

# Fabricating Ideas

*A Review by  
Dylan J Beck*



David S East. *Rosette Generation*. 2010.  
Slip cast ceramics, carpeting, DVD animation.  
Photo by Ken Yanoviak.



Neil Forrest and Del Harrow. *Pequod Chop*. 2010.  
Glazed ceramic, wood and lighting.  
Photo by John Carlano.

THE EXHIBITION *FABRICATING IDEAS*, CURATED BY FORREST Snyder and Chad Curtis in conjunction with the 2010 NCECA conference, showcased a group of artists who have incorporated computer-aided technology into their studio practices. Snyder, a Baltimore, Maryland artist, is known for his creation of the web forum *Critical Ceramics*. Curtis, an assistant professor in the Tyler School of Art, Temple University in Philadelphia, has designed computer-aided milling and drawing machines and incorporated them and their products into his ceramic and mixed-media sculptures. Those invited to participate in the exhibition (David East, Neil Forrest, Del Harrow, Jeanne Quinn and Steven Thurston) are all artists formally trained in ceramics. According to Curtis, the intention was to combine the hands-off nature of the technology with sensibilities drawn from experience with the tactile properties of clay.<sup>1</sup>

What started with Snyder's invitation to Curtis to curate an exhibition evolved into a collaborative group project through an extended discourse and multiple creative studio sessions. The seven artists had been working with the concepts exhibited in *Fabricating Ideas* for nearly four years and the resulting exhibition displayed a spectrum of approaches to the use of emerging technologies and a range of expertise within the learning curves for these respective technologies. Non-traditional art-making tools such as CNC (computer numerical controlled) devices and CAD (computer-aided design) software have been in use in industry for decades but only recently have these become accessible to studio artists. Until just a few years ago the least expensive 3D printers still cost in excess of \$40,000 USD but recently engineers and designers have developed 'desktop' 3D printers, such as the CupCake CNC from

Makerbot Industries and the Fab@Home open-source (non-proprietary software and hardware) 3D printer developed by Hod Lipson and Evan Malone of the Cornell University Computational Synthesis Laboratory. These can be purchased for as little as \$700 USD.

Many of the *Fabricating Ideas* artists are associated with university art departments committed to cutting-edge research. Working in academic environments where tools such as laser etching/engraving devices and 3D printers are available has allowed them to pursue ideas with a great deal of latitude. That freedom was manifested in the studio during the collaborative sessions held at James Madison University in Harrison, Virginia and the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland. Through these sessions and through their individual work, the artists developed an exhibition that not only reflects a wide range of approaches to and unique uses of technology but also presages the next chapter in the technical progression of art making.

Given the emerging-technology theme, it was especially appropriate that the exhibition was hosted by the *Gray Space* at The Crane Arts Building, a 1905 structure designed by Walter Ballinger, an early innovator in the use of cast concrete construction<sup>2</sup>. The Crane's unique interior, so different from that of a white-box gallery, conspired with the inventive works in *Fabricating Ideas* to evoke a century of pioneering technologies. The ceiling of exposed cast concrete and the dark gray walls augmented the depth of the space above the pitted, 100-year-old concrete floor but, more importantly, the pervasiveness of grey with its metaphorical suggestions of indeterminate space (grey areas) symbolically situated the exhibition on the conceptual median



Steven Thurston. *Origins of Allegories*.  
Photo by Ken Yanoviak

between the handmade and the fabricated, the traditional and the vanguard.

Arrayed along the wall opposite a bank of windows were the works of Thurston's *Origins Of Allegories*, a series of furniture-grade wooden discs. The undulating chargers of eastern hardwood framed small prototypes of platonic solids: dodecahedrons and icosahedrons that have epitomized human conception on an abstract plane since the first millennium BCE. Though each was isolated in its own shrine for singular contemplation, these reflections of geometric truth were interconnected through a network of antiquated electrical wiring and internal lighting. Inherently complex but regular, the platonic solids readily lent themselves to CAD and rapid prototypical production. Printing these intricate objects in resin-injected plaster on a Z-Corp 3D printer, Thurston rendered them in nearly perfect form then underscored this achievement – the dream of ancient mathematicians and philosophers – by presenting each model in elegant illumination.

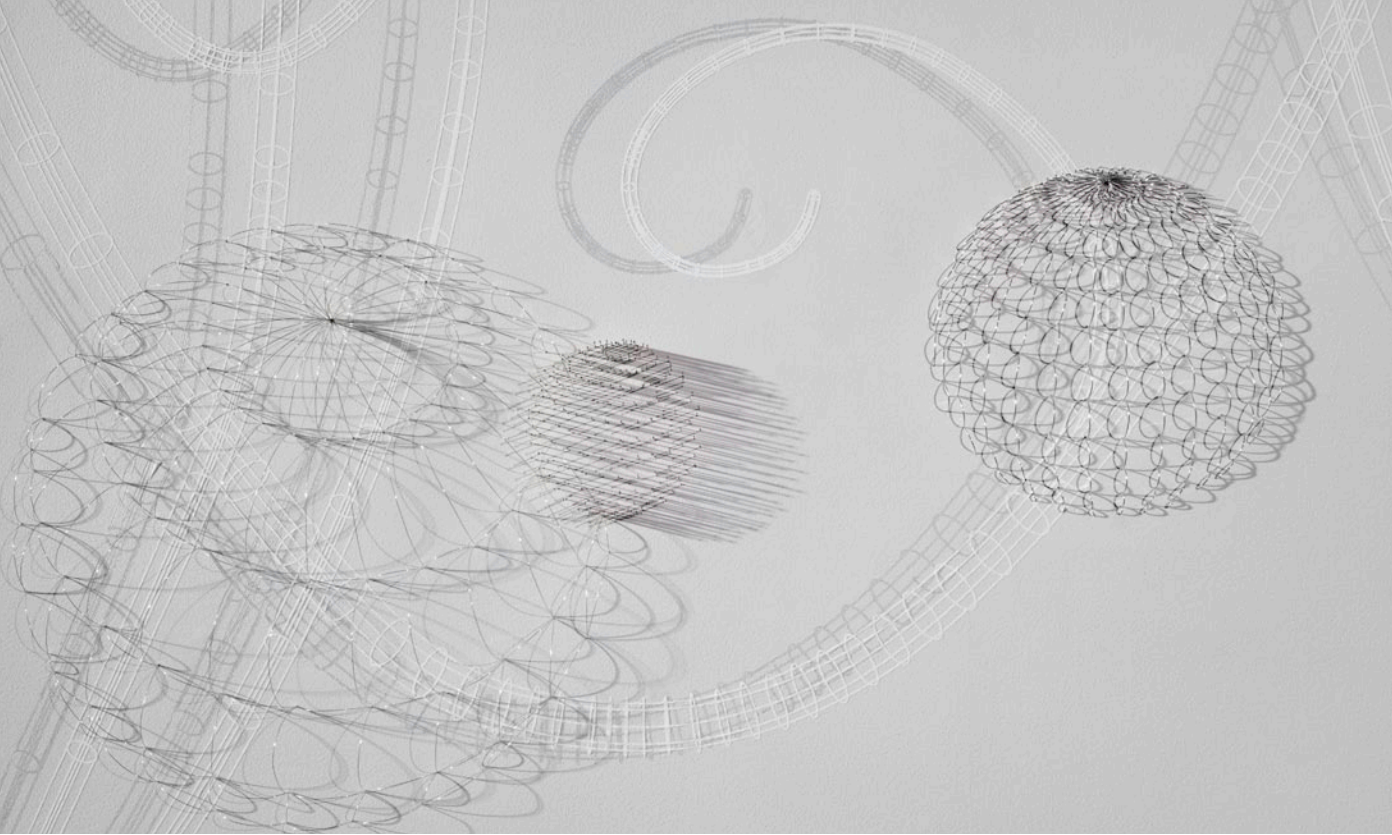
Due to the built-in language of CAD Software, pattern and regular geometry were the hallmarks in *Fabricating Ideas*. Moving off of the wall to the centre of the room were Harrow's four provisional models, an installation consisting of three non-objective forms and a polygonal house plant of black porcelain in a hand-rendered terracotta planter. Supporting a nebulous wire frame structure of resin-dripping oak dowels was a more regular structure of copper water pipes, suggesting a functioning, though closed, interior architectural system. This closed system evoked the increasingly cloistered interior domestic spaces of contemporary suburban/exurban neighborhoods, while a puddle of fired black clay, adjacent to it,

seemed to ooze like used motor oil. The fourth form, of blue glazed clay, was a geometric wave frozen at its crest and supported from behind by a steel pipe. Generated from a digital model, the form was translated into a press mould of plywood polygonal shapes, a method of construction clearly recorded on the sculpture's surface.

The domestic interior was more directly addressed in David East's *Rosette Generation* and *Crown* series. The former comprised two arrays of slip-cast house silhouettes whose three-dimensional form was drawn from perspectival recession. These two rosettes lay upon a swath of frieze carpet, a type used for high traffic and industrial/retail applications, while an animation of the rosettes played on a small LCD screen. The arrangement, with its incorporation of an existing fireplace, conjured the image of a child lying on the floor watching a cartoon amid merchandised toys from that cartoon.

Mounted on the wall near *Rosette Generation* was East's *Crown* series, the title of which refers to the crown moulding found in interior architectural applications, in this case, domestic architecture. In Kosuthian manner, there were three representations of various instances of crown moulding. In the centre was a grid presentation of appropriated Google images of moulding of the undistinguished type found in contemporary houses. Flanking these were three-dimensional laser-cut fir plywood models and a vinyl silhouette. This multi-faceted investigation of space-defining decorative embellishment illustrated the features of domestic interior architecture through what seemed an obsessive/compulsive scrapbook presentation.

On the other side of the *Gray Space*, along the windowed wall, was a collaborative piece by Forrest and Harrow.



Jeanne Quinn. *All That Is Still Melts Into Air*. 2010. Paint, vinyl, wire and pins.  
Photo by John Carlano.

The work, titled *Pequod Chop*, was a sod-like section of red glazed ceramic presented in a poplar plywood display case. The topography of this sectioned red strip evoked a choppy sea, the blood-red sea of Melville's infamous whaling expedition upon the Pequod. The wave form was created through the use of "Real Flow, an algorithmic computer application developed for the movie special effects industry to simulate fluid movement".<sup>1</sup> Once the form was generated digitally it could be uploaded to a CNC milling machine that took the digital topographic information and physically removed material from foam blocks until the specified topography was achieved. Then a mould was made from the foam positive and a ceramic object was produced from that mould. The use of these mediating tools and digital processes allows an artist to produce forms that might otherwise never be realized.

Finally, upon the wall just to the right of the entrance was Quinn's *All That Is Still Melts Into Air*. This relief of paint, wire and pins was perhaps the most celebratory of the design technology that produced it. Consisting of a light grey rectangle painted on the wall with vinyl wire frame filigree and low relief spheres of wire and straight pins, the work was practically a screen shot of the Rhino (popular 3D design software) work space. Quinn is admittedly new to 3D design software and CNC devices, yet her interest in "what it means to create a world that lives between the digital and analogue, between two dimensions and three dimensions and between the real and the imagined"<sup>1</sup> is evident in *All That Is Still Melts Into Air*. While working within a virtual 3D space, it is natural

to want to experience that space in an unmediated way. By using a CNC vinyl plotter and sculpting in three dimensions with pins and wire, Quinn approximated that unmediated experience.

Overall the *Fabricating Ideas* exhibition accomplished what its curators intended. The works were created, in part, through the use of computer-aided fabrication and design tools yet these modes of production were not the sole contents. The artists, trained in a very tactile and material discipline, used their unique sensitivity to materials in concert with very hands-off, cerebral technological tools to create works laden with both contemporary and historical relevance. If this exhibition can be taken as evidence of trends within the field at large, contemporary ceramists, like their counterparts in other media, are enthusiastically embracing an exciting new era in which historically rarified high-end technologies are becoming more and more accessible to the general public.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Chad Curtis, Del Harrow, Jeanne Quinn, Steve Thurston, recording of *Fabricating Ideas* panel discussion, NCECA 30 April, 2010.
2. Crane Arts official web page  
[http://www.cranearts.com/?page\\_id=50](http://www.cranearts.com/?page_id=50).

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