

# Ceramics

Art and Perception

2015  
ISSUE 102

INTERNATIONAL  
US\$20





# Julia Galloway The Place it is That We Call Home

GREAT FALLS, MONTANA, (US) IS A CITY OF JUST UNDER 60,000 residents. It boasts the Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center, alongside the Missouri River near the series of falls that gave the town its name; Malmstrom Air Force Base, the control centre for a vast field of ICBM missile silos; the Sip 'N Dip Lounge,

where women in mermaid outfits cavort in a glass-walled tank behind the bar; and the Charles Russell Museum, which features a modern building complete with galleries and gift shop and also the log cabin studio of the famed cowboy (-and-Indian) artist, which provides a glimpse into an earlier time in the West and the art world. Great Falls has a modest but lively contemporary art scene, with galleries and studios in some of the rehabbed buildings in the downtown, and The Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, the converted school building that hosted the impressive exhibition of work by Julia Galloway, *The Place it is That We Call Home*.

The presentation offered a look back with two major works in revised versions, along with recent work that looks forward as this productive artist moves full speed ahead, now that she has settled in after moving to Missoula to teach at the University of Montana. The Audubon-inspired installation *Birds of North America*, first shown in 2007 with 1200 cups on several walls, this time featured 160 cups along one side of the main ground floor hallway that is the museum's principal gallery. Galloway chalked the wall with an ornamental fence design, as well as a green and blue background of vegetation

and sky that matched the colours used on one side of the cups. Birdsongs triggered by sensors played when viewers picked up cups. That could seem gimmicky but was in practice an appealing touch that recalled the origin of the project, when Galloway heard birdsongs early in the morning.

Galloway's initial idea was more magical realism than scientific illustration, more Gabriel García Márquez than Roger Tory Peterson. Interactivity in



Julia Galloway  
*The Place it is That We Call Home*



the art world as often as not involves attempts to engage audiences one way or another by using cell phones or computers. But here Galloway, in addition to the bird songs, employs a simple, effective method to draw viewers in. She sets up the cups so that at first only one has the side with the bird image facing out: viewers feel compelled to turn the others around. This successful "Please Touch" strategy also introduces the idea of camouflage, since the birds are at first concealed, then revealed when their images are made to appear. The cups use a straightforward



Facing page, above: *Long Gallery at Paris Gibson*.  
Facing page, below: *Audubon Wall (Detail) Side 1*.  
Above: *Sky Vault Ceiling and Walls*.  
Below: *Audubon Wall (Detail) Side 3*.

lettering style for the scientific labels with line drawings of the birds in the style of old-fashioned commercial illustrations. Even with this matter-of-fact approach, the poses and positioning of the birds honour each individual species, its appearance and behaviour, as when Galloway shows a frigate bird zooming downward, or a Henslow sparrow as a tiny presence near the bottom of the cup. To move down the wall was therefore to experience not only the birdsongs, but also a kind of visual music with its own variations, repetitions and counterpoint.

Galloway said that since arriving, "All I ever do in Montana is look up, look up, look up." They don't call it Big Sky country for nothing, and she responded to her new surroundings by making plates in the shapes of clouds, saying, "I believe in getting nourishment from where you are, even something as stupid as the idea of eating from the sky. But for me there is still something so poetic about that." The result, *Sky Vault*, consisted of 400 cloud-shaped plates and platters in the Great Falls installation (there were 100 plates and 100 cups in the original), suspended from the walls and ceiling of a separate room to form a cloud-filled sky. The walls, painted darker toward the bottom to suggest a bank of clouds or fog ringing the horizon, along with the low-key lighting, created an atmospheric, monochromatic space. At first I thought the work marked yet another attempt to convert functional





Facing page: Language Cups.  
Above: Language Cups (Detail).

pottery into installation art as a status upgrade of sorts, but Galloway's ideas are more complex and interesting. For her, gallery exhibition is a temporary introduction to the main event: the use of her pottery in a domestic setting, whether as plates and vessels for food and drink or as décor. Like the Audubon, the sky work provides an accessible experience for viewers who might not be all that comfortable in a museum or gallery but do know the territory, in this case the Montana sky.

There were multiple possible vantage points and multiple possible views, but after a day Galloway put a bench along one wall to provide an excellent position for surveying the space and the panoramic effect. The most striking view, appropriately enough, was upward, if one stood in the centre of the room and looked at and through the floating cloud forms overhead. The room was kept dim so the experience deepened as one's eyes adjusted to the darkness and one could better appreciate the subtlety of the lighting and the groupings. Not as purist as a Turrell skyspace or the Rothko Chapel, *Sky Vault* was nevertheless an immersive and, yes,

poetic, environment with a skyscape that even Charlie Russell (or Georgia O'Keeffe) might admire. The food at the opening was served on cloud plates, providing a bridge between museum and home. As Galloway sums up the informing idea, "Installation time is such a short time in the life of a pot. I love the flash moment of exchange, when a cup changes from being 'mine' to being 'yours' and this exhibition celebrates this moment of display."<sup>2</sup>

The two large installations anchored the presentation of works on pedestals and shelves along the main corridor's other wall, with an arrangement of small *Language Cups* within a house silhouette serving as a transition of sorts and another contribution to the exhibition's home theme. Galloway decorated the cups with the binary language of 0s and 1s, with block letters and with fragments of cursive writing. Inspired by the chatter of faculty meetings and the many brief conversations she had as departmental chair, the cups explore language and communication by setting dry, mechanical





numbers and letters against fluid, more personal expression, and by emphasising transformation and coding. Metallic backgrounds – a favourite Galloway element – introduce a hard, contemporary, almost high-tech feel, as well as a sense of layering and an obscuring of the lettering, while the use of classic blue and white does the opposite, introducing a bit of ceramics traditionalism. Some cups feature letters that are blurred, as if language were dissolving, with meaning lost. Although the work is relatively modest, it shows Galloway probing the major subject of language and, once again, the problem of how to incorporate individual pots into larger groupings.

The newest works in the exhibition were the product of a single firing and therefore represented an up-to-the minute report on the state of Galloway's art. They provide a reminder of how, in Galloway's ceramics, representational imagery and abstract elements, line and colour, can do a merry dance. Many of the pots are also reminders of Galloway's fascination with the drama to be found in duality, whether played out between the two pots in a sugar bowl-and-creamer set (which she says have an "inherent dialogue") or the two sides of a pitcher decorated in totally different ways. Overriding any specific formal qualities, however, is Galloway's commitment to functionalism.

The new pots are, like *Sky Vault*, a response to Galloway's new sense of place in Montana, to her new home, literally – her house. They are not radical in form, yet reveal her determination always to be exploring something new. There is no show-off flamboyance, just assured mastery in both the thrown forms and in the surface decoration. Galloway knows just how to enliven her pots with small touches – a strip of colour on a handle, a dimpled rim, an elongated profile – without distracting from the overall effect. She also knows how not to do too much, as when she allows an open, undecorated area

to breathe life into the overall design, or leaves it to the soda firing to add some final highlights.

Galloway's emphasis on domesticity and functionalism might appear old-fashioned and conservative, but she is far removed from any Martha Stewart-ish notions of tasteful 'good things'. Her pottery does not seek sanctuary in the past, but turns to the history of ceramics as a source of ideas for engaging the present more fully. Her devotion to domesticity is in line with feminist, revisionist arguments about craft, gender roles and the home, and her love of surface decoration shares the unabashed (and polemical) pleasure in supposedly non-modernist ornamentation in the work of *Form*



and *Pattern* movement figures such as Robert Kushner. Galloway's ceramics give the present its due by showing how she lives – where she lives – now. The recent work has an open, contemporary feel even if the house that is the central subject has a touch of funky quaintness inside and out. The overall impression is one of lived-in vitality, and the pots have their own liveliness, too, in keeping with Galloway's opening proclamation on her website: "I am interested in pottery that is joyous."

Galloway captures the character of her home – a self-portrait of sorts – with both skill and playfulness. On a pitcher a string of decorative lights extends out from the porch and stretches around the back of the pot as if waltzing around the yard before reconnecting on the other side. A set of cups use simple forms but exuberant decorations that make them joyous indeed. One teapot that shows



Facing page, top: *Cups with Still Life Drawing.*

Facing page, below: *Sherwood Street Side View with House.*

Above: *Covered Pitcher with Drawing of Living Room and Fan on Lid.*

Below: *Covered Pitcher with Couch.*

All above photos by Samantha Briegel.

the kitchen is capped by an image of a ceiling fan on the lid; another shows the objects on top of the refrigerator. And in a happy accident that delighted the artist, a pitcher handle aligns with the latch on the fence shown in the surface decoration. If a couch on one pitcher appears in a deft, pleasing line drawing with a light wash of colour to add character, on another pitcher the couch appears as a fantastic creation that comes alive because of the daring use of what the artist describes as "ashy, runny" glaze, carried over onto the lid. Galloway has said that she looks at things "that have a visual denseness like Persian miniature paintings, with their architecture slightly askew".<sup>3</sup> As a group these images of her sweet home in Montana – complete with dog on the living room floor – offer a welcoming, slightly askew study of place and space, and a vivid demonstration of how artistic personality is communicated through the intricacies and richness of style.

Galloway is dedicated to functional pottery for domestic use, sceptical about the introduction of some art world values into the ceramics world and not shy about expressing her opinions. She has decried "dated and conservative modernist notions about contemporary ceramics," and in particular the belief that "for potters to be avant-garde, they must abandon function or at least dismiss the history of ceramics and embrace the 'cult of the new'".<sup>4</sup> Of recent trends in 'postmodern' ceramics, she is blunt, if naming no names: "So slipcast the Dixie





cup already and get on with it." Yet her passionate opinions about ceramics are matched with a spirit of generosity toward other ceramists, and an interest in any and all approaches.<sup>3</sup> Her proclamations may recall William Morris or Bernard Leach in response to industrial modernity, yet still hold good in an age of computer-driven postmodernity: "The more I think about this the more radical I think pottery is, especially in the context of the contemporary economy and the state of the work force in America. The idea of making something by hand and then having it in your house and then using it and having it for a long time sounds so radical."

As Galloway's incorporation of digital language suggests, she is willing to address the contemporary world. The display of domestic scenes on familiar kinds of pots suggests old-style comfy-ness rather than an excursion into radical deconstruction. But the recent pots possess a kind of cinematic freedom in the exploration of space – physical and depicted, interior and exterior, ceramic and architectural – and a balance between formality and informality that seems just right for contemporary sensibilities. Galloway avoids falling back on a predictable set of signature forms decorated in a signature style. Yet her work remains completely personal and immediately recognisable.

Galloway's pots, though human rather than heroic in scale, display a sense of artistic expansiveness (aesthetic Big Sky-ism) that defines her evolution

as an artist. It remains significant, however, that the installations return in the end to being individual plates and platters. Galloway is a potter first, last and always. She obviously believes there is nothing constricting about functional ceramics, and is devoted to the communal, democratic qualities of pots when used for celebration and rituals, whether in a large public gathering such as an exhibition opening, or in a smaller private get-together or daily meal at home. As Galloway observed of pitchers and teapots: "Pouring is sharing." The modest size of the pots does not constrain their social significance or the artistic possibilities she explores in, on, around and through them. There are no boundaries to Julia Galloway's ceramic universe: even the sky is not the limit.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Unless indicated, all quotations are from conversations with the author. My thanks to Kristi Scott, director of the Paris Museum, for her hospitality and help, and to Julia Galloway, for making the trek from Missoula to Great Falls to meet with me and discuss the exhibition and her work.
2. "Sky Vault," juliagalloway.com.
3. From an interview by Lana Wilson, "Julia Galloway – Part 2," posted on juliagalloway.com, originally published in Clay Times.
4. Julia Galloway, "Reflecting For The Future," posted on juliagalloway.com.
5. Galloway's dedication to the ceramics community is evident from her website (juliagalloway.com), which includes what she describes as "service based" elements such as the list of artists under "Montana Clay" and the "Field Guide for Ceramic Artisans," a compendium of information designed to aid students when they are finishing school. Under "Alchemy" she provides glaze recipes and related information. Galloway is also on the board of the Archie Bray Foundation, where she has several times served as a juror for the residency program.



Facing page, inset: Photo of Julia in her studio in Montana.  
Facing page: Pitcher with Couch. Photo by Samantha Briegel.  
Left: Kitchen Pitcher, Green, Blue and White, Side 1.  
Photo by Samantha Briegel.  
Above: Julia Galloway's Signatures.

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