

EXHIBITION REVIEW

MICHAEL DIRISIO

PLAY, PRECARITY AND SURVIVAL

Curated by Sigrid Dahle, organized by the Manitoba Craft Council, exhibited at aceart inc., Winnipeg, July 30 – August 22, 2015

Through 2013 and into the spring of 2014, as the September opening of the Canadian Museum of Human Rights (CMHR) approached, Rebecca Belmore was actively working with hundreds of community members to develop a large-scale installation *Trace* (2014). The work is comprised of thousands of clay forms, resembling oversized beads, each made by compressing a fistful of Red River clay gumbo sourced from across Winnipeg. These “beads” were then strung along steel cables to make a 40' long textile. This massive socially engaged project continues much of Belmore's interest in labour, colonization and autonomy by depicting the hand imprints of local children and adults, while celebrating traditional native craft and beadwork. Commissioned by the CMHR, the use of Red River clay connects the work to the site of the museum, where the Red River and Assiniboine River meet. Referred to as simply “The Forks,” the area has been an important meeting place for native communities for thousands of years, an importance that continues long after the colonization and dispossession upon which the Canadian state has been founded.

Trace served as a significant point of reference for the curatorial development of *Play, Precarity and Survival*, a group-exhibition organized by the Manitoba Craft Council and presented by Winnipeg's artist-run centre aceart inc. The significance of clay, with its relation to the hand and labour, as well as the history of consumption and cultural appropriation that surrounds it, was present throughout the exhibition, connecting the otherwise varied works. While the CMHR has been deeply criticized since its

opening for downplaying or omitting the presence of colonization and genocide within Canada, many of the works in *Play, Precarity and Survival* were far more critical—an important local response to the museum's omissions.

Play, Precarity and Survival included drawing, installation and ceramic works, with contributions by Marcel Dzama, Seema Goel, Rachael Kroeker, Jeannie Mah, Monica Mercedes Martinez and Brendan Lee Satish Tang. Seema Goel's installation *Blood Sugar* (2015) was most direct in its criticism of North America's suppressed colonial history, with its title referencing both our unprecedented sugar consumption and the systems of domination and exploitation that operate to produce this sugar. The installation included dozens of porcelain plates and bowls suspended by thin red threads from the ceiling. On much of the dinnerware was painted small spoons or piles of sugar. While the installation did not quite have the overall appearance of a sugar molecule, as intended, it did serve to disrupt the otherwise orderly manner with which these signifiers of middle-class status typically function. As one who cannot readily picture a sugar molecule, this may have been an isolated reading, but I appreciated the absurdity of the suspended porcelain, with many pieces appearing caught mid-fall, slowly rotating as people walked around or among them.

This disruption can also be connected to Goel's criticism of the broader social order upon which the European class structure has been founded. Her artist statement remarked that “If want of heat on the tongue spurred exploration, then it was lust for sweetness that fuelled the presumption to stay. The demands of sugar birthed slavery and colonization upon the new world and flung future generations towards an addiction we acquire in childhood.” The thin red threads holding each porcelain piece in place invoked a violence that connected each piece to a larger structure or system. Goel offered a reminder that both the sugar she has represented and the porcelain that was present were produced by individuals



Seema Goel, *Blood Sugar* (2015), installation view. Photo: courtesy of the Manitoba Crafts Council.

working in a system that is often brutal, one with an atrocious history of exploitation, oppression and dispossession.

Labour and the significance of the body were also central concerns of Monica Mercedes Martinez in the construction of *following the line I caught* (2015), which spanned the centre of the gallery. The work began with a large net, with Martinez and others molding terracotta clay onto thick ropes. As the clay built up, hand prints became visible, and Martinez's interest in the activity of making became increasingly apparent. As with Belmore's *Trace*, these imprints from the hands that built the work make visible the material modes of production that are increasingly given short-shrift in a period defined by immaterial and affective labour. Sigrid Dahle's curatorial statement remarks on ways that clay can entrap makers with professional limitations, given the medium's perceived relation to craft, connecting *following the line I caught* to the ongoing dialogue around arts labour and the precarity of the artist.

Precarity came to the fore in Rachael Kroeker's tower of bowls, *Stacked* (2015), which was con-

structed from a cast made of a mass produced bowl sourced from the Dollar Store. While Goel's porcelain referenced Chinoiserie, the European cultural appropriation of Chinese ceramics and ornamentation that began in the seventeenth century, Kroeker's bowls referenced a more modern cultural relation. The Dollar Store bowl that Kroeker used for her mold was originally produced in China, and is emblematic of the mass industrialization and neoliberal expansion of trade that is currently underway. The bowls seemed to barely hold steady, with the stack rising to about six feet, appearing caught in a wavering motion that anticipates a collapse. The artist's precarity, as well as the crisis prone system itself, seems implicated in this unstable tower. Kroeker complicated this precarious production, however, by having her work involve disparate modes of production—that of the studio-artist and that of the factory worker.¹

The works of Jeannie Mah and Brendan Lee Satish Tang contributed to the exhibition's interest in globalization and cultural appropriation by reconstructing the ornamentation present in common Chinoiserie designs. Mah inserted her own image



Monica Mercedes Martinez, *following the line / caught* (2015), installation view. Photo: courtesy of the Manitoba Crafts Council.

into that of the Royal Crown Derby Blue Mikado dinner plate, while Tang's drawings transformed the traditional blue ornamentation into ripples of water that surround swimmers who emerge from and cut through the blue lines. The symbols of middle class status that Goel interrupted were here reconfigured to express the diverse identities that Mah and Tang explore, identities that seem not fixed but liquid, in a continual state of becoming.

The value of *Play, Precarity and Survival* was its rejection of any constant, universal value. The exhibition was one of a series of shows that the Manitoba Craft Council has produced within the last six years that sought to transcend the binaries of craft versus art and function versus concept. Value was thus framed as a culturally specific social construct, with the stratified valuations of craft and art left at the door. This acknowledgement of the relation between value and culture contributes to a significant response to the cultural appropriation and subjugation that the exhibition addressed, and the moments of humour and play added levity to the otherwise heavy material. The continued presence of

the body was likewise significant, as it is important to remember that it is people who are labouring away, whether exploited, precarious or free, in these systems to which are ascribed abstract names and attributed to distant places. Globalization, neoliberalism and colonialism are not simply theoretical models, but express harsh realities that millions of individuals face each day. By questioning the hierarchical system of values that founds these forms of domination, *Play, Precarity and Survival* asked how these precarious, crisis-prone systems might be addressed, and what human survival in the context of these crises might entail.

Michael DiRisio is Artistic Director of Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre in Kingston, Ontario.

NOTE

- 1 Marcel Dzama's *Melting Snowman Canister Set* (2005) similarly existed between these two modes of production, yet seemed less critical and merely aimed to make an edition of ceramic multiples. It was an odd inclusion because it detracted from the exhibition's broader discussion of the brutality of global capitalism.