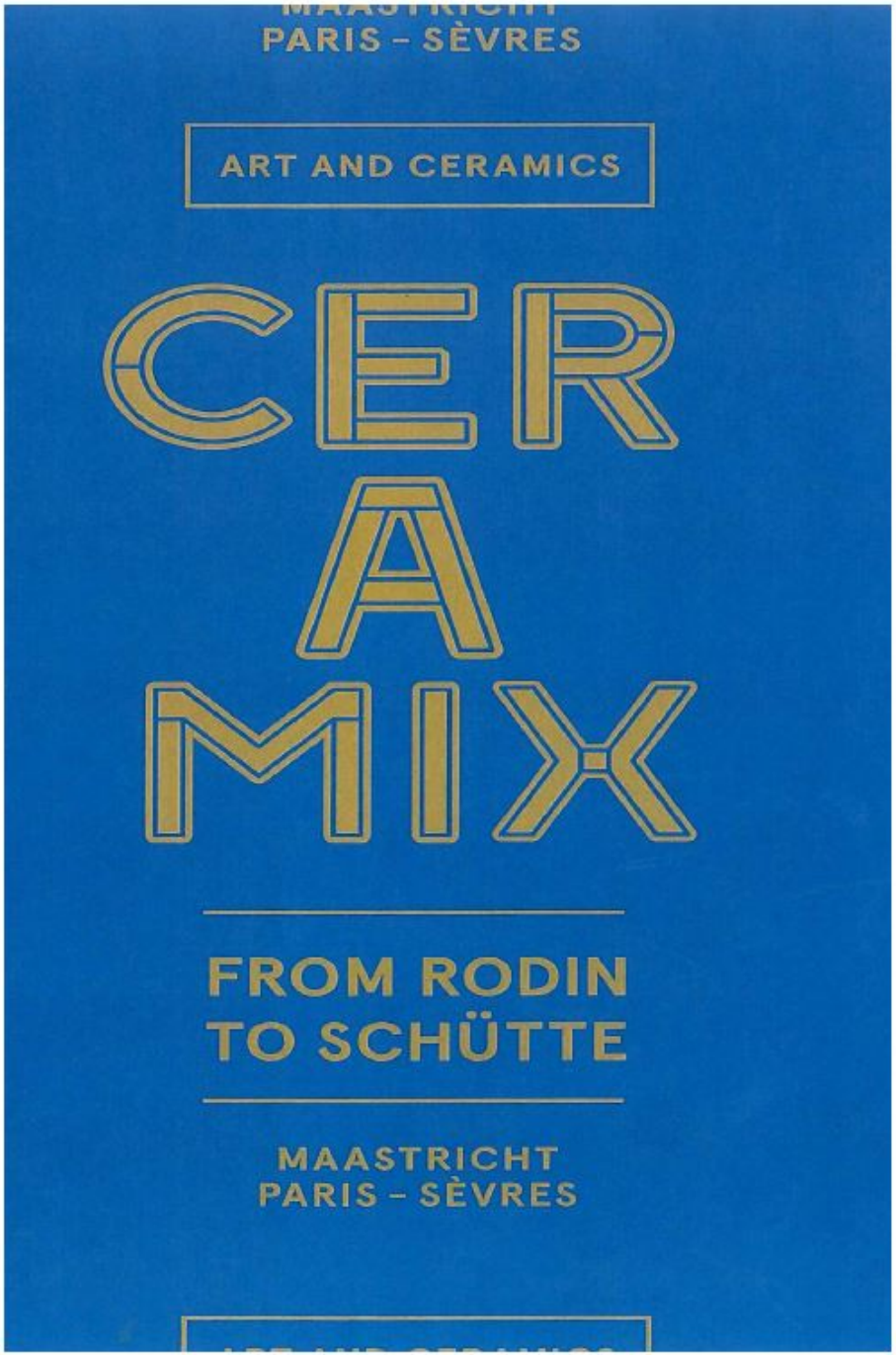

CERAMIX

Art and ceramic from Rodin to Schütte

Curators: Camille Morineau and Lucia Pesapane

This isn't the first time an exhibition at La maison rouge has focused on a specific material and its use by artists. Already in 2012, *Neon* considered contemporary creation from the perspective of a given technique. The exhibition put forward by Camille Morineau and Lucia Pesapane therefore had a ready-made place in La maison rouge's programming, and all the more so as Antoine de Galbert has a longstanding interest in ceramics. His collection includes several works by Elmar Trenkwalder, Johan Creten, Elsa Sahal, Shary Boyle and Rachel Kneebone among others, and he was himself considering a project that would focus on ceramic sculpture. Ceramix came at exactly the right moment. Developed in partnership with Bonnefanten Museum in Maastricht and Sèvres–Cité de la Céramique, it highlights through 250 works the links between art and ceramic in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Ceramic refers to any clay object which has been irreversibly transformed by firing. Ceramics first appeared during the Neolithic period, preceding glass and metalwork, two other forms of production that require heat. The vast majority of human societies use ceramic objects. These are mainly functional (dishes, containers) although there are notable examples of non-utilitarian ceramic sculptures, such as the terracotta soldiers that were

buried in the tomb of Emperor Qin near Xi'an (third century BC) or religious sculptures by the della Robbia dynasty in Renaissance Italy, to give just two examples. However, "ceramic sculpture" truly came into being with Paul Gauguin in the late nineteenth century. Since then, ceramic has remained a part of sculpture, reprised by artists in different places and at different times throughout the twentieth century, and with even greater enthusiasm in the twenty-first century where it increasingly features in biennials and contemporary art shows.

Working with raw earth isn't new to artists. Sculptors have frequently used clay to rough out their ideas before transposing them into more permanent form using materials such as marble and bronze, which are considered more "noble". Beyond the sensual attraction of clay, its malleability and plasticity allow it to be spontaneously fashioned, in direct contact with the hand. Ceramic, in contrast, implies a certain number of complex operations (assembly, firing, glazing) which the artist must either learn himself, or call on the assistance, expertise and tools (kiln, glazes) of trained potters or ceramists.

Ceramix shows artists' diverse approaches, from modelling to performance, from small-scale objects to installations, expressionism to conceptualism.

Because this is such a rich terrain, the exhibition is shared between two sites: Sèvres–Cité de la Céramique and La maison rouge. Both venues consider the same chronological period (late nineteenth to early twenty-first century) through different and complementary thematic, geographic and monographic considerations to show how ceramic has established itself as a modern material. The exhibition can therefore only be seen in its entirety by also visiting Cité de la Céramique in Sèvres.

The corridor leading into the exhibition sets out the chronological spectrum, beginning with the most recent developments in contemporary ceramic and a conceptual approach with a wall-mounted piece by **Mai-Thu Perret**. She has transformed a utilitarian object (a wooden pallet) into a fragile and delicate ceramic tableau. Adjoining this are installations by **Piet Stockmans** and **Catherine Lee**. Stockmans (a designer for the Royal Mosa porcelain factory in Maastricht from 1966 to 1989) is one of the few artists in the exhibition who produces both functional pieces and unique artworks, in particular wall installations that explore themes of repetition. Their common denominator is that they are made from white porcelain, often coloured cerulean blue. Works by Catherine Lee also revolve around seriality, although she is interested more with duplication than repetition. This piece is an alignment of several examples of a simple abstract form, similar to a prehistoric silex tool. Lee uses raku, a Japanese firing and glazing technique that originated in the sixteenth century, to introduce numerous surface and colour variations to this minimalist series.

These different facets of contemporary sculpture lead visitors **to Auguste Rodin**'s *Tête monumentale de Balzac* (Balzac, Monumental Head), circa 1897, the starting-point of the exhibition as it marks the emergence of "ceramic sculpture" towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Ceramic sculpture

Paul Gauguin, Auguste Rodin and Jean Carriès all took an interest in ceramic, not least because coloured glazes opened up new possibilities that marble and bronze could not match. All three worked with ceramists to pierce the mysteries of this new material. **Rodin**, for example, entrusted his *Tête monumentale de Balzac* to Paul Jeanneney, a wealthy engineer with a passion for Japanese stoneware which he took as inspiration for colours and textures. Rather than producing a true likeness, Rodin concentrated on the writer's creative force which he conveys in the scale of the work and the exaggerated features.

Masks and mascarons

Next to Balzac's head, **Paloma Varga Weisz**'s mask is another monumental piece whose realistic style recalls the tradition of death masks. Taking her ageing father as a model, his face deeply furrowed, she takes advantage of clay's ductile nature to propose a reflection on the inexorable passing of time.

Sculptor **Jean Carriès** began experimenting early on with colour and surface effects, using experimental techniques to add patina to his waxes, plaster casts and bronzes. In 1888 he discovered a passion for glazed stoneware and subsequently moved to Saint-Amand-en-Puisaye where he devoted himself exclusively to this new-found medium. He worked tirelessly, seeing which variations he could obtain from different clays, glazes and firings. He produced a significant number of masks in which several influences can be seen, beginning with Japanese art which had captivated Parisians at the 1878 World Fair. Carriès showed a deep appreciation of Japanese mat stoneware and the aesthetic of Noh theatre masks. He also admired medieval art and its grotesques, and was familiar with Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's "character heads" from the eighteenth century.

Like other Fauvist painters, **André Derain** worked with potter André Metthey in the early twentieth century to decorate vases with floral designs and female figures. He returned to ceramic in 1938, this time working alone, after a storm uprooted a pine tree on his property in Chambourcy to reveal a seam of red clay. He set about modelling simple but expressive heads, masks and figurines, inspired by the African and Mediterranean primitive figures he collected.

For his *Basler Masks* (2014), **Thomas Schütte** looks to Europe and the masks worn during carnival celebrations in Basel, a Swiss tradition that goes back to the fifteenth century, although visitors might also see similarities with the mascaron, an architectural feature. The apotropaic function of Schütte's demonically grinning faces is heightened by the use of vivid, venomous colours.

Ceramic, an avant-garde material

Ceramic was part of almost every major avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century. In France, the Fauvists worked with potter André Metthey

who helped them produce intensely coloured vases and plates. **Raoul Dufy**, who was close to the Fauvists, began a prolific collaboration with the Catalan ceramist Josep Llorens Artigas in 1924, after the two met in Paco Durio's studio. The pair worked with landscape designer Nicolau Maria Rubió i Tudurí for a series of *Jardins de salon* (1924-1930), small indoor jardinières designed to resemble architectural constructions and emblazoned with decorations in honour of music, art, the sea and the gods of mythology. They are characteristic of Dufy's flamboyant style and his familiar themes of women bathing, the sea and seashells.

In 1947 **Pablo Picasso** moved to a studio in the hills overlooking Cannes where he would remain until 1955. Here, he embarked on a collaboration with ceramists Suzanne and Georges Ramié, and their Madoura studio in Vallauris. Setting his pictorial practice aside, he concentrated almost exclusively on ceramics which he saw as a return to the origins of art, producing close to four thousand works at the couple's studio. Tableware can be seen alongside feminine figures, inspired by Ancient Greek Tanagra figurines from the sixth and third centuries BC that are allegories of elegance and delicacy. The vases' curved contours blend into bodies - an arm becomes a handle - in a celebration of feminine beauty.

In Italy too, ceramic became a part of the artistic repertoire in the 1930s. Tullio Mazzotti (nicknamed **Tullio of Albisola** after the town near Genova where he experimented with ceramics and which is, alongside Faenza, an important centre for ceramics in Italy) inspired many Futurist artists to experiment with ceramic and give a modern dimension to this ancient craft. He and Tommaso Marinetti co-authored the 1938 *Futurist Manifesto of Ceramics and Aeroceramics* in which they advocate polycentric, mechanical, anti-imitative forms in startlingly bold colours. Luigi Colombo (known as **Fillia**) was among the artists who signed the manifesto. He transformed traditional functional objects (vases, tea-sets) into elementary geometric spheres and cubes which he then combined into dynamic ensembles, some suggestive of Art Deco. Certain works reflect the Futurists' fascination with war – *Masque à gaz* (Gas Mask) (1932) by **Ivos Pacetti**, who opened his own studio in Albisola in 1929, makes brilliant use of glaze to imitate the sheen of metal - and with machines, a theme **Bruno Munari** transposes in his "imaginary animals". They offer a humorous, synthetic vision of nature. His dog appears to have been assembled from mechanical parts. **Roberto Bertelli**'s female bust shows a Cubo-Futurist influence while using patina to create the illusion of bronze.

The liberation of clay: California and the Otis Group

A profound renewal in the use of ceramic, which took on new status as a form of sculpture, came about not through the New York art scene but in the art and design departments of Californian universities. **Peter Voulkos** - who in 1954 was invited to teach in Los Angeles, at the Otis College of Art and Design which he left in 1959 to teach at University of California, Berkeley - abandoned the conventions of ceramic and produced works in a spirit of

abstract expressionism, borrowed from the New York school. These are imposing, spontaneous, irregular pieces with rough, imperfect surfaces. The energy and physicality of Voulkos' sculpting is deliberately evident. His talent as a teacher can be seen in the diverse nature of his students' works, who were encouraged to explore very different aesthetics from Voulkos' own. **Kenneth Price**, for example, who studied with Voulkos in Los Angeles, is particularly attentive to the use of colour, preferring bright hues and sometimes replacing glaze with acrylic paint. His abstract sculptures, which oscillate between constructivist geometric lines and rounded, organic forms, are without equivalent. **Ron Nagle** was a regular at Peter Voulkos' studio in Berkeley, where he would also teach as of 1961. His experience as a jewellery-maker explains his preference for small objects. Nagle's admiration for Georgio Morandi's metaphysical still lifes transpires in the form of his ceramics: small, abstract sculptures that resemble cups but are in fact pretexts for far-reaching experiments into the colour and surface effects of glazes. In his more recent works, Nagle leaves aside functional forms and glossy surfaces (the "Finish Fetish", a genre that emerged in Los Angeles in the 1960s), preferring organic shapes whose rough surfaces suggest rocky concretions or corals, painted using industrial methods.

Ceramic funk

The Funk aesthetic that appeared on the West Coast of the United States in the 1950s came as a response to the then dominant movements, whether the formal rigour of minimalism, the detachment of pop culture, or abstract expressionism. Peter Selz, who in 1967 curated the exhibition that would coin the term "funk art", describes it thus: "Funk art is hot rather than cool; it is committed rather than disengaged; it is bizarre rather than formal; it is sensuous; and frequently it is quite ugly and ungainly." Distinct artists came together under this "banner". Of them, the most remarkable personality was no doubt **Robert Arneson**, who in 1962 was appointed to run the ceramics studio at University of California, Davis. His figurative sculptures draw widely on popular culture and frequently represent everyday objects, in particular toilets, the "ultimate ceramic", clearly alluding to Marcel Duchamp's *Fontaine*. His raucous interpretations of familiar items examine social and political questions with great humour. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, he produced portraits of popular figures, from Mona Lisa to Marvel's Captain Ace, together with numerous large-format self-portraits. These were often grotesque and full of self-derision: the turkey roosting on the head of *Captain Ace* (1978) is a reference to Arneson's favourite brand of whisky, Wild Turkey, and his drinking habits.

Kathy Butterly graduated from UC Davis in 1990, and was part of the last generation of artists to study with Arneson. Her richly coloured, abstract works suggest fine tableware in their tiny size and her delicate use of glazes. However, the soft, biomorphic curves, sexual references and sense of humour are eminently suggestive of Funk art.

Like Arneson, (the two are of the same generation), **Viola Frey** produced a

number of self-portraits. Often larger than lifesize, they are far more restrained and introspective. Frey's sculptures are characterised by thick glazes, textured surfaces and bright colours. A pupil and later assistant to Arneson at UC Davis, **David Gilhooly** shares his enjoyment of humour and the grotesque. In the 1970s he invented a series of frog characters which he portrays surrounded by a cornucopia of food and manufactured goods in a satirical comment on the excesses of today's consumer society. **Marilyn Levine**'s work is immediately recognisable. From the start of her career in 1969, she has specialised in hyper-realistic ceramics, mainly stoneware to which she adds nylon fibre for greater elasticity. Her bags, gloves, shoes, jackets, etc. are veritable trompe-l'œil renditions and technical exploits that imitate leather to perfection, capturing its texture, folds, even the scuffs on its surface.

Eros and Thanatos

Instincts of life (Eros) and death (Thanatos), theorised by Sigmund Freud, are given material form, inextricably combined in the dense and complex compositions in this section. The visitor can concentrate on the forms themselves, as all the works are monochromes. The curators have chosen to fill the space with white pieces in reference to the grand tradition of porcelain, a rare and costly material that was known as "white gold" when it arrived in Europe from the East. Porcelain was reserved for kings before finding its way onto bourgeois tables in the nineteenth century.

Given its monumental size and the technique used (an assembly of elements which have been fired and glazed separately), **Elmar Trenkwalder**'s sculpture is far removed from elegant tableware. Viewed from a distance, it resembles an elaborately sculpted religious or commemorative monument. Its style could be Gothic or Baroque, or that of a Khmer or Indian temple (Trenkwalder is openly influenced by all these). However, closer scrutiny reveals faces, bodies, and abundant male and female genitalia. Multiplied and assembled, treated symmetrically or on an altered scale, they take on an abstract, decorative dimension. Plant matter and anthropomorphic elements intermingle in **Rachel Kneebone**'s porcelain sculptures. These are more dramatic, agitated works that are shot through with erotic tension. They also suggest ancient sculpture (*Laocoön*) as well as Rodin's *La Porte de l'Enfer* (The Gates of Hell). Organic references reveal themselves clearly in **Johan Creten**'s *Odore di Femmina* (Smell of Female) and in a more allusive manner in **Arlene Shechet**'s work. Her polymorphous creature with its irregular mat surface is not without humour, **Rachel Labastie** reproduces objects intended to exert a violent physical constraint (shackles) in the delicate and fragile medium of porcelain. Hung on the wall like remnants of the past, they evoke absent bodies. This same association of tragic subject and delicate technique can be observed in **Katsuyo Aoki**'s skull (near the door). It reinterprets the theme of the *memento mori* in the elaborate style of Baroque or Rococo.

Our first response to **Bita Fayyazi**'s fifteen hundred giant cockroaches swarming across the gallery floor and walls is astonishment as much as

repulsion. The Iranian artist's work was greeted with uproar when first shown at the sixth Biennial of Contemporary Ceramic in Teheran, in 1998. It constitutes an allegory for her artistic practice, which is inspired by life. This multitude is also the result of a collective output: anyone visiting the artist's studio was invited to make a cockroach from six moulds that she designed. Casting is a throwback to ceramic's utilitarian origins. More importantly, through repetition it creates a disarming proliferation that is especially well-suited to the installation format.

Elsa Sahal

Ceramic has been Elsa Sahal's chosen medium since 2000. She experiments endlessly with shapes, surface textures and glazes. Her main subject is the human body which she portrays as neither obviously masculine nor feminine, often metamorphosed or fractioned beyond recognition. *L'acrobate* (The Acrobat) (2012), firmly supported by legs made using the primitive technique of coil pottery, resembles a surrealist *cadavre exquis*: ostensibly sexual body parts (buttocks, orifices, breasts) are curiously assembled into a powerful figure that struggles to disconnect with the ground. In contrast, the sculptures in the *Pole Dance* series (2015) break free from gravity, rising above their base to sensually twist around the vertical axis of the pole. Their supple, provocative, emancipated forms reconfigure bodies from erotic attributes, at once sensual and grotesque. Further along, Rodin's plaster figures contort themselves not in any kind of erotic dance but as though attempting to escape the antique vases in which they are trapped.

In the patio, the truncated figure of a girl, urinating upright like a boy, becomes a *Fountain* (2012). Her legs extend into two massive mineral columns. Sponge-like marine organisms have attached themselves to these columns along with, more curiously, nuts and bolts.

Teatrini. Italy from the 1930s to the present

Just as Futurism, an early twentieth-century avant-garde movement, began to lose ground, archaistic trends started to emerge in Italian art. **Arturo Martini** was one of the leading figures of Italian sculpture between the two world wars, and one of the first to show an interest in ceramic. As a member of the Valori Plastici group, he distanced himself from avant-garde art, instead advocating a return to tradition and a naturalist style. His monumental work *Chiaro di luna* (Moonlight) (1931-1932) reveals his interest for primitive artists and archaic forms, particularly Etruscan art, and his preference for materials in their natural state. His work explores a lyrical, fantasy world that would have a profound influence on post-war Italian sculptors, including **Fausto Melotti**, a pioneer of geometric abstraction in 1930s Italy. Alongside thin metal sculptures, Melotti produced other works in ceramic, and post-1945 devoted himself almost exclusively to this medium. *A tentoni* (1979) is an example of his *Teatrini* or little theatres: compartmentalised structures whose tiny, rudimentary figures and abstract

props provide narrative fragments for a story that embraces poetry and realism, surrealism and abstraction. **Giosetta Fioroni** began painting and drawing in the late 1950s, coming much later to ceramic, in 1993 in Faenza. Part painting, part sculpture, her pieces draw the observer into a dreamlike world of peculiar, brightly coloured, large structures with shiny or pearly surfaces. A similarly enigmatic atmosphere can be found in the work of young-generation artists such as **Alessandro Pessoli**, another regular at the pottery studios in Faenza. His sculpted scenes, sometimes white, sometimes polychrome, take root in the history of 1930s Italian sculpture while assembling an extremely varied cast of characters; a highly personal *commedia dell'arte* with abundant reference to film and theatre.

Thomas Schütte

Thomas Schütte is an eclectic artist, as much at ease with wood, aluminium, bronze or plastic as with clay or modelling clay. His work spans sculptures, architectural models, drawings, engravings and installations. Since the 1980s, sculpting has been an important part of his practice, particularly human figures. Schütte is very much involved physically in the production process, in particular for his exaggerated, grotesque male heads. In contrast, *Die Fremden* (The Strangers), the ceramic figures he made in 1992 for documenta ix in Kassel, are as static and aloof as the vases that stand alongside them. His *Keramik Sketches* installation (1997-1999) reveals the creative process itself: the fumblings, accidents and errors that are a part of any creation are presented as finished works, on specially designed racks.

Johan Creten

Having worked with ceramic for over twenty years, Johan Creten is a pioneer of this medium in contemporary creation. Numerous artist's residencies around the world, including in the United States, and in Sèvres, have enabled him to acquire a vast technique, constantly exploring clays, glazes and different firing techniques. Creten is equally at ease with stoneware as with porcelain, with modelling as pastillage (a forgotten eighteenth-century technique in which fruit and flowers are fashioned from small rounds), and has experimented with an entire palette of coloured glazes, from thick to transparent. Like any sculptor, Johan Creten considers the base to be an important part of the work, adapting them to each series. Behind its seductive sensuality and colours, his work engages themes such as sexuality, religion, death and politics, sometimes transposed into their titles.

Remnants of a fragile world: Latin America and its identity

No single exhibition can hope to take in ceramic sculpture as practiced around the world. This section is a modest incursion into Latin America, where ceramic is a centuries-old tradition that can be traced as far back at least as pre-Columbian pottery.

Carol Young approaches ceramic as an archaeologist would. The different elements in *More than the Sum of its Parts* (2015), each fashioned from different coloured clays, are aligned like fossils or silex tools unearthed in archaeological digs. **Paula De Solminihac** makes similar reference to the remains of a culture or an identity: black clay shapes, none easily identified, appear to have been excavated and laid out as fragile witnesses to a long-lost civilisation on the same packing cases that served for their transport. The installation springs from an initiatory journey which the artist made to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Maria region in Columbia, home to the world's first potters. **Ana Hillar and Oscar Dominguez** are two Argentinean artists who are now based in Faenza, Italy, an important centre for ceramics. In their studio there, they produce works that reinterpret animal and vegetable forms. Many of their pieces are white or ochre and seek to highlight ceramic's "everyday" quality, as in this ethereal work of what appear to be twigs and branches. **Gabriel Orozco** didn't make the elements for *Poissons* (Fish) (1993). Instead, he simply left his handprint on still wet clay tiles. The artist calls on the visitor's imagination to transform the abstract fragments spread across the floor into a shoal of fish.

Leiko Ikemura

Leiko Ikemura studied sculpture in Osaka, travelling in Spain and Switzerland before settling in Germany, in 1972. Her practice alternates painting, sculpture, installation and photography, always through variations on the same motif, often a human figure. She alters the colour, glaze, size or accessories of a headless female figure, or imagines several ways to position a hand against a face. Crafted as simple, often monochrome forms, Ikemura's work suggests troubled emotions. Dreamlike and poetic, they are instilled with solitude and fragility.

Sacred and profane, traditions revisited

Like other sculpted matters, ceramic lends itself to a variety of uses, from religious statuary to trinkets. **Charles Vos**, who spent his entire career in his hometown of Maastricht, where he also taught, produced small ceramics on classical themes: official portraits, animal sculptures and religious statuettes in an art deco style. In terms of technique and subject, **Philip Eglin**'s work is in a similar vein, were it not for their quirky decoration slashed with bright colours, wallpaper flowers and elements of graffiti.

Shary Boyle and **Jessica Harrison** each in their own way revisit the eighteenth-century tradition of porcelain figurines, typically produced at the Meissen factory in Germany. Whereas Shary Boyle uses the Meissen aesthetic as inspiration for scenes whose meaning eludes us, Jessica Harrison buys figurines at flea markets which she then transforms, completely altering their signification in the process. Pretty ladies in Sunday dresses, more accustomed to adorning little girls' bedrooms, find themselves covered in tattoos or clutching their own severed head in their hands. This same combination of delicate technique and morbid subject

occurs in **Carolein Smit**'s work. The blonde, bejewelled skeleton reclining on cushions returns to the traditional image of the vanity, intended to remind us of our mortal condition. Just as colourful, **Marlène Mocquet**'s ceramics are an extension of her painting: a busy, fantastical animal and vegetable world. Meanwhile, **Han Van Wetering**'s spiky, hybrid character borders on the monstrous.

Videos

Since the 1950s, artists all over the world have physically wrestled with clay in a number of performance works (*Challenging Mud* by Kazuo Shiraga, Tokyo, 1955, springs to mind). The films screened in the projection room reveal this alternative approach to clay. In the 1970s, **Charles Simonds** used his own body as the foundations for a brick construction; **Jim Melchert** dips his head in slip (liquid clay) which he then allows to dry into a mask; the modelling process is documented step by step in **Rachel Labastie**'s film, then deconstructed by chantalpetit. **Nina Hole** focuses on the firing process in her spectacular *Fire Sculptures*. Lastly, creation is shown as a physical struggle with matter in **Valérie Delarue**'s performance, or as a pagan ritual in a piece by **Miquel Barceló** and **Josef Nadj.**

The exhibition continues

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