

Multiplicities and “Singularities”: Léopold L.Foulem and Ceramics at the Musée National des Beaux-Arts du Québec

Paul Mathieu

“Singularities”, a retrospective exhibition on the 40 + years career of Léopold L. Foulem’s work in ceramics is in itself an important event. This is the first time since the mid-1970’s that a National institution takes such a seminal curatorial stance and exhibits ceramics with respect, intelligence and consideration. By focusing on the work of one individual, arguably the most important artist in the field working in Canada now, and one of the few with a true international reputation, all art fields confounded, the MNBAQ is a courageous pioneer. At this point in time, such a visionary exhibition would still be basically unthinkable anywhere else. So if this event is joyous and celebratory, it is also somewhat sad. It deserves some reflection. Here again, ceramics is singled out and presented as apart, separate from other happenings and events in the art world. It is not part of a multi-disciplinary group show beyond the limited confines of “craft”, where ceramics would be included and treated as an equal and it is not part of the larger discourse around contemporary art either. This welcomed institutional inclusion is also, unfortunately, a reinforcement of exclusion.

This being said, the exhibition itself is extraordinary in multiple other ways. I will describe here the experience of the visitor, my own anyway. The works, 120 objects altogether, are exhibited in two large connected rooms, using the familiar conventions for display in a museum context. The beautiful custom plinths appear to be floating in space and create an efficient feeling of elevation. The first impression is powerful and the viewpoint exquisite. In the first room, a cross-section of Foulem’s work over the last 45 years is presented in a chronological fashion in a long, linear display case, starting expectedly from the earliest work to the most recent. A conservative curator would probably have been satisfied with this predictable presentation, rather familiar and convenient. The curator of “Singularities”, Mr. Paul Bourassa is more creative and visionary. Despite the fact that the chronological display is essential for the visitor to grasp the richness, diversity and complexity of the art as it developed over time, it wouldn’t be sufficient to evaluate fully the offerings on view.

In the second contiguous room, the works are organized in four distinct yet complementary sections, each with its own long display case, each one a bit taller than the preceding one so that it is possible to see all the objects, all at once, as we enter the room, in an elevated progression of amazing efficiency. The impression is powerful, bordering on the sublime. The display cases are so many reliquaries, holding and protecting as much as displaying their precious content. These four display cases exhibit a mixture of objects from all periods of the development of the works, seemingly randomly. This first impression is fast set aside. The strong impression of stylistic diversity found in the first room is reaffirmed and reinforced here in these specific combinations. Yet, by presenting the objects reorganized in articulated groupings, the visitor gains an understanding and appreciation of the complex issues they embody.

The first showcase is titled “The Use of Concepts” and present a variety of objects where the conceptual nature of ceramic forms and objects is most in evidence. I would refer the curious

reader to the exemplary catalogue produced for the exhibition. Yet for the visitor, the curator has also provided a brief explanatory text for each of the four sections, printed strategically on the walls. Those familiar with the artist's work know the importance for him of a conceptual approach to ceramics and to art making. Foulem is interested in ideas. Things exist in so far as they embody ideas and generate thinking, and not to provide a simple optical response to beautiful things exquisitely made, as is too often the case with these types of objects. The first grouping exhibits a number of these ideas, around dematerialization and positive/negative relations, among others as well. A negation of practical function and the use of decoration as sign, render objects into images, while examining the complementarity (yet distinctiveness) of form and surface in ceramics.

The second showcase is titled: "History at Work", and the selected works make obvious references to historical precedents, in form and/or surface, for the objects included. History is a central constitutive aspect of ceramics, an inescapable fact that Foulem has mined with great efficiency throughout his career. The artist is as much a scholar as a maker, possibly even more so, even when making things. History is at the core of the numerous and complex references present in all of his productions, otherwise incredibly diverse stylistically. This stylistic diversity I have already mentioned is continuous within each series yet discontinuous from series to series, again in a contestation of the necessity for cohesiveness of style within the production of an artist. This denial of personal expression as exemplified by stylistic continuity, here denied, is central to the aims and efficiency of the work. It may create confusion by contesting expectations, yet it is necessary to also challenge such expectations and take us elsewhere, to a more rewarding place than familiarity, instead. A stylistic approach to making can only yield so many possibilities while a conceptual approach is endlessly productive of new solutions. This fundamental difference between style and concept is most evident in the phenomenal variety of works on view.

The third showcase is titled "Discourse on Matter" and here Foulem alternatively celebrates and contests the inherent materiality of ceramics and of other materials as well, be they noble bronze or trashy plastic garbage. Materials and materiality are of little interest and importance in themselves here, what matters is how they engage with ideas, how they introduce specific meanings within the work, how they contextualize our experience of the work, based on hierarchical prejudice and familiar expectations, again. At every turn we are asked to reassess our position and expand the limits of our experience. If some of these works appears fun, even light, this is not easy work but endlessly challenging and often difficult. At every turn, we are confronted with new possibilities for further reassessment. Here again, the diversity of formal solutions by juxtaposition and associations are astounding.

The fourth and last showcase is titled "Against the Current" and here the selection of works contest various aspects of culture in general and art in particular, notably around issues of hierarchies (again) and sexual identity and practices. This contestation through minority culture, within art or within sexuality, reaffirms the political and critical nature of much of the artist's work and its reassessment of perceived and actual notions of what constitutes relevancy and acceptability in art. The examination of ceramics and homosexuality within a shared exclusionary system in hegemonic contemporary art and social culture is of great efficiency here. Here too, the use of humor and word play serves as a diffusor and permits easy entry for the

reassessment of possibly difficult and certainly complex issues, if not obviously at first. The initial impression may be instantaneously comical and funny, yet the depth of the issues presented are of great seriousness. Most art (to paraphrase Sister Wendy) presents itself as profound yet too often remains superficially profound. Foulem's work is profoundly superficial. It is in presenting itself as superficial that it provokes and challenges. A whole separate essay could be written on the notion of surface and superficiality in Foulem's work.

These four groupings with their specific titles and distinct explanatory texts are to be understood by necessity as complementary. Each and everyone of them, the emphasis on concepts, the historical references, the workings of matter and a contestation of cultural and institutional values, are all and always present in all and any works of the artists, basically from the very beginning of its rigorous development. Even the earliest works, if they had not been made then in the late 1960's and early 1970's, would appear totally fresh and relevant if made now. Their subversive power has not abated. The obvious multiplicities of styles and the apparent confusion of materials are largely irrelevant if we consider instead the multiplicity of contexts and meanings present in the work. By separating and defining aspects of the work within these four complementary categories, the curator has shown as much insight and intelligence as the artist and the work itself demonstrate. By doing so with such succinct efficiency, the visitor is provided with the possible necessary structure to appreciate and understand the complexity of the works, while leaving generous room for individual experience and interpretation.

This work has finally found its home. It is meant to be seen, experienced and understood within the institutional context of museums and the conventional display strategies found there. Nonetheless, it also contests institutions and conventions, with exemplary power. It is in this perverse contradiction that its greatest efficiency resides.

Paul Mathieu is a potter who teaches ceramics at the Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver. His latest book on the history and theory of ceramics "The Art of the Future" is available for free online, text and images, at www.paulmathieu.ca/theartofthefuture