



# America Pinched and Pulled

## Jenn Brazelton

THE SIMPLY TITLED WORK *USA*, FIRST EXHIBITED AT THE Socially Conscious Abstraction at the SMArt Gallery, San Francisco, US in early 2014, is a large mass of southern ice porcelain, clinging tenaciously to the gallery wall. Glaringly white and satin smooth at its core, its surface, its presence is an evanescent topography of spiky cities and rural and wilderness depressions.

It is not the *USA* as presented by political or economic interest groups, or the physical form of a nation pinched and pulled by recent economic adjustments, but a sculptural work of art wrought from clay that has undergone a process of wedging, punching, pulling, scraping, folding and finally subjected to intense heat. While as a work of art based on current demographics, it is in many ways a historical work of

the shape of the nation.

As if emerging in coral-like edifices, the artist, Jenn Brazelton has given spiky form to metropolitan centres. *New York* rises from a globular peninsula as a crowd of tightly wound purple and gold eruptions. America's most densely populated centre rests as an almost isolated island, within the jaw-like crescent of lesser metropoli, also finished in a violet hue, but lacking the golden Manhattan spires.

Moving westward, the terrain falls away to rippling depressions, expanses of grey, minus detail apart from the thinning filigree or road-like networks that meet and cross and continue, without record. To the south, small purple rises account the cities of the southern coast line and, to the north, the once industrial heartland is shown as two narrow strips clinging to ridge lines, like receding ice in spring. Further west a deep crevasse, seems to divide the landmass, the vein-like surface given abrupt pause, before stretching onward to the purple rises of the city of dreams and other outcrops of the Pacific Coast.

Like pictorial clouds, it is common to ascribe anamorphic form to cartographic representations and this is no different. Viewed as a whole, stretched across the gallery wall, this work seems to contain an avaricious jaw to the east, replete with swollen tongue, a single leg for propulsion and slim hips widening to a powerful tail: a creature contained within a loose Shar Pei-like skin.

This is not the artists first rendering of a nation based on demographic data. The path to this mammoth ceramic work has been winding, at least

A Review by **David Hume**

Above: *USA*. 2014. Work in progress.

Below: *USA (Detail)*. 2015.

Above photos by Jenn Brazelton.

Facing page: *Bangladesh*. 2013. ceramic and glass, 24 x 17 x 4 in.



remnant cloth that offers the viewer the illusion of soft to the touch, gentle to the skin, fabric and is astutely finished with muted textile tones. At the centre of this swirling vortex exists a small black recessed pupil, its scope blinkered by the surrounding cloth that threatens to fold, or collapse, in on it. This work is a skilfully realised comment on that which is seen and unseen within the fashion industry.

News coverage and recent history have and continue to be key motivators in this project, with the Jasmine Revolution of 2011 sparking an inquiry into the Arab world that begins with Tunisia. Here Brazelton has represented the seminal point of the Arab Spring in visceral form, layering a blazing



in the scope of her vision. Brazelton has previously represented other nations from the same perspective, adding flourishes to the raw population data, from current events and her own understanding.

This is particularly evident in *Bangladesh*. Inspired by the disastrous 2013 factory collapse that revealed the conditions of workers in the textile industry there, Brazelton represents this nation as a ragged rosette of



Above: *Muscat and Oman*. 2013. Multi-fired ceramic, Keraflex porcelain, fibre. 11 x 18 x 2 in.

Below: *Tunisia*. 2012. Multi-fired ceramic. 12 x 13 x 5 in.



clash of brilliant reds, oranges, blacks and whites in an attempt to capture Mohamed Bouazizi's moment of self immolation. In this work the corporeal red, somehow emerging as a vein-like lattice through an ash white dust, shows the hope and promise that emerged from tragedy.

Most works appear to be built up in layers and central to the artist's style is the thread of cursive icing, at times thick and rope-like and on other occasions a filigree of gossamer, perhaps delineating transportation routes or communication paths, that provides a texture of depth to many works. It rests lace-like upon translucent background shades, sometimes bejewelled, achieved through a skilfully applied glaze process. For example, in the wall relief of *Muscat and Oman*, two pale forms are overlain with a piped filigree of silver cursive trails set against a pearly base. The two land masses of this geographically separated nation are linked via a deep brown, tightly wound, spiral cable, marking



*United Arab Emirates. 2012. Ceramic Low fire. 9 x 8 x 2 in.*

the coastal edge of the larger form that becomes stretched as it reaches to symbolically connect with the smaller.

It is the complex finish of this work that demonstrates how the artist seeks to enhance the two tenuously connected forms through further understanding of the people and the unifying culture of the nation. Drawing inspiration from the colourful decorations embroidered onto traditional *Kumma* caps Jenn Brazelton has finished this work with a dense peppering of sequin-like dots, ranging from black to deep and pale blue, through to red and pink that, although applied separately, seem to blend as they overlap. She explains that the connecting umber coil is a more toned down suggestion of prosperity, as a contrast to the bright gold used on the *UAE* sculpture, with its dominant, more deeply furrowed golden skeins and residue shadows.

It is in the complex glaze lustre of symbolic detail that these robust cartograms advance the inquiry

into art and cartography through the ceramic medium. Not unlike the status of cultures born out of nation states as a result of population growth, migration and communication channels, these works cling tenuously to the wall of the gallery, or rest precariously balanced on plinths, at once vulnerable and threatening as a result of their volume, to slide or topple from their anchor points.

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All photos by Wilfred J Jones unless noted.