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Contemplating Social Conflicts with Laurent Craste's Allegorical Ceramics



*Laurent Craste, Épuration II, 2016 Porcelain, glaze. 14.8 x 27.9 x
27.6 cm, courtesy Back Gallery Project*

By **SHAUN DACEY**, AUG. 2017



SHAUN DACEY

Shaun Dacey is the Director of the [Richmond Art Gallery](#). Previously he was Curator at the [Contemporary Art Gallery](#), where he was responsible for a diverse programs of exhibitions, education, and off-site projects with particular focus on the residencies and outreach with artists based at the CAG's Burrard Marina Field House Studio. His previous positions include director/curator of [Access Gallery](#), public programmer at the [Burnaby Art Gallery](#), and youth programmes coordinator at [Oakville Galleries](#). Dacey holds a master's degree in critical and curatorial studies from the University of British Columbia.

[Laurent Craste](#)'s recent ceramic works conjure memories of fables in which inanimate objects are brought to life. Upon first viewing his pieces, I was reminded of a scene from the film *Fantasia* (1940) that enraptured me as a child. In the scene, Mickey Mouse plays a sorcerer's apprentice. When left alone by the sorcerer, Mickey decides to don the magical sorcerer's hat, using it to bring life to a broomstick. He then teaches the broomstick his usual job of fetching water, and leaves the broom to complete his tasks while he fades into a nap. What follows is an allegory of class revolt: Mickey chops up the broom, and the broken pieces subsequently multiply into an army of hundreds of brooms who then begin pouring buckets of waters on their master, almost

drowning him before he's saved by the sorcerer. Cute and comic as stories like these, they allude to dark and sinister societal realities. The attribution of human qualities to the non-human produces an aesthetic buffer from the very real graphic horrors of slavery, discrimination, violence, and death, instead offering a moral tale to contemplate.

With his recent series *Abuse*, Laurent tortures his Sèvres style vases as he crucifies, stabs, stomps, and attacks the iconic form. The objects are personified with a comic sense of humor as they flex their biceps or crouch down after a hard blow. His work utilizes tactics similar to those of childhood allegories to consider the layered and complex systems of capitalism, class, and repression. What may initially appear as humorous and playful tongue-in-cheek riffs on classic ceramic genres are also visual metaphors of real-world class politics. I connected with Laurent to discuss the conceptual layers of his work.



Laurent Craste, Petits charniers décoratifs – 2016, Porcelain, glaze (Porcelaine, glaçure), Boys: 17.3 x 17 x 15.5 cm; Girls: 17.4 x 15.8 x 15.8 cm, courtesy Back Gallery Project

Shaun Dacey: Why do you work in ceramics? What drew you to the medium?

Laurent Craste: I was initially attracted to the materials of classical sculpture, such as marble and bronze, which I knew through visits to French castles and European public art that I saw in my youth. When I started practicing sculpture in an amateur studio after arriving in Canada in my early twenties, I quickly realized that on the one hand, I was good at modeling and not carving (which excluded marble and other stones in my field of

practice) and on the other, that bronze required complicated techniques and was quite expensive. I therefore decided to work with clay as not only a modeling material, but also the definitive final material of sculpture. I enrolled in a professional technical ceramic school in Montréal in order to master the techniques of clay transformation. It was love at first sight with this material. Everything fascinated me: all the glazing possibilities, the firing processes; but the discovery of one technique in particular was decisive in my use of this material: throwing.

With throwing I could really appreciate the plastic qualities of clay and a process of working it that demands rigor, mental concentration and connection with the body. This led me to focus on the ceramic object rather than on the modeled sculpture in the round. Through these decisions I discovered the long history of ceramics in general, and in particular of porcelain objects, a very rich field that could become the base of my practice. Consequently, it is as much the physical ceramic material as the historical archetypes of which they are constituted that attracted me.



Laurent Craste, Iconocraste au pied de biche, 2014, Porcelain, glaze, crowbar. 53.5 x 44.6 x 61.5 cm, courtesy Back Gallery Project

SD: What is your interest in working with historical forms such as Sèvres?

LC: After several years of working as a potter on functional and decorative objects, I developed an interest in the socio-economic value of the art object and its political implications. All my general knowledge of the history of the decorative arts, but also of history in general, seemed to lead me to a discussion of class relations. The historical archetypes from which I work refer to precise periods of European history: the Ancien régime of the eighteenth century, the Napoleonic Empire, the monarchical restorations of the nineteenth century. These also relate to long standing Western socio-political classes. The recognition of the classical European vase is universal.

I evoke the historical contexts and subsequent revolutionary moments when such objects were

destroyed for ideological reasons. By introducing surrealism and humor in the treatment of the objects I can speak of universal feelings such as envy, resentment, and vengeance, linked to a sense of injustice. Since social inequalities are omnipresent, I think that my work, although it evokes historical episodes, can also be seen as a form of warning to the rich and powerful of this world.



Laurent Craste, Casket II, 2017, Porcelain, glaze, wood 20.3 x 46.4 x 16.48 cm, courtesy Back Gallery Project

SD: Anthropomorphization of your ceramic forms is a key element in your recent work. Can you speak about the bodily presence you create?

LC: The traditional vase, with its curves and counter-curves, already has an anthropomorphic structure. It is described with the vocabulary of the human body (the foot, the belly, the shoulders, the neck, the lip). But of

course I amplify this appearance by transforming the handles into small arms, holding the lids of the jars open, thus evoking a mouth. The objects become real characters for which one feels empathy. I try to incarnate the very well-known words of the French poet Lamartine:

Objets inanimés, avez-vous donc une âme

Qui s'attache à notre âme et la force d'aimer?

(Inanimate objects, do you have a soul

Who is attached to our soul and force it to love?)

My objects also evoke the world of cartoons: they seem soft, ductile.

SD: Do you think they have a queer quality? There is something transitional about them.

LC: I never considered my work in this way. But this notion of Queer-ness is very Anglo-Saxon and a little bit mysterious to me, although gay, but so French!

If I consider the notion of queer as a transgressive element, then yes, my work can, by its irreverence towards symbols of bourgeois and aristocratic good taste, be associated with this movement, in a political perspective. This political perspective is at the heart of my practice.

If this implies a sexual notion, it is more tenuous. The evocations of sexual penetration, if they exist, are quite involuntary, or unconscious on my part.



Laurent Craste, Trophy VI, 2017, Porcelain, glaze, gold, axe, 49.5 x 35 x 20.9 cm, courtesy Back Gallery Project

SD: In your series Subversion, can you speak about your choice of imagery?

LC: In this series, transgression does not come from a physical intervention on the object, but from a substitution of iconography. I try to stay closer to the

original models, both in the overall shape of the object and in the organization of the decoration, so that the object appears banal at first glance. I would say it's a process of contaminating the object. The country landscape becomes a desolate scene, the seascape shows shipwrecked African migrants, the traditional aristocratic castle is ablaze with imperial bees turned into flies, thus inoculating strangeness and morbidity to the object. Originally, these objects represent either attributes of power (possessions such as castles, portraits of powerful people, etc.) or banal, almost bland scenes (bouquets of flowers) because they are displayed only to ostensibly show its economic wealth. With this inoculation of morbid imagery they become symbols of vanity.



Laurent Craste, Iconocraste aux tags II, 2016, Porcelain, glaze, lead pigments, gold, custom and commercial decals, 83.5 x 26.5 x 26.5 cm, courtesy Back Gallery Project

SD: In *Abuse* you are depicting violent acts to the Sèvres form. Why such a response to this?

LC: The porcelain vases produced by Sèvres, as well as by other royal or imperial manufactures elsewhere in Europe, were produced for the aristocracy and used as a manifestation of economic and political power and good taste. It is evidence of belonging to a dominant social class, politically, economically and culturally.

They were nevertheless pure masterpieces of the decorative arts. These are works that, because of my French origins, I know best, and are part of my cultural universe. They were symbolically associated with aristocratic power and thus were the victims of acts of destruction, especially during the French Revolution.

The works of *Abuse* are evocations of the ideological iconoclasm that accompanies history, both ancient and recent. Think of the destruction of the works of the Mosul museum last year by Isis, or of the Buddhas of Bamyan in Afghanistan.



Laurent Craste, Dépouille aux fleurs «Bleu de Delft», 2012/2015, Porcelain, glaze, decals, gold, nails, edition of 3/5: 40 x 38 x 14 cm. (Ed.1/5 in the permanent collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.), courtesy Back Gallery Project

SD: Living in Canada, how do you see these works operating for a North American audience? Does colonialism and its continued violence inform the work?

LC: Concerning the references of my work, they are of course, in their final characteristics, very French. However, as in a taxonomic classification system, before the specifically French reference, one should see a more general western reference. The general forms I work with, (the Medicis vase for example) are found throughout European porcelain production (in Meissen, Wedgwood, Capodimonte, etc.). Furthermore, these are reinterpretations of ancient Roman or Greek archetypes. In other words, my references, before being French, have are connect to a lineage of western art. These references are universally recognizable - in the same way that a Chinese blue and white vases are.

More than anything else, the reference of my works is as much in the described action as in the object on which this action is applied: violence. No one needs to know that I refer specifically to this or that tragic event in French history to understand the work's purpose, namely to highlight violence, vandalism, massacre, etc. And this violence is also, sadly, universal, and likewise present in the North American society.

In relation to colonialism, it is a notion that is not consciously or voluntarily present in my approach which is more socio-politically oriented towards class relations.

However, following the discussion we had in Vancouver during which I mentioned my family origins (from French settlers in Algeria), as well as the intrinsically Western character of my works, I can quite understand that my work can also be interpreted in this light. **WM**