



because the EARTH IS 1/3 DIRT

University of Colorado at Boulder

CU Art Museum

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because the EARTH IS 1/3 DIRT

SAINT CLAIR CEMIN

JOHAN CRETEN

WIM DELVOYE

LÉOPOLD FOULEM

BACKA CARIN IVARSDOTTER

WALTER McCONNELL

KRISTEN MORGIN

TED MUEHLING

LAWSON OYEKAN

ANNABETH ROSEN

PIETER STOCKMANS

University of Colorado at Boulder

CU Art Museum



Because the Earth is 1/3 Dirt
Exhibition view, CU Art Museum
University of Colorado at Boulder



Because the Earth is 1/3 Dirt
Exhibition view, CU Art Museum
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The Earth and the Earthly

KIM DICKEY WITH KIRK AMBROSE

Mud, waste, and dirt, man's companions throughout his life, should they not be his most treasured possession? And is it not a service to remind them of their beauty? See how young children look in streams through rubbish and find a thousand wonders.

Jean Dubuffet, "L'auteur répond à quelques objections"

I had a wonderful dream once that I built a bowling alley entirely out of dust, and then I went bowling. And it all just went "poof" into a beautiful cloud.

Kristen Morigin, Symposium,
"Because the Earth Is 1/3 Dirt"

It has plastic potential, it has momentarily taken a shape but perhaps it could take another one. What's often said about clay is that it is democratic in nature, that it is potential in a lump.

Walter McConnell, Symposium,
"Because the Earth Is 1/3 Dirt"

If artistic practice is now in the midst of a "post-medium condition," as Rosalind Krauss contends,¹ why have a show based on a single material? What unites the objects in this exhibition is less a common use of clay than the exploitation of the metaphorical potential of the medium. While clay undoubtedly functions in these objects as a material support, as a medium it contributes to their conceptual complexity. The artists represented in the show do more than make objects in clay, they make clay *and* the act of making with clay their subject. There is no doubting the gestural power of, say, the works of Saint Clair Cemin, which the artist himself considers to be conveyors of states of being, but, as a medium, clay can evoke a host of associations that extend beyond the purview of human activity. The molten magma that erupts from the core of the earth hardens, weathers, and accumulates into the layers of dirt we call clay. As an index of these geological processes, the material of the objects assembled here reminds us of the ephemeral nature of existence. *Because the Earth Is 1/3 Dirt* draws attention to the various machinations that take place on the earth's surface: accumulation, seeding, flowering, upheaval, erosion, and decomposition. The following remarks aim to situate the art of Walter McConnell, Kristen Morigin, and Wim Delvoye in relation to these dynamic processes.

To prepare for this show, McConnell and Morigin worked in greenware on site at the University of Colorado Art Museum. Despite their labor-intensive fabrication, requiring the aid of scores of student workers, these installations appear to have evolved without effort, as if they were found or stumbled upon.

OPPOSITE

Kristen Morigin
Topolino, 2003
(detail)



Walter McConnell
Itinerant Edens: Perpetual Spring,
 2004

ABOVE
 (detail)



McConnell's *Itinerant Edens: Perpetual Spring* (2004) seems to have emerged from a mound of liquid stone, forming a hothouse of exotic flora and, perhaps, revealing the guts of the earth. Roots intertwine like intestines with the matter that supports them. Seen through a column of fogged plastic, the piece takes on the soft focus of nostalgia associated with imaginary landscapes: refuse left behind after a bacchanalia, Disney sets, or enclosed gardens of paradise. The condensation that accumulates within the enclosed space creates the illusion of a pristine environment. Yet we are barred from entering the landscape by the plastic screen that generates these perceptions. The mechanisms that create our desire ultimately frustrate its fulfillment.

Morgin's interpretations of a Fiat Cinquecento and one of Beethoven's pianofortes (both 2004) suggest a material culture that is disintegrating. These two cultural icons, representing an elegance and refinement all too rare today, appear ravaged by time and the elements: dust to dust. We are reminded of Arman's *Topolino* (1994), a tour-de-force ceramic sculpture overflowing with cast porcelain teapots, but here it is eroded. Despite the apparent emphasis on decay, Morgin's ephemeral creations seem strangely alive. To indulge in a pathetic fallacy, perhaps it is their mortality that imbues them with a sense of life. On the one hand, their decrepit state points to aspects of the history of these objects. Beethoven was apparently very hard on his instruments. That Fiat produced small cars nicknamed Topolinos, or little mice, makes the gnarled holes in the sculpture's 'upholstery' seem animated or inhabited. On the other hand, Morgin recounts that these works often

Kristen Morgin
Topolino, 2003



Kristen Morgin
Topolino, 2003
(detail)

trigger personal memories in viewers. Paradoxically, the ephemeral appearance of the works generates especially vivid mental images. In this regard it is interesting to note that despite their convincing verisimilitude, the sculptures contain no part of the objects they emulate. Indeed, Morgin rarely looks at source images when making her pieces; she constructs them almost entirely through memory and imagination.

Left untouched, Morgin's two installations would endure indefinitely, but knowledge of their imminent disassembly brings to mind the thorny relationship between permanence and impermanence associated with ceramics throughout history. Notions like the biblical "feet of clay" evoke fragility even though ceramic objects often survive as the only traces of a lost civilization's material culture. Much of human history has been reconstructed from shards.

The highly polished surfaces of Delvoye's *Mosaic* (1990) may seem unrelated to these themes, but the components of the elegant ornamental design, images of the artist's own excreta, assert a base materiality. Placed on the floor, the tiles cover the earth with a seemingly sanitary surface, but their subject matter fails to mask the results of a universal bodily function. As stool returns to the earth, it decomposes, enriches the soil, and eventually creates the potential for new life. Flowers grow from shit; the beautiful is predicated on the abject. With its beautiful pattern assembled from a series of repellent elements, Delvoye's work evokes an analogously antagonistic yet ultimately complementary relationship.



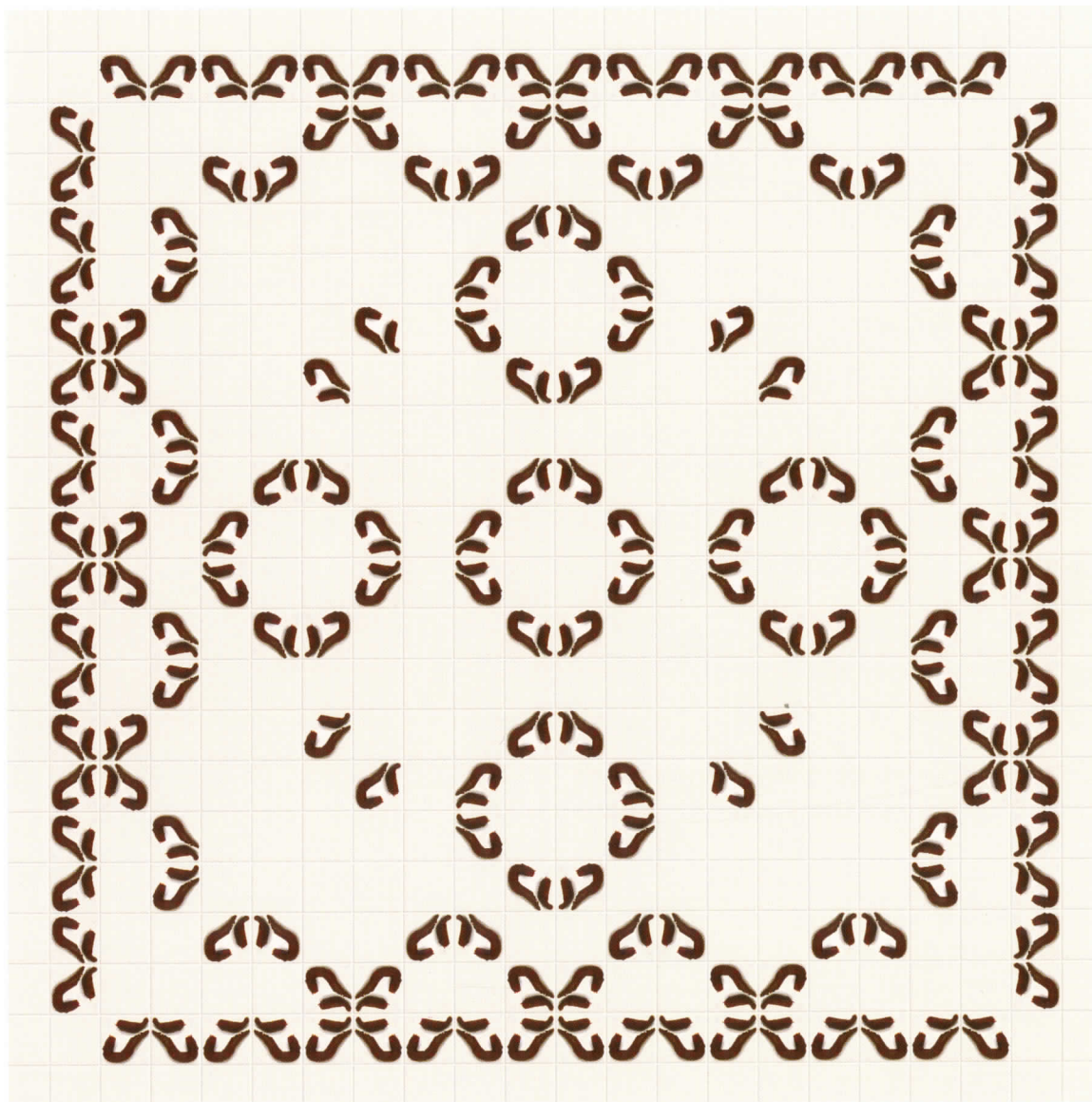
Ezra Pound defined poetry as the yoking of two contradictory terms. Similarly, the works of McConnell, Morgin, and Delvoye exploit the ability of ceramics to foster dense layers of meanings. More than simply objects in clay, they demonstrate an awareness of the earth and the earthly.

NOTE

- 1 Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (New York, 1999), 5.

Wim Delvoye
Mosaic, 1990

(detail on page 17)



This catalogue is published on the occasion of the major exhibition *Because the Earth Is 1/3 Dirt* organized by the CU Art Museum, University of Colorado at Boulder and presented from February 13–March 19, 2004. The exhibition was accompanied by a symposium of the same title, presented on February 14, 2004, also at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

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COVER

Annabeth Rosen
Sample, 1999–2002. (detail)

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Johan Creten
Why Does Strange Fruit Always Look So Sweet?,
2002. (detail)

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Walter McConnell
Itinerant Edens: Perpetual Spring, 2004.
(detail)

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Lawson Oyekan
Coming Up for Air, 2000–2002.
from "Trial with Light" series. (detail)

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Backa Carin Ivarsdotter
Mountains, 2003. (detail)

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Pieter Stockmans
625 Objects in Box, 1998

Photography Credits

Offering, 1999–2000

lead glaze over white slip on earthenware
8½”h x 11”l x 12”w

Striped Bulbs, 1999–2000

lead glaze over white slip on earthenware
8”h x 20”l x 13”w

Striped Twigs, 1999–2000

lead glaze over white slip on earthenware
8”h x 20”l x 13”w

each work loaned by the artist

Pieter Stockmans (b.1940)

Wall Object, 2001

porcelain. 5 pieces, 12”h each, spacing variable

3 Objects in Box, 1998

porcelain and wood. 4”h x 34½”w

625 Objects in Box, 1998

porcelain and wood. Each Vase: 2¼”h x 11”diameter
5”h x 40”w

each work courtesy of
Garth Clark Gallery, New York, NY.

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© Saint Clair Cemin.

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