

Art and Cartography in the Ceramic Sculpture of Jenn Brazelton

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From her studio in Oakland, California, sculptor, Jenn Brazelton surveys the world, its nation states and their mapped delineation, according to demographic projections. The perceived outlines are then brought to life through the artist's response to recent events. In so doing, she seeks, through her art, to imbue bald population data with personality, to enhance black and white statistics, with emotive colour, layered upon hand formed clay cartograms.

Some works are drawn from extended exposure, while others are the result of single dramatic events, seeping into the consciousness through saturated media exposure. It is in the representation of the perception and or experience of place that the artist's work finds an antecedence in the historic construction of maps and cartography as the domain of artists.

In addition to terrestrial representation, ideas of the cosmos influenced cartographic representations. It is as an extension of this notion this artist forms her work, replacing the pre Renaissance artist's desire to situate themselves in the cosmos, with the challenge to represent discrete spaces, fast becoming irrelevant nation states, burnished through a response to recent media reports.

Until the Renaissance the representation of place was the domain of art as much as science (Rees 1980). Subsequent to that period cartography was hijacked by science, with its dependence on data usurping the artistic and emotional representation of place (Rees, 1980, Fairbairn, Thun-Hohenstein 2009). The post Renaissance history of cartography, is then defined as incorporating two ideals: as statements of facts, and as a "surrogate of western civilization", dominated by social scientists and scholars in the humanities (Edney 2013). It may be conceived, from this definition that today space for the artist in the formulation or critique of maps is limited. However, since roughly the middle of the last century a number of artists, including: Joaquín Torres-García; Jasper Johns; Claes Oldenburg; Robert Smithson; John Baldessari; Alighiero Boetti and Richard Long (Watson 2009 and Krygier 2011), and other artists engaging with the critical geography movement of the 70s and 80s, have sought to wrestle back some ground. While, most recently, Chinese artist Ding Bin has extended the perspective of ink and wash painting in his exhibition, *Post-Landscape Iconography Research* (Today Art Museum, 2014), and perhaps more pertinent to Brazelton's project, Jeff Schmuki's 2008 sculptural ceramic exhibition *Pattern Recognition* (Peeler Art Center), has explored the interconnection between, "cartography, documentary, memory and the built and natural environment" (Peeler Art Centre),

What is apparent, from most of the artistic output cited above, is that without occupation place fails to exist. That is place is constituted through inhabitation, without which it is simply vacant space. It may, therefore, be reasonably argued that demography is central to the construction of place, in that it records human coalescence. There is, likewise, a wealth of art theory and historical critique that may be brought to bare on this body of work, (See Watson 2009).

Demographic maps are the departure point for Brazelton's sculptures, whose ceramic cartograms, like artists before her, contest the notion that art and cartography have, since the Renaissance, existed as separate disciplines. Such a fallacy is grounded in the foreshadowed misunderstanding that cartography is based on the interpretation of data, and art, in the form of the landscape tradition, exclusively upon the artist's sense of place.

As with the debate regarding cartography and art, there are a number of contradictions within this project that the artist eagerly embraces and seeks not to iron out but to appreciate. Chief among them is that the artist extracts her forms from the latest demographic mapping techniques, and in

seeking to represent, them through one of the oldest artistic mediums, works against the grain of technology, that is said to have further distanced both practices (Cartwright 2009), investing in her work a humanistic interpretation of contemporary mapping.

Cartography plasticizes space, demographic maps both reduce and expand place, which therefore make the ceramic medium the most suitable for its rendering. This is realized through a conceptual process of eye — mind — hand, common to both disciplines. As noted above, in a number of cases the visual stimulation is channeled through electronic media input, or data, while on some occasions first hand experience provides the stimulus. The resulting creations represent the artist's feel for the chosen subjects, a response to received data, generating a sense of place, at times intimate and sometimes remote, that situate her within the world.

In this ongoing suite of works each individual cartogram illustrates a nation state, drawn from mapped representations, hand moulded in clay then finished with lustrous glazed surfaces that, often, suggest an impressionistic comprehension of the subject. The shapes are vaguely recognizable from their mapped representations, while the glazed finishes are complex and detailed, demonstrating the artist's desire to represent her understanding of individual nations in their current or recent situations. This is particularly evident in Bangladesh, which is perhaps the most accessible work to date.

Inspired by the disastrous 2013 factory collapse that revealed the shocking conditions of workers in the textile industry there, Brazelton represents the nation as a ragged rosette of 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 skillfully realised comment on that which is seen and unseen within the fashion industry.

News coverage and recent events are a key motivator in the expansion of 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 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.

Some cartograms, like Tunisia, are organised to be free standing, arranged on a plinth. Others, such as Bangladesh and Muscat and Oman, lend themselves to mounting as wall reliefs. In this respect it would seem that the artist is happy to be led by the form extracted from the demographic projection.

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 filagree 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 bejeweled, achieved through a skillfully applied glaze process. For example, in the wall relief of Muscat and Oman two pale forms are overlaid with a piped filagree 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 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 colorful decorations embroidered onto traditional Kumma caps 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, while applied separately, seem to blend as they overlap. While she explains that 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.

A raft of cartographic theory regarding the selection of symbols and colour, may be applied to understanding these works, in both their physical form and finishing glaze. Just as Cartwright (2009 p20) proposes that “cartographers become involved in the elements of cartography that they have both mastered (either academically or technically, or both) and that they also enjoy doing. Personal satisfaction in producing an elegant and aesthetically-pleasing design or mastering some scientific problem...” so too the Brazelton seeks “...as-near perfect a solution that is possible,” in physical form and finish.

In their physical form, the artist noted, during conversation, that much of her work appears to have come out of the sea. There is indeed a strong sense of emergence in these sculptures that refers well to both the emergence of continents from receding oceans, the development of national borders and political determination, and the evolution of the sculptors chosen medium.

Other sculptors, such as Schmuki (2008), have explored similar representations through the ceramic medium, separating natural and man made environments through the use organic and geometric shapes respectively. What stands out in Brazelton’s work is the insistence of organic form for the representation of both urban and natural spaces.

This sense of emergence and dedication to organic form is especially available in the artists current and most ambitious work, a table top size model, measuring over five feet, of the United States, based on recent demographic data. In its progressive condition this work stretches across the bench top and brings to mind notions of a rock pool, exposed by a receding tide, replete with coral outcrops and towering barnacles. Brilliant in its raw bleach white clay, it threatens to fracture along topographic depressions. Indeed, it is not just scale but also the inclusion of detailed terrain that marks this work apart from others. For while demographic maps are, in the main, limited to the two dimensional representations of human coalescence, here the artist situates metropolitan hubs on rising ground of coral like outcrops.

It is in viewing this work in progress that, somewhat like an eager child gazing down into a newly exposed rock pool, the question of perspective arises. Previous works in this project demonstrate a direct, if challenging relationship, to the contrary points of view that distinguish the art of mapping and landscape painting, yet unite them in the act of possession, or the representation of knowledge and understanding (Jobst 2009). The verticality and incumbent gravity of these art works is particularly challenging. For here each outcrop and depression relate to each other along the horizontal plane, yet as with arial perspective of maps the viewer ascends to an all seeing omnipotent gaze, that perhaps reduces the relative appreciation of individual undulations in their three dimensional realization.

Just as Chinese artist Ding Bin has approached this dilemma, adopting a similar perspective in advancing the tradition of pen and ink landscape representation, Brazelton’s work advances notions of post landscape art, but here with the added features of physical depth, gravity and the tactile temptation that resonates from so much ceramic art. Indeed, it is in the complex glaze luster 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, clinging tenuously to the wall of her studio, seem vulnerable, threatening, as a result of their volume, to slide from their anchor points.

How the artist resolves the challenge of the curation of her ambitious US sculpture, and perhaps more importantly what symbolic representations of US culture she incorporates into the glaze, I look forward to discovering in this considered evocation of people and place.

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