



Above: Lucia Lobonț. *The Stories Collector*.
Below: Rafa Pérez. *Urbe*.

At the Forefront

A BIENNALE ACTS AS A VEHICLE FOR DISPLAYING THE LATEST innovations and trends in contemporary art practice. The first *International Ceramics Biennale* in Romania (8 October – 3 November, 2013) was held at the National Museum of Art in Cluj, the capital of Transylvania. The global sampling selected by a distinguished panel of international judges was of the highest calibre. As ceramics artists around the globe continue to defy clay's limitations and push their material into new frontiers, it was interesting to note multiple examples of artists from different countries unknowingly exploring similar approaches and concepts in parallel.

The venue and presentation of Romania's first international ceramics biennale was to some extent symbolic of the state of that nation. The event was held in the crumbling baroque Museum of Art which has seen better days. The works were exhibited in two spacious, refurbished cellars typical of the city's fortress architecture. The lighting and technical support reflected an institution sorely lacking in funds yet redolent with the country's rich cultural history. The installation of the diverse ceramic works, however, was well curated. Giant vessels stood like sentinels beside delicately thrown porcelain, while a ceramic soccer ball sat incitingly on the ground aimed at a wall grid of colourful ceramic plates. A mobile of melted ceramic hearts floated above crude stoneware forms

that held the imprint of the artist's hands. A pile of unfired clay decomposing on a tabletop defied the fact that the same base material also produced the enormous baby-pink floor sculptures.

The *Cluj International Ceramics Biennale* was loosely based on the theme of its concurrent international symposium "Between Tradition and Contemporaneity". What emerged was a picture that leaves no doubt that ceramic art has left the murky outer fringes of the art world in order to wholeheartedly join in the fray of artistic discourse.

Article By Lilianne Milgrom

Leslie Manning
(renowned ceramist,
juror and presenter

at the *Cluj Biennale*) offered a thoughtful reminder about what we can gain and learn from the multiple ceramic creations on view: "In a world of moving





Above: Katarzyna Woźniak.

Below: Heidi McKenzie. *China-Bound Series*.

images it is important to observe the static object.”

With just fewer than a hundred participating international artists, there was certainly no lack of magnificent objects upon which to meditate. Spanish artist Rafa Pérez was awarded first prize for his superb construction *Urbe*, made up of soft slabs loosely wrapped over a geometric frame. The real interest lay in the textured crackled glazing and the tension produced by the combination of structured and unstructured elements. By contrast, Polish artist Katarzyna Woźniak’s minimalist installation of white unglazed cubes sported pouting lips breaking through the surface of the forms.

Canadian artist Heidi McKenzie’s *China-Bound* series entrapped blue-and-white decorated porcelain cubes in serpentine-like orbits of unravelled wheel thrown forms. The strong push/pull

of her pieces made for a dynamic presence. Fellow Canadian Debra Sloan’s life-sized baby sculptures flaunted unexpected adult expressions of anger and pain, leaving the viewer to ponder what instigated their apparent rage.

Romanian artists were also well represented. Lucia Lobonț was awarded a prize for her series *The Stories Collector*, a grouping of finely constructed cylindrical porcelain vessels, sensitively illustrated and incised and topped with sculpted animalistic figures. Romanian artist Bogdan Teodorescu’s *The Story of Painting* consisted of a chipped, salvaged figurine of a lone deer standing on a pile of broken bricks, gazing at its broken antler fused onto a porcelain plate. Despite its small scale, it was particularly poignant.

Many of the participating artists looked beyond clay to incorporate audio and video elements, found objects, wood, wire, leaves, sand, photography and glass. For example, Swedish artist Karin Karinson Nilsson’s highly unusual work entitled *Miss Bliss*. The two sculptures were constructed from a tower of assorted ceramic figurines over which liquid glass was poured and left to dry mid drip in suspended animation. US artist Jeffrey Mongrain’s startling *Snow Optical* revealed his signature video projection of an iris at the base of a large thrown bowl form.

My own work, *Lock, Stock and Barrel*, suspends a pair of hand built, gas-fired porcelain panties behind a large, rusted lock that casts an ominous shadow upon the delicate





Top left: Debra Sloan. *Baby Lucian Weeps*.
Top right: Karin Karinson Nilsson. *Miss Bliss*.
Above left and right: Jeffrey Mongrain. *Snow Optical*.
Facing page: Bogdan Teodorescu. *The Story of Painting*.
Facing page, inset: Lilianne Milgrom. *Lock, Stock and Barrel*.

undergarment. *Lock, Stock and Barrel* was inspired by the rising wave of anti-abortion sentiment and legislation in the US, a disturbing reversal of the gains women have made.

The accompanying Symposium on the Arts of Fire, in its ninth year, was well received and included informative presentations from Iceland,

Latvia, Austria, Israel, US, Canada, Belgium, Brazil, Romania and Turkey. Cluj is hoping to build on the momentum of its first *International Ceramics Biennale* to establish itself as a centre of contemporary ceramics. Based on the presence of local artists such as internationally renowned ceramics sculptor Arina Ailincai and the support of art faculty from the numerous universities in Cluj, the future of their *Biennale* aspirations looks promising.

Lilianne Milgrom is a multi-media artist and writer on the arts. Two of her works were selected for the 2013 International Ceramics Biennale in Cluj, Romania. She was also invited to speak at the concurrent Symposium, delivering a presentation entitled "The Balance of Concept and Aesthetics in Contemporary Ceramic Installation" (www.liliannemilgrom.com) (liliannemilgrom@gmail.com) (www.ceramicsbiennale.com).

