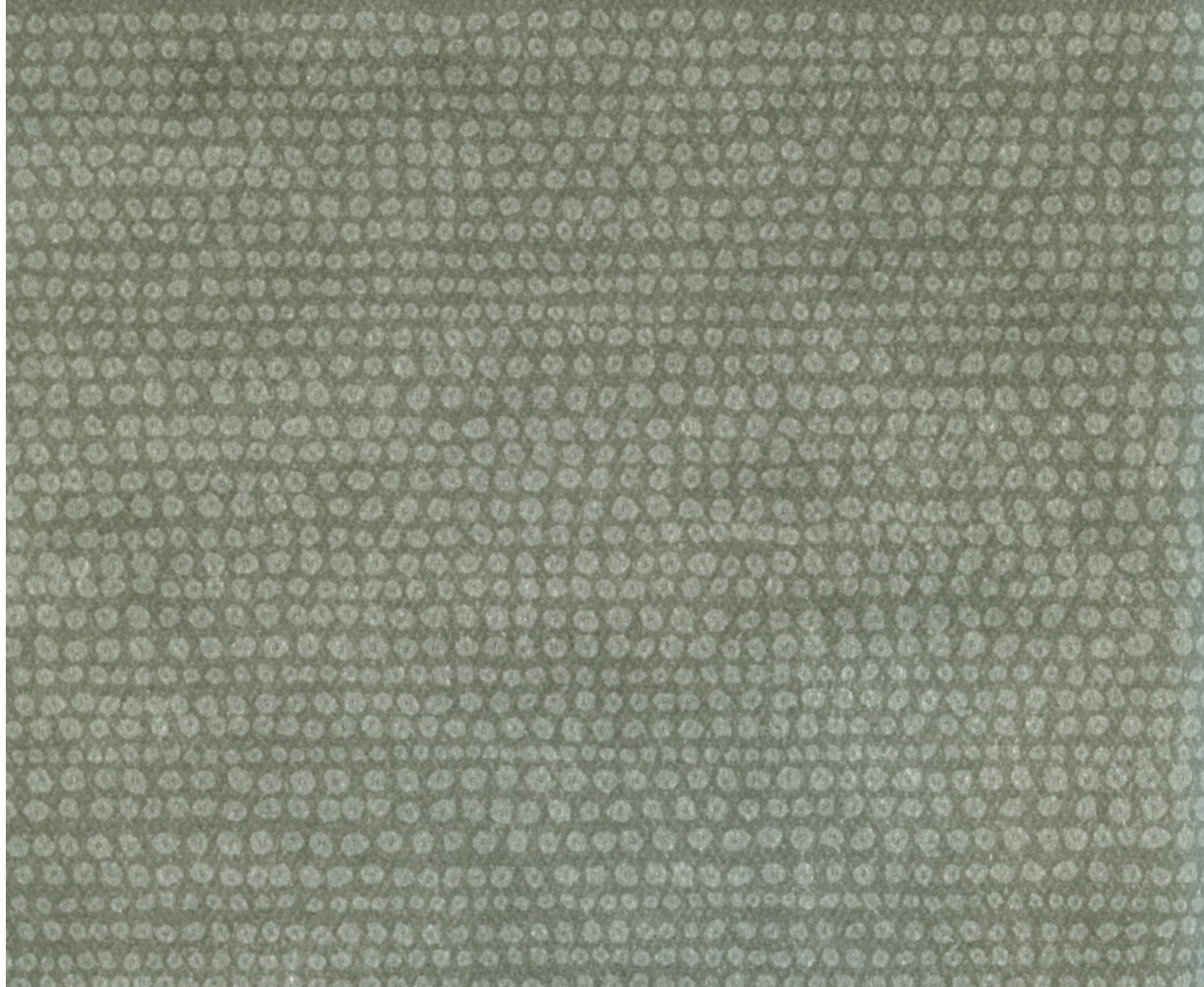
A native of Tokyo, Megumi Naitoh currently resides in Boston, Massachusetts. She received her MFA from Massachusetts College of Art in 2000 and her BS from San Diego State University in 1995. She is a recipient of Massachusetts Cultural Grant, The Clay Studio Solo Exhibition Award and Emerging Artist Award at NCECA. Megumi Naitoh is an Associate Professor of Art at Emmanuel College in Boston, MA.



# ESSAY

Peter Held *Curator of Ceramics*

Arizona State University Art Museum, Ceramics Research Center





## PLAYING IN CLAY

"Play is the voluntary movement across boundaries, opening with total absorption into a highly flexible field, releasing tension in ways that are pleasurable, exposing players to the unexpected, and making transformation possible." — Gwen Gordon, *What Is Play? In Search Of A Universal Definition*

NCECA's invitational exhibition *Push Play*, co-curated by Linda Ganstrom with Stefano Catalani and co-organized by NCECA and Bellevue Arts Museum, brings together both emerging and established artists whose selected works—some overtly, others more subtly—push the boundaries of play. From childhood innocence to abject alienation and adult fantasy, "play" provides an opportunity for artists to get away with disarming strategies.

The show surveys a variety of artistic approaches mirroring contemporary trends, both within the confines of the ceramics field and the mainstream art world. Figuration, installation, new technologies and mixed media work all come into fruition in this wide-ranging exhibition. Many of today's practitioners are compelled to create for a variety of reasons: personal and private concerns, political activism, and seeking balance in the face of contemporary society's rapid-fire pace driven by an all-consuming technological culture.

In his work *Homo Ludens* (*Man the Player*, 1938), the Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga examined the importance of play in human culture. Huizinga uses the term "Play Theory" to define the conceptual space in which play occurs. Huizinga wrote that play is primary to and a necessary condition of cultural renewal. He identifies five characteristics that characterize play. It is free, is in fact freedom; is not ordinary or real; is distinct from ordinary life both as to locality and duration; creates order, is order; demands order absolute and supreme; is connected with no material interest and no profit can be gained from it.

Establishing a bond between play and poetry, Huizinga later theorized that in disciplines such as the plastic arts, the connections with play are less obvious, the "creative impulse" ruled by the discipline, "always subjected to the skill and proficiency of the forming hand." This theory was later debunked by other thinkers, and most would agree that all forms of successful art must have an element of playfulness.

In viewing the figurative work in this exhibition, I observed that these are not necessarily uplifting folk. The artists tend to convey personal challenges and the shared societal angst in which we live. Sigmund Freud saw play, and art, as a means of releasing painful memories and feelings. Cristina Córdova, Judy Fox, Anne Drew Potter, Beth Cavener Stichter and Christina West, are some of the most skilled figurative ceramic sculptors in the field today, whose works are emotionally charged, mysterious and unsettling. Córdova's *Dulce* places an Afro-Caribe female figure gazing defiantly towards the viewer against a backdrop of silhouetted memories, not unlike the artist Kara Walker's historical narrative device. We wonder who is playing with whom.

Judy Fox's *Ayatollah* and *Nkondi* are stoic children play-acting, the innocence of youth giving way to an elusive land of wonderment and, simultaneously; reflecting the larger authoritative adult world.





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*The Captains Congress* by Anne Drew Potter creates a dramatic vignette addressing issues of identity, gender, and alienation experienced throughout our lives. Christina West's grouping of castaway porcelain-clothed figures *What a Doll: The Human Object as Toy*, are both individually lifeless and collectively animated, leaving the viewer to draw his or her own conclusions about relationships to be embraced, abandoned or ignored. Drawing from the heroics of classical sculpture opposed to mundane poses, West creates surreal environments that are dreamy but not restful.

PHOTOS FROM LEFT:

*If I had met my Grandma*  
Tara Polansky

*What a Doll: the Human Object as Toy*  
Christina West

*The Captains Congress*  
Anne Drew Potter

*Swan: Awareness Series*  
Adrian Arleo

*Kohler Diptych*  
Sarah Lindley Et Norwood Viviano

*16 Cups 16 Metaphors—Self-Portrait*  
Chris Staley

*Returning to the Light*  
Charlie Cummings

*Dulce*  
Cristina Córdova

*Prosperity*  
Caroline Cheng

Beth Cavener Stichter's work always packs a visceral punch that is raw, un-nerving and honest. *Come Undone* is a tour de force, composed of secretive self-portraits, portraying aspects of femininity that she attempts to understand and reclaim. The large wolf represents the darker aspects of childhood and how it shaped the artist's habit of seeing the world as black and grey and of predator and prey. These issues are instrumental in forming a child's identity; we grow up seeing the world in terms of these archetypal characters. While *Come Undone* creates a surface tension that is sinister and dark, the underlying theme of the work is derived from a desire to see humor, lightness and beauty emerging from the most shadowy and horrific depths. Collectively, these artists create humanitarian stage sets that unapologetically convey involvement and detachment, self-expression and self-transcendence, individuality and cooperation.

The rich historical traditions of European court porcelain figurines take a decidedly modern turn with the works of Derek Reeverts and Irina Zaytceva. Reevert's *Any Port in the Storm* portrays an idyllic Disneyesque Snow White character, lost in the rapture of nature, while her scruffy modern-day counterpart is tormented by natural forces. Glossy and slick versus matte and handmade, with differing scale, the piece creates a lively vignette that might speak to the danger of being lost in playful bliss. Zaytceva's *Ghost of Lotus Shoes* portrays a concubine with bound feet, once considered intensely erotic in Chinese culture; a woman with perfect lotus feet was likely to make a more prestigious marriage. While she pleasures herself, her male counterpart stares off in a cavalier manner, indifferent to the physical and emotional pain inflicted. The artist questions not only the practice of foot-binding but the ongoing subjugation of women.

Several of the participating artists use animals as a metaphor portraying human vulnerability. Both Adrian Arleo's and Rebekah Bogard's works deal with transitional states of reality/dream, conscious/unconscious. Arleo's *Swan*, perched on an aqueous pedestal, is swathed not in downy feathers, but a sea of ocular-like gremlins, leering with smug grins. Serene repose and agitated observation create a dichotomy. *Twilight*, an installation by Rebekah Bogard, portrays two languid creatures drifting to slumber land amidst biomorphic forms under a starry night. Bogard incorporates a "cutesy" style, to underscore and seduce viewers into her world, subversively sending messages of femininity and gender.





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Kelly Connoles dioramic rabbit warren is a flurry of movement and gestures. Skillfully rendered, the hutch playfully cavorts in the wild but is always mindful of predators lurking nearby. In opposing tenor, Caroline Cheng's *Prosperity* is an elegant Chinese robe of butterflies symbolizing both individuality and a collective cultural whole. A potent symbol of young love or longevity, *Prosperity* is a poetic reminder that many children long for the opportunity to dress up and float away to a happier space.

PHOTOS FROM LEFT:

*Gravitational Pull*  
Rebekah Bogard

*Come Undone*  
Beth Cavener Stichter

6/12/2009  
Megumi Naitoh

*Any Port in a Storm*  
Derek Reeverts

*Scamper*  
Kelly Connoles

*Ghost of Lotus Shoes*  
Irina Zaytceva

*Troikas, 1968*  
David Linger

*Girl Crying*  
Diego Romero

*Nkondi*  
Judy Fox

Two artists, Sam Scott and Chris Staley, spell it out for you with word-play but they take divergent conceptual approaches in their work. Sam Scott's series of six porcelain chargers incorporates traditional games of dominoes, jacks and alphabet blocks interspersed with bits of the computer world. Skill, chance and knowledge become intertwined, bridging generations and the evolution of gaming. Chris Staley, one of the more thoughtful clay workers today, challenges the viewer with his rubric of matching objects to words that inspired their making. His monochromatic cabinet of curiosities hangs above his portrait, slathered in unctuous slip and catching him in a rare moment of maddening ecstasy.

From Mimbres to Marvel Comics, Diego Romero's trio of bowls provides tragicomic relief. Using historical foils for his post-pop commentary, Romero doesn't romanticize his indigenous ancestry, rather, he pointedly remarks upon the harsh realities of contemporary Native peoples, fractured mythologies and the elevated status of hero worship within our society.

Clay's digital and virtual worlds collide with a number of the artists in the exhibition. Brian Boldon, Charlie Cummings, David Linger, Megumi Naitoh, Tara Polansky and collaborators Sarah Lindley and Norwood Viviano incorporate a variety of technologies and strategies in their works, including video, industrial processes, scanned and manipulated photography and rapid prototyping. They evoke memory and nostalgia from vacations past to virtual journeys in time and space.

As this exhibition attests, the field of ceramics has witnessed dramatic shifts in studio practice, the marketplace, collecting and presenting with the rise of the postwar craft movement. A new generation of practitioners is no longer wedded to past traditions; these artists are transdisciplinary and mining the edges of art, design, fashion and architecture. The artists in *Push Play* react to and create within these tectonic cultural shifts. Whether drawing from the purity of childhood imaginings, clashing with present-day mythologies, or living in the fluidity of studio time when reality dissolves into spontaneity both playful and meaningful, these artists are walking a creative tightrope on the path to self-knowledge, noting the risks along the way.



A daunting responsibility and thrilling opportunity, my curatorial role in establishing a theme and selecting works for the biannual NCECA Invitational expands my capacities as I strive to create exhibitions of beauty, meaning and relevance in host venues for a global audience. *Push Play: The 2012 NCECA Invitational* might seem the polar opposite of the serious environmental concerns in the *Earth Matters: 2010 NCECA Invitational*; yet it stems from a similar curiosity about humanity's activity. In *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett explores the relationships between the human activities of work and play, art and craft. If art is work with a playful attitude, play as an aspect of the creative process seems integral to the studio practice of many artists. Where are the roots of our play? How does play shape our identity and world? What is the function of art and play in contemporary society? Is there a dark side to play? These questions shaped my decisions as I reviewed the submissions and made my selections.

Play transports. Henny Linn Kjellberg's ladders in *Climb Away* invite the viewers to reach up and climb into the second story of Bellevue Arts Museum and enter the world of *Push Play*. Once there, *Sitting and Thinking* by Kiki Smith reveals a glimpse of a quiet, interior life at play. Play is imaginative and internal.

Play pleasures. The enjoyment of flight and movement integral to the act of blowing bubbles in Brian Boldon's *Echo* is reinforced by the form and its decoration, delighting the viewer with change as they move about the images. Play or the opportunity to operate freely within a bounded space, is beautifully symbolized in Jessica Gardner's *Weight*. The balloons created from onesies lift the sack from its earth bound existence, but the clock, clearly evident, suggests all our play is bound by time, limited and precious. This concept is repeated in Margaret Keelan's *Hopscotch* as the girl/doll inevitably hops toward the final square. Play challenges. Games offer play within set boundaries. Chris Staley's guessing game *16 Cups 16 Metaphors Self-Portrait* requires insight and inquiry to play. *Hanafuda Sake Drinking Game Set* by Yoko Sekino-Bove blends the innocence of a child's tea set with the adult pleasures of gambling and intoxication.

We play with objects. *I am what I am* Hannah Blackwell's oversized Popeye pushup toy delights with its lithophane still life, but on closer inspection questions gender and sexual identity. Raymond Gonzalez's adult version of a pop toy *Shove* entices and amuses. The collaborative work of Ian Thomas with Ryder Richards, *Monument to a Quarter Million Dreams* appears to be a model of the space shuttle, but the icy creep calls into question the decline of space exploration, science education and inventive free play. Sam Scott's series of porcelain plates feature a wide variety of toys emerging from the nursery and the war room, running the gamut from dominos and jacks to Corvettes and war heads: *Big Boys Toys*.

Christina West's *What a Doll: The Human Object as Toy* hints at the excess and exploitation possible during play. It is pleasurable to manipulate and control dolls. They allow an opportunity to imagine various roles and work out multiple scenarios. Does that play prepare one for life?



The violent consequences of self-indulgence and exploitative play shock and disturb in Clayton Keyes's *Bougie Putti*. In *Ghost of Lotus Shoes* Irina Zaytceva allows the concubine autonomy and pleasure through self play despite her societal role of subservience. In her nudity and pillowy boudoir environment, Cristina Córdova's *Dulce*, the sweet object of desire warily confronts the world with a direct stare, no longer an object but a woman considering her options and her inner landscape.

Play requires space. Sarah Lindley and Norwood Viviano collaborated to render sinks into elegant models of the Kohler Factory campus and its partner the Kohler landfill. Their work speaks about Utopian insight and optimism in planning for parks and recreation to enhance quality of life for factory workers and the reality of refuse overwhelming those spaces dedicated to play. Nature offers itself as a playhouse. Charlie Cummings's *Returning to the Light* beckons, as inner tubes float along an imaginary stream. Memories from such trips can be captured in photographs, but their physical memories leave an even deeper impact. David Linger's *Troikas* or horse drawn sleighs insist on participation in some snowy, shadowy fun despite the political climate.

Play is vital. Through play, relationship bonds strengthen, people attune to each other, personality develops and social order is established. The precarious fragility of human bonds is evident in Mika Negishi Laidlaw's *Correlation 5*. The importance of playful learning experiences between a mother and her child are sanctified in the safe space of the pillow, itself a delicately balanced perch for the eggs. Tara Polansky imagines a relationship in the sweetly sensual play of a kiss. The iconic poses of Judy Fox's nude children, *Ayatollah* and *Nkondi* suggests the power of role-playing in creating future selves.

Storytelling and myth spark play. The Green Fairy in Arthur Gonzalez's *Service at the Villa* ponders the life of pretend and the reality of the story. Derek Reeverts inserts a fresh character into a Disney version of Snow White, who loses his crown, unable to imagine himself a prince, unprepared to act the Old World hero. Comics and graphic novels offer a type of story with heroic figures in the work of Diego Romero. Compelling in their graphic clarity and thought provoking perspectives, they challenge the accepted order of established "his story." An avatar or virtual identity supplants herself in Megumi Naitoh's *6/12/2009* changing the player's perception of self in mundane daily life. Overwhelming and oppressive, beautiful and brutal in their honesty, Mark Chatterley's *Nave* and Anne Drew Potter's *The Captains Congress* emphasize the power of the group at play. A shared scrutiny and danger pervades these works. Wearing paper hats, assuming roles of leadership and power in making decisions that deeply impact the lives of those on trial remind us that play is not always pleasant or fair.

Engaging art is a form of play, an opportunity to operate freely within the bounded space of the museum or a catalog. Again, you are invited to *Push Play*.

**CLOSING CREDITS:** LINDA GANSTROM, NCECA Exhibitions Director and *Push Play* Curator; STEFANO CATALANI, Bellevue Arts Museum Director of Curatorial Affairs, *Push Play* Curator; NORA ATKINSON, BAM Curator; ESTER FAJZI, BAM Registrar; PETER HELD, Catalog Writer; KARRIE SIMPSON VOTH and CHAIWAT THUMSUJARIT, Catalog Designers; JOSHUA GREEN; NCECA Executive Director; KATE VORHAUS, NCECA Projects Manager; MARGE LEVY and WALLY BIVINS, NCECA 2012 Co-Liaisons; KEITH WILLIAMS, NCECA President; LELAND POWERS, Fort Hays State University Chair of Art and Design; PAUL FABER, Fort Hays State University Dean of Fine Arts; THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS.