

AMERICAN

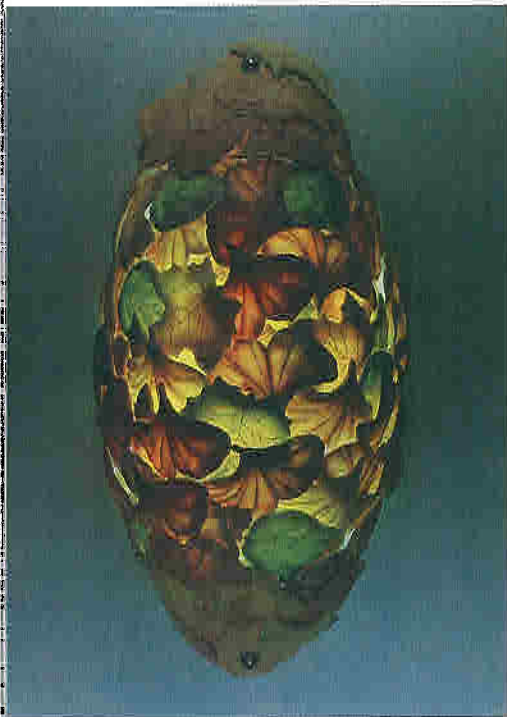
CRAFT

JUNE/JULY '05



REVIEW CURTIS BENZLE

Canton Museum of Art, Canton, OH • November 26, 2004 - February 27, 2005



John Ruskin, in *Lectures on Art and Architecture*, declaimed with typical certainty, "Life without industry is guilt, industry without art is brutality." A sense of the passion implicit in artistic labor, albeit more quietly expressed, permeated Curtis Benzle's exhibition "Porcelain: Vessels and Sanctuary Lighting." As the title suggests, Benzle's work, all made in 2004, seeks to convey an aura of calm and spiritual ease, especially in his attention to the exquisite effects possible through experimentation with porcelain. Benzle, who is professor and chair of dimensional studies at the Columbus College of Art and Design, utilizes a technique of weaving colored and non-colored porcelain that he adapted from the millefiori process in glass to create a richly grained pattern throughout the work. "There is a reason I struggle with difficult materials, invent frustrating techniques and tolerate relentless failure," Benzle says. "For me, the reason is an unflinching desire to give form to feeling." And for him feeling is located in an evocation of natural forms within the materials, which are then shaped by a deftly realized aesthetic sensibility. Nature responds to nurture; nurture flows from nature.

Two loosely related groupings comprised the exhibition. Throughout the gallery, bowls of various shapes with scalloped edges were either placed individually on pedestals or arranged in a visual tableau with a pair of smaller "florals." On

the walls was Benzle's "sanctuary lighting," porcelain leaf clusters covering fluorescent lamps of differing lengths and configurations. At the periphery and near the door, perhaps intended as a coda to the show, were a group of eight demitasse cups with brightly colored impastoed surfaces, each displayed on its side atop an accompanying saucer.

Most of Benzle's porcelain vessels are translucent, with their dynamic fluctuations of color brought out by the muted gallery light; their surfaces are occasionally streaked with strong tones, enlivened by quiet patterns or a vein of gold leaf. *Torn*, for example, possesses a relaxed open form, its light blue interior shot through with a spray pattern of blue dots and lit by a gold seam. In *Material Stress*, a rippling, reddish striated pattern on the exterior plays off the light blue interior and resembles the shimmer of light on water and rock. Benzle obviously enjoys creating diverse patterns—checks, hatch marks, patchwork weaves—that provide a lively counterpoint to surface color and to the shape and irregular edge of the vessel.

Each piece in the four lighting works called *Leaf Pyre* is a framework of interwoven leaves forming a mound over luminous fluorescent lamps. The colors from one work to another are carefully modulated to suggest the changes of fall, from vibrant tones to shades of brown. Less successful in their seasonal evocation are *Autumn Dream*, a horizontal light piece, and *Winter Wanes*, a vertical. To this viewer, both works resembled a trough filled with dead leaves.

Benzle's show occupied one of two small galleries situated off the Canton Museum's main hall, where the more ebullient "Designing Craft" exhibition was on view. This large show was a spectacular compendium of recent work in a plethora of materials, sizes and constructions; it celebrated the unconventional, the stylishness of experimentation, even the attraction of the outlandish. Curtis Benzle's work offered a meditative counterweight to the adjacent show, not a rebuke to its sprawling energy but rather a gentle remonstrance that emphasized a return to the basic "muck and mire" of craft industry, the love of the corporeality of manipulated matter and a reverent delight in the transformation of traditional materials.

—RICHARD A. SCHINDLER

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Together, 2004, vitreous porcelain, refractory stains, 14 by 10 by 4 inches. OPPOSITE PAGE: *Leaf Pyre 1*, 2004, porcelain, glass, steel, fluorescent, 12 by 8 by 7 inches.

