

Ceramics

Art + Perception

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#114

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Brian



Rochefort

Interview by **Alexandra Terry**



On the occasion of Brian Rochefort's first institutional solo exhibition *Absorption by the Sun*, at Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, the artist sat down with curator Alexandra Terry to discuss his latest works and his artistic process.

AT You started working with ceramics when you were 14 years old. What drew you to this medium, and what elements of it motivated you to pursue it as an artistic practice?

BR When I was in middle school my brother, who is two years older than me, was taking ceramics classes as a tenth grader. I was always into drawing and painting but I was fascinated by the possibilities with ceramics, it was completely new to me. So when I got to high school the first class I signed up for was Ceramics 1 with Mrs. Burns. I fell in love with clay the moment I started my first project, which was a cereal bowl. Ever since I have been working in clay full-time, every semester throughout high school and art school and up until now. It's always been a constant in my life; it truly makes me happy.

When I applied for art school I picked three schools and applied to them all for printmaking and drawing. I was accepted to all of them but decided to study ceramics instead since I was so passionate about clay. At the time I had no idea you could have a career in clay outside of the pottery community.

AT How did you develop your practice at RISD? Do you feel that attending art school is important to the development of artistic careers? What have you learned as a professional artist, since graduating, that you wish had been included in your art education?

BR My work was constantly moving in different directions while at RISD. I wanted to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible and I did this with such intensity that I needed a storage unit to hold all the work I made. In the back of my mind, I knew I had to develop a skill I could use after graduation to make money in order to sustain a functional studio. Having all of these techniques under my belt helped me hone in on what I wanted to pursue, and what I didn't care for. My interest was non-representational drawing, painting, and photography, so I was always looking for a way to translate that interest into ceramics. This is how I developed the idea I currently have with clay and glaze.

In retrospect, one of the most important parts of being an artist was not learned or taught in art school, which is how to conduct business or learn how to sustain a career. We didn't learn this because most of the professors didn't have any success in the art world and had no experience exhibiting, or selling anything. Everyone was settled into their cozy tenured jobs and knew enough about art to keep their offices. It is a harsh truth that nobody likes to talk about.





AT Your pieces utilize a breathtakingly vibrant color palette. What dictates your color palette? What educational background, if any, do you have with color theory? How do you select your colors?

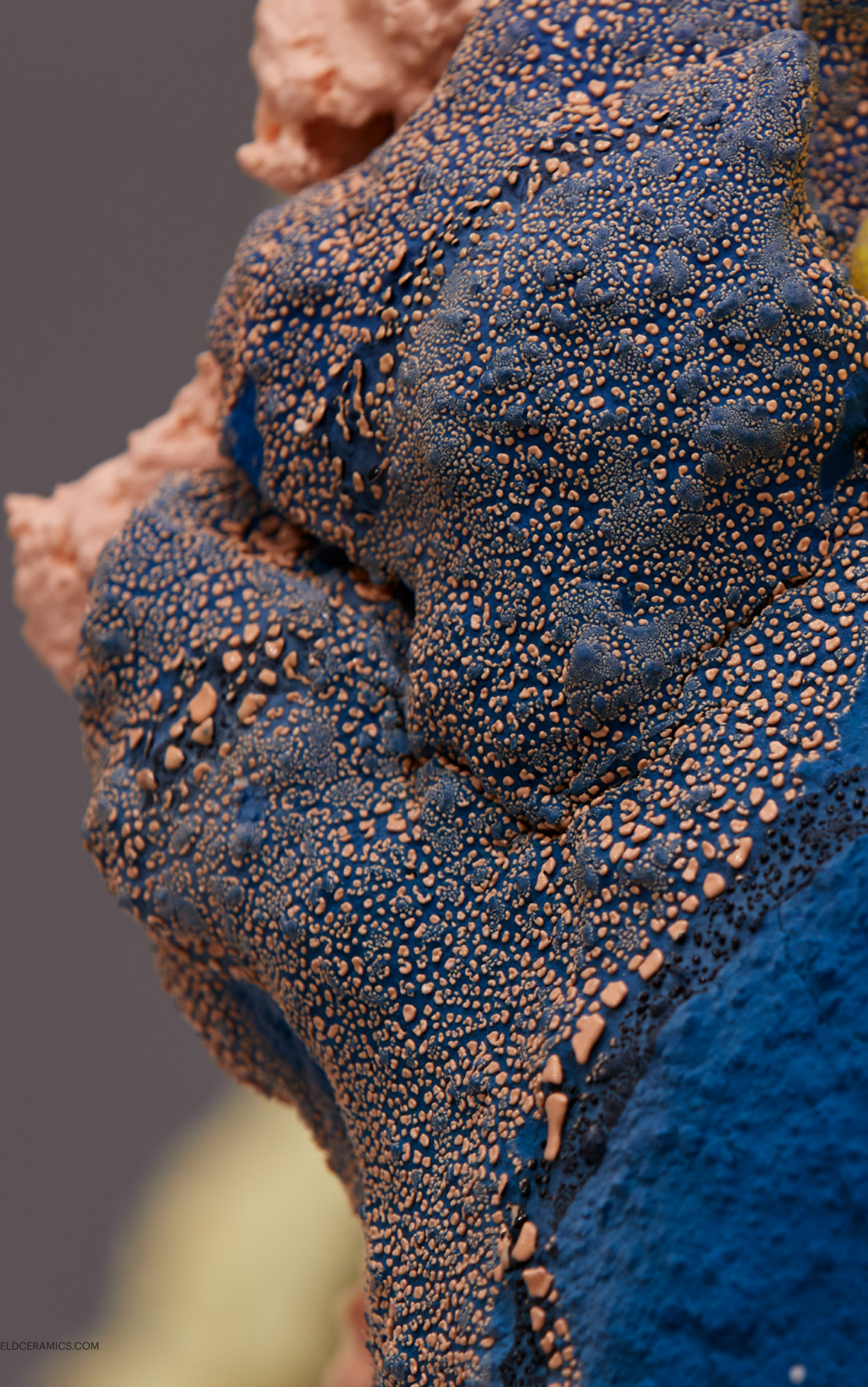
BR Color has always been my main interest. You rarely come across ceramic artwork that can successfully combine vibrant colors without looking muddy or clownish. I suppose looking at paintings by masters like Albert Oehlen, Helen Frankenthaler, and Imi Knoebel has helped. I also had a rigorous foundation in drawing and design. I believe these color choices and aesthetic decisions are somewhat innate and can only be facilitated or finessed by professors.

I select colors based on what shape comes out of the kiln. I go through phases where I will hate using green but a month later will obsess over it by making ten sculptures in different hues of green. After a trip to Nicaragua, I decided to go bananas with bluish greens and yellowish greens. Suddenly I introduced a new color into my studio that changed the next 20 sculptures. Last year I spent months trying to generate the brightest purple possible which was a challenge because it's the most difficult and overlooked color in ceramics.

AT Your glaze application is expressive and painterly. Are your works informed by painting, and/or paint application? How have you honed your glaze application skills? Are there painters that have informed your work?

BR Yes, my work is loaded with references not only to ceramic heroes like Ken Price and Ron Nagle but abstract expressionists and contemporary non-representational painters like Franz West, DeKooning, Albert Oehlen, and Christopher Wool, to name a few. My cylindrical Paint Can series is more of a direct acknowledgment of these artists since I use a very similar painting technique, except I am using glaze and a kiln.

The *Crater* sculptures are very expressive as well but the brush stroke and mark making are removed; the surfaces are more fluxed and organic, which is still a nod to my heroes but also references land formations that I have visited. I use many different techniques to apply glaze. I airbrush a lot of my colors, I drip glazes diagonally, and apply with paintbrushes. All of this is done meticulously over the course of weeks. The surfaces are built up over time, slowly.





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AT Is your work informed by other artists or artistic movements, either current or historical? How do you see yourself positioned within the larger global art scene?

BR I like to show my work with painting since there is a good conversation to be had between my work and abstract painters who have a vibrant and defined style. My work is extremely different from other ceramics so it is difficult to pair me with anyone else working in clay. As far as where I fit into a global art scene, I do not know. I don't have a social group to define my work either. I try to be completely independent of all these categories and social cliques because I believe it causes division and tribalism. What we need more of is autonomy, and what we need less of is group identity to make us feel cozy and accepted.

AT What other creative practices inform you and your work? Design? Music? Film?

BR I listen to music when I work but I wouldn't claim it has much influence on my sculpture. It is critical to a positive and upbeat work environment though. If I wasn't working in sculpture I could have been a very good photographer. I still think of myself as mixed media artist with a minor in photography.

AT What role does experimentation play in your work? How do you balance the precise nature of working with glazes and your kiln, with spontaneity and play?

BR Ceramics, in general, is experimental to some degree because I am reliant on the heat of a kiln which changes the chemistry of the materials. Glazes melt and flow. My work used to be more experimental a couple of years ago before I began formulating my own glaze recipes. I was firing works 7-8 times in order to build up the surface. Now I have 20-30 glazes I use that are reliable and precise. There is still some experimentation to a degree but more so meticulous and thought out. If glaze didn't have that mystery and experimental nature to it, then people would be less interested in the medium.

AT How does your studio, and its location affect your art-making? Do you feel influenced either positively or negatively by where you are based? Does the LA art-scene inform your artwork? Do you have a community of artists that you look to for support?

BR My studio is located east of downtown LA. People say my work is very Los Angeles / Southern California because it is colorful, but I disagree. I have been using vibrant colors since undergrad in Rhode Island, it has always been my thing. Originally I am from the East Coast and I still feel that way at heart. I don't think Los Angeles is a healthy city to thrive in the arts. Traffic, fires, smog, high rent, and cut-throat competition are not conducive to being a humble artist. The best galleries are in NY and Europe where there is a deep history of appreciation for art and craft.

AT How did the two-year Archie Bray Foundation residency program inform your work? Do you feel that artist residency programs provide a productive and supportive atmosphere that encourages experimentation?

BR The two-year residency was a blessing because at the time I was a senior at RISD without many prospects. The Bray is the best residency in the ceramics community which provided great facilities without many boundaries or time constraints.

I recently spent three weeks at Ceramica Suro in Guadalajara, Mexico. It was an amazing experience not only because I love Latin America but because it gave me the chance to make a body or work drastically different from my studio practice. I plan to visit Suro again in the near future. This is one of the very few residencies I am interested in.

AT You recently were awarded a commission to produce work for the Paraguay embassy. How do projects such as this affect the way you approach your work?

BR I received a substantial travel and acquisition grant to travel to Paraguay for inspiration. When I return to the studio I will make some works based on the landscape. Nearly all of my *Craters* are abstract representations of places I have visited in Latin America and East Africa, so this is an extension of a pre-existing idea. Now that I am being rewarded for traveling it makes the experience so much more exciting.

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AT Your solo-exhibition *Absorption by the Sunz* at Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB) is your first institutional exhibition. How does working within an institutional context affect your practice? Both within your studio and in terms of display? Do institutional exhibitions affect the way you approach your audience? Do you consider your audience when making work?

BR In reverse order, no, I do not really consider my audience when preparing for a show because my work comes from personal experiences while I travel in solitude. I consider presentation and display when presented with a space but those decisions come after the work is already created. I have endless ideas for presentation but these choices are definitely determined by gallery format.

AT How do you see your work developing over the next few years? Are there other materials and techniques that you anticipate introducing to your work?

BR I am planning a few travel destinations to Rwanda and Uganda to see the silverback gorillas. This area, Virunga National Park, is surrounded by volcanoes which is a major theme in my work. A major trip like this will certainly impact how I look at my current body of work.

My interest in exotic animals, especially big cats I have seen in the Amazon and Africa, has also given me ideas for other materials, but that will remain confidential until I figure out how to accomplish this goal.

AT If constraints of resources (money, time, space etc.) were not an issue, what can you imagine yourself making? Are there projects or pieces that you would undertake that you cannot work on currently?

BR I think the most critical aspect of my work and studio is not being cheap with materials, pigments, and firings. In the future I will hire an architect to help design and build out my own studio that is minimal and wide open. I will have three or four Skutt Kilns firing daily, a spray booth, and all custom furniture. I will still be making the current work, just slightly bigger with more going at the same time. This is how my work progresses, everything in my studio is related. Creating an atmosphere to work in is extremely important to my creativity.

AT You have explained that your work is not only inspired by geographical and physical phenomena that you have encountered through your travels, but also by your interest in the work of Carl Sagan and interplanetary studies. Is there a connection between the two? How do your interests feed into the work you do in your studio? Do you undergo research beforehand?

About the Author
Alexandra Terry is the Associate Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, where she has curated exhibitions of artists including Barry McGee, Beatriz Olabarietta, and Brian Rochefort. From 2008-2015 Terry was Curator at MOP Foundation, a London-based nonprofit dedicated to promoting and supporting Iranian contemporary art. She has curated exhibitions in the US, UK, and UAE, in addition to contributing to contemporary art publications. Terry holds a BA in Fine Art and Art History from the University of Colorado, Boulder and an MFA in Curating from Goldsmiths, University of London.

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Images credit: Alex Blair.

BR In the past two years I have been to about 24 countries, which has had an enormous impact on my studio practice. My interest has shifted from marine life and protected barrier reefs in the Galapagos, Belize, and East Africa to tropical cloud forests in Bolivia and Ecuador. Each trip leads to a new interest. All of which make their way into my work as an abstraction.

I am currently interested in volcanoes and exotic animals so I always research locations that are extremely remote with the rarest types of species.

Carl Sagan was a champion of space but also said a lot about conservation and the imperative to treat our planet like it was our last. Space travel is something I will never experience but it still a fascination of mine. I do believe space travel and planetary relocation will be necessary for our species in the future, which might loosely relate to the doom and gloom that is inherent within my work.

AT Your work incites an incredibly visceral response. Viewers are drawn to the work, in the sense that they want to touch the pieces, or as some have mentioned, consume them. How can you explain this reaction? Certainly, the colors and textures are awe-inducing, but can you put your finger on the magnetic quality that sucks people in? For me, I sense a relationship between the works and my own human make-up (organs, blood, cells etc.) - could this be part of the draw?

BR My work is so alien to viewers. It is difficult to adjust or adapt to because it doesn't look like anything anyone has seen. I transform material that is malleable and tactile into objects that have no evidence of the human touch, no fingerprints, no brush strokes. Color and texture have always been my main interest, so I push my glazes to the max using 15-20 different glazes I have formulated over the years. ■

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