



Debora Muhl, *Rhythm*

Revisoning the Receptacle
Vessel Invitational

Group Exhibition
January 16 - May 23, 2021

OPENING EVENT AND SPECIAL PROGRAMMING:
Friday, February 5 | 5 - 8 PM

- 5 PM | Raku firing demo with Tia Santana

- 7 PM | Vessel vignettes by Wilmington Ballet

Throughout civilization, artists have created containers for functional, ceremonial, and decorative purposes. Today, artists are revisoning the ubiquitous home accessory that has perpetually held sophisticated visual appeal into bold, new conceptual statements and technical innovations. From objet d'art to mundane curio, the twenty-four artists represented in this exhibition reexamine the purpose, shape, illusion, and allusion of "the vessel".

Addressing the contemporary receptacle as object, subject, and concept, *VESSEL INVITATIONAL: REVISIONING THE RECEPTACLE* examines the ancient, beguiling historicity of the receptacle with its shifts in shape, illusion, and allure. It questions the boundaries of this traditional craft through exploration of form and function. It seeks to create visual tension, persuasion, and contradictions. It asks, is it carried? Is it shelter? Is it permanent or ephemeral? Is the vessel an embodiment of something or someone? It asks, does the object display, imply, or contain space? Consider the ancient Keilim tractate in the Order of Tohorot in the Mishnah. Thirty chapters consider the notion of purity and impurity as it relates to use, containment, and whether ritual immersion is required—in another form of vessel, the mikveh. In examining a balanced yet myriad range of expressions and asking what form does it take, this exhibition leaves ample room for a subtle alternative to the world wherein the receptacle becomes the dialogue with the viewer evincing its continued relevance.



Doug Johnston, *GOED*



Julie and Ken Girardini, *Voyage*

VESSEL INVITATIONAL: REVISIONING THE RECEPTACLE presents works of art that emerge from a shared interest in exploring traditional exchange between the collector and the object, to push new frontiers through a delightful diversity of processes, contexts, materials, and aesthetic quality. As exemplars of observation, aesthetic process, and the search for transcendence, the artists selected for this exhibition reveal literal or functional translations, such as the work by collaborators Julie and Ken Girardini. Their longboat vessels exhibit contours much like Viking ships characterized by long slender hulls with symmetrical keels, bow, and stern. Instead of riveting planks of wood, they weld the hull together using various pieces of cold rolled steel with touches of brass, copper, and other materials. Tapping into Scandinavian culture, historic continuity, and contemporary design, the backbone of the Girardini team conjures both Nordic stability and fragility, yet a gliding energy-in-reserve motion.

Other works display metaphorical interpretations, such as Allen Topolski who uses found objects to rework and combine transparent associations--wheels, domestic devices, etc.--point to stability, mobility, or nostalgia.



Allen Topolski, *Household*

His cue from Centralia, PA, the bygone era city that continues to burn from a 1962 fire at an abandoned mine pit landfill. It later ignited a larger mine beneath the city destroying the life of the community. Only a few houses remain occupied. For his piece, *Household*, Topolski encapsulated an old-fashioned slide image in an old-fashioned appliance. It literally holds a house: the image of one of the few houses still standing in Centralia. The image of a singular house symbolizes the abandonment, destruction, yet the thriving against all odds attitude of some inhabitants. Ironically, the town of Centralia, PA burns; vegetation thrives and the vestigial few homes still get their lawns mowed.

Other artists, such as Stephen Merritt, explore historical references. Merritt formed his *Aryballiod Vase* in the ancient tradition of wheel-thrown clay blending cultural construction with commodity, employing techniques learned while studying with ceramic masters in Japan. Inspired by the aryballos storage jar developed in 15th-16th century Cuzco, Peru, with its characteristic long necks and bulbous torso, Merritt fabricated his own interpretation on the vase in sections which allowed for the formation of extremely thin walls. While still on the potter's wheel, Merritt pieced together the sections resulting in a lightweight vessel that accommodates dry or wet goods.

Some materials have been recycled, upcycled, or contain subdued statements in an array of media including clay, metal, wood, glass, fiber, plastic, or assemblage. Marianne Lettieri's mixed media assemblage investigates social systems and individual identity with everyday objects and discarded materials. In *Sieve*, Lettieri constructed the walls of a 1940s colander with objects from a mid-century junk drawer. The recycled ensemble serves as a metaphor for a time capsule: life pours through time rippling across discarded or keepsake treasures. In *Starship*, Lettieri references ancient marine boats and modern space exploration. The ordinary food bowl, removed from its original use, has been reimagined as a space vessel. Constellations drawn on the vessel are intentionally obscured to symbolize the development of SpaceX and the precariousness of space exploration.



Michal Fargo, *Soft* (detail)

Some take structural techniques to an astonishing new level with unexpected or unusual pairings. Michal Fargo's work investigates the thin line of reality "between imitation and interpretation" by exploring an integration of clay sculpture draped in the improvisational material of velvet. Sandra Bowden's mixed media "book" containers juxtapose unlikely combinations of precious and rudimentary materials, both polished and blemished, to evoke metaphors of decay as well as good vs. evil. Her work often fuses book art with ancient inscriptions and visionary interpretations of classical religious iconography and ceremony.

Some artists are inspired by architectural elements, geometry, asymmetry, or perfect symmetry. All expand the idea of the vessel beyond traditional contours to generate new perspectives that accentuate subtle or obvious alterations. Although pragmatism is often thought of as the

the common underpinning of functional works of art, in this exhibition purpose is blurred, melded, and reenvisioned to breathe new life into the ancient art form. United by divergent styles and superbly crafted specimens, the works stand in deep conversation with one another while embodying the essential components of transcendence.

- Exhibition Curator: Kathrine Page

Participating Artists: Sandra Bowden, Thomas Campbell, Wendell Castle, Loraine Cooley, Michal Fargo, Ruth Geos, Ben Gillespie, Julie and Ken Girardini, Johnathan Hopp, Doug Johnston, Nancy Jurs, Marianne Lettieri, Lauren Mabry, Jennifer McCurdy, Stephen Merritt, Debora Muhl, Ashley Murphy, Irmari Nacht, Ola Rondiak, Mari Skarp-Bogli, Sara Thompson, Allen C. Topolski, and Nancy Topolski.

Sandra Bowden (Chatham, MA) juxtaposes precious material with unlikely companion objects. She arranges nails or pearls mounded in a gilded box as a "book" of contrasts to evoke metaphors: of polished versus tarnished, of good against evil, of permanence in contrast to decay. Influenced by work stemming from ancient scriptoria, her work often fuses architectural elements with ancient inscriptions, thus immortalizing transience into permanence. Bowden's work is included in the Vatican Collection, as well as in collections nationally.

Thomas Campbell (Asheville, NC) primarily works as a steel fabricator. Off duty he forges metal objects both familiar and abstract; functional and decorative. The weighty material balances the delicate work on display and harkens to the industrialization of the American steel business.

Wendell Castle (Rochester, NY) taps into his Kansas roots and his love of wood. His iconic irregular shapes and fools-the-eye concepts evoke expressive sculptural presence. The play of texture, quality of material, and the solid relationship between organic and geometric form achieves a dramatic ensemble. Castle received his BFA in Industrial Design and his MFA in Sculpture from the University of Kansas. He is the recipient of numerous awards and is internationally renowned. Castle died in January 2018.

Loraine Cooley (Rochester, NY) creates “intimate sculptures that invite personal investigation and discovery.” With little space to negotiate arrangements, Cooley’s details for shape and volume need careful consideration and restraint. The result is a sublime expression in stunning form of exposed containers with interlocking forms. The metal trio sets the perfect stage for playing with elements of light and shadow. Her fluid, expressive use of material keeps her on parity with metal artists who emerged in the 1990s and sought to capture the essence of emotion. Cooley received her BFA from Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY.

Michal Fargo (Berlin, Germany) straddles the thin line between imitation and interpretation as she creates sculptures and sceneries that question the perception of linear time. Her velour-coated constructs fuse the organic with the synthetic and serve as the conduit for introspection and interrogation about reality. Fargo received her BFA from Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem and her MA in Ceramics and Glass at the Royal College of Art, London. Her work has been shown around the world. She was one of the 2019 nominees for the Loewe Foundation Craft Prize. Fargo is represented by Pentimenti Gallery, Philadelphia, PA.

Ruth Geos (San Francisco, CA) derives inspiration from the aviary world. Implanted bird feathers join forces with the precious material of gold leaf accompanied by poetry to set the stage of containment for reflection, dazzle, and surprise. Pushing the boundaries of creativity and process, Geos experiments with texture to redefine the vessel.

Ben Gillespie (Philadelphia, PA) explores lighting in his fascination with engineering, furniture, and sculpture design. The elegant finishes and sinuous contours embody a contemporary minimalist aesthetic interpreting geometry, invoking memory, or renewing discovery of the natural world. In doing so, Gillespie’s work forms a continuum that transcends media barriers. Gillespie received the Prize for Excellence in Design at the 2020 Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show.

Julie and Ken Girardini’s (Sykesville, MD) self-taught collaborative work tells stories of the observable world. Through the permanence of metal materials fabricated in the cold rolled steel process, the artist team finds meaning in pushing boundaries. By mixing elements of wire, paper, or even glass, their work evokes a feeling of fragility and substance. Their work is seen in a number of prestigious juried art and craft shows, including the American Craft Council, The Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show, and the St. Louis Craft Fair.

Johnathan Hopp (Alfred, NY) takes the clay process to a whole new level by combining technique with Bauhaus aesthetics. He moors his avant garde ceramic production method on “disposable slip-casting molds made of flat materials that can be printed, laser cut and folded into an endless variety of shapes with an endless variety of surface decorations.” Hopp explores digital design and prototyping tools, industrial production methods, and time-honored manual work. He holds a BFA in Industrial Design from Rhode Island School of Design and a MDes in Industrial Design from Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem. He serves on the faculty at New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University.

Doug Johnston (Brooklyn, NY) focuses on coiling rope to explore functional and sculptural coiled objects. By experimenting with basketry, masonry construction, 3D printing, and the love of architecture, Johnston’s work subverts the common bowl to dramatic extreme. While Johnston’s artifact embodies the handmade with natural fibers, the contours challenge the viewer’s perception of the vessel. Johnston received his BA in studio arts, BA in Architecture from Drury University and his Master of Architecture from Cranbrook Academy of Art.

Nancy Jurs’ (Rochester, NY) ceramic sculptures exert dramatic sculptural presence. Her biomorphic forms in stoneware evoke a sense of movement. The Portuguese-born Brazilian singer and dancer, Carmen Miranda, served as the inspiration for the piece, *Trio des Janiero*. Like Miranda’s emblematic, elaborately coiffed hats, Jurs’ *Trio* playfully tilts off balance and draws attention to movement in the contours and play of cast shadows. Jurs received her BFA in Ceramics from Rochester Institute of Technology.

Marianne Lettieri’s (Granbury, TX) mixed media constructions and installations investigate shifts in cultural and individual values associated with everyday objects and discarded materials. A mid-century colander, filled with a potpourri of items, becomes a time capsule, a sifter for that which was left behind. A former serving bowl gets reimagined to imply navigation with a reference to space exploration. Lettieri received her MFA in Spatial Arts from San Jose State University and a BFA in Drawing and Printmaking from University of Florida.

Lauren Mabry (Philadelphia, PA), driven by a fascination with color and the transformative nature of ceramics, treats the ceramic canister as a “360-degree uninterrupted canvas”, elevating the painterly qualities inherent in slip and glaze chemistry and surface treatments. Her splashes of color painted randomly onto the white background of the sculptural clay construction embed the object to resemble abstract expressionism. Her “rich, flowing glazes create hypnotic tones, textures and forms.” She received her BFA from Kansas City Art Institute, and her MFA from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Mabry is represented by Pentimenti Gallery, Philadelphia, PA.

Jennifer McCurdy’s (Vineyard Haven, MA) work finds inspiration in the ordered symmetry and asymmetry found in nature’s form. Patterns, growth and movement of life are all integrated into her translucent porcelain forms where light is both reflected and absorbed. As if frozen in a puff of wind, the object’s deceptive sense of lightness stems from the all-white exterior in contrast to the gold-leafed interior, revealing further graceful curves and patterns and the object’s sculptural precision. McCurdy received her BFA from Michigan State University. Her work is in the permanent collection at museums such as Renwick Gallery, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Weisman Museum of Art, Baltimore Museum of Art, and others.

Stephen Merritt's (Rochester, NY) work interprets the Aryballiod water jug from the ancient Incan culture. Though reminiscent of Asian aesthetics, the uniformity of shape is unique to Incan people. The appendages define its shape. The precisely executed rim, elongated neck, extended shoulder and bulbous body showcase the beauty of the materials and interpretation of the ancient form. Merritt is inspired by the concept of the marriage of "hand and spirit" as the "foundation for work of lasting value." He studied ceramics in Japan with two renowned masters, Ishikawa Seiho and Inoue Manji. Manji is one of a handful of living ceramists given the moniker "national treasure." Merritt's work is in the collection of numerous museums such as, the Peabody Essex Museum, Boston, MA; the Smithsonian, Washington, DC; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, NY. Merritt maintains a studio in Rochester, NY.

Debora Muhl (Emmaus, PA) looks to sweet grass to weave her contemporary, sculptural basket forms. Her not-so-subtle textural applications take the shape of time-honored bowls using tightly bound coiling methods, like elegantly wrapped gifts. The asymmetrical projections create an ornamental surface pattern that is immediately arresting and beguiling. A self-taught artist, Muhl's work can be found in numerous private collections around the world as well as in the permanent collections of the Mint Museum in Charlotte, NC, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA, the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, MA, Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris, France and the Racine Art Museum in Racine, WI.

Ashley Murphy (Lincoln University, PA) primarily explores the wood burl. Finding shapes and spaces inherent in each work, Murphy's sculptures infer specific stories about a path through life experiences, the wood's provenance, or simply revealing the characteristic feature of the individual piece. Murphy assembled his turned cedar form with telephone remnants including a Bennington porcelain insulator. What was once used as a conduit for wire communication, has now been reharvested to communicate containment. Murphy's work has been shown at the Philadelphia Craft Show.

Irmari Nacht's (Englewood, NJ) bold explorations transform books into new shapes and forms that emerge as elements of subliminal messages. As once-contained stories, cuts, curls, slices, and distresses dissolve to become small monuments of language extended in undulations and spirals beyond the surface. Nacht's skillfully textured surfaces and repeated elements captivate the viewer's awareness of change, transformation, information, and altered reality. Nacht studied art at SUNY Cortland, NYU Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the Art Students League, and Museum of Modern Art. Nacht's art is in several corporate and public collections: AT&T, PSE&G, ADP, Newark Museum, International Museum of Collage, Bowdoin College, Jimmy Carter Museum, Cleveland Institute of Art, Rutgers University, Yuko Nii Foundation, Lafayette College, and Yale Art Museum. She is represented by Carter Burden Gallery, NYC and is a winner of the 2020 American Craft Week artists' contest, "Art Therapy in the Time of Covid19."

Ola Rondiak (Kiev, Ukraine) translates garments or fashion apparel into basic shapes to explore the layered and experimental process of plaster of Paris. Influenced by other luminaries who use their art as platforms for social justice, Rondiak's work underscores the important healing role of art on the psyche. Rondiak received her BA in Psychology and Education at Hunter College, NY and her M.Ed in Clinical Psychology at Cleveland State University, OH.

Mari Skarp-Bogli (Bristol, CT) takes industrial brushes to create intriguing sculptural forms of visual and actual texture. The surprisingly mundane material and muted palette set in a wooden cradle teases the sense of human touch. Arranged in a matrix, the extreme surface texture in varying heights punctuate the ensemble and blur the edges of perception. Skarp-Bogli received her BFA in Painting and Sculpture at University of Hartford; a Certificate in Art History at University of Hartford; an MFA in Interdisciplinary Studio Arts at Maine College of Art; and a Certificate of Women in Leadership from Cornell University.

Sara Thompson's (Portland, OR) vessels integrate concepts of both science and math. Drawn to the simplicity of hammering a flat sheet of silver into a three-dimensional object, Thompson converges the historical tradition of her craft into an object that both occupies and contains space. By taking abstract concepts and translating them into elegant silver objects, Thompson joins the "historical tradition of her craft with the fundamental beauty found across all scales in nature." Thompson received her BFA in metals at Oregon College of Art and Craft. Thompson received the Eric Berg Memorial Prize for Excellence in Metal from the Philadelphia Museum of Art Craft Show, November 2020.

Allen C. Topolski (Rochester, NY) is known for his eccentric, innovative assemblages. With a nod to Danish artists in the 1980s who experimented with found objects, Topolski's work is constructed of found materials that are reworked and combined through a variety of transformative activities. The exaggerated forms focus on concept, proportion, and repetition and set the stage for playful conceptualism or jarring commentary on social dilemmas. His suite of vintage tea and spice tins shaped like flattened Vidalia onions and stacked like a totem lend a modern, minimalist appearance that point directly to stasis or stability. Topolski received his MFA in Sculpture from Pennsylvania State University and a BA in Studio Art from Bucknell University.

Nancy Topolski (Rochester, NY) Using various materials including vintage images and papers for collage, discarded objects and bindings for artist books, electrostatic transfers and second hand/vintage fabrics and fibers, Topolski creates works on paper, canvas, felt, and wood. She consistently engages in process as a means of personal expression and in pursuing knowledge and understanding. Topolski received her Master's Degree in Special Education from St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY and a BA in Art from Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA.