

BLOUINARTINFO

Choreography in Clay

BY CONNOR GOODWIN | OCTOBER 05, 2018



Adam Silverman

(Image Courtesy of Friedman Benda and Adam Silverman, Photography by Daniel Kukla)

Arms crossed over his slight frame, Adam Silverman resembles a chess master plotting his next five moves as he surveys 26 black ceramic pieces clustered on a raised circular platform.

Goodwin, Connor. "Choreography in Clay," *Blouin Artinfo*, October 5, 2018.

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“I could be here another 7 hours ... or 7 years,” he says, as his mind cycles through countless permutations. Although the process of throwing and firing clay is fluid and experimental, when it comes to installation, Silverman likes to be in control. This meticulous approach stems from his background in architecture, and his obsession with posture and spacing can be traced to his interest in choreography.

Later, Silverman tells me the circle, the potter’s wheel, is always with him. Indeed, the circular platform supporting the 26 black ceramics is literally cut out from a wall, a wall where paintings might be mounted. It is, to say the least, an aggressive statement and an allusion to the potter’s wheel.

Over drinks after his first day of installing “Occupation” at Friedman Benda New York, Silverman spoke with BLOUINSHOP about working with constraints, artistic control, and upcoming projects. “Occupation” will be on view through October 13.

To begin, can you tell us about “Occupation,” your latest exhibit at Friedman Benda?

Every time that I have a show, there is a larger context within which the work is made and presented.

“Occupation” has three distinct pieces. Two related, wall-installation pieces (one black and one white) that bracket an “X” formed by two 20-footlong intersecting beams. Each of the three pieces of architecture support ceramic objects. The wall pieces each have 26 individual figures occupying them. And the crossing beams have individual pieces sitting on them.

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The installations are designed very consciously for the viewer, who will also be occupying the space. This is to both choreograph the motion of the viewers within the gallery as well as to present the objects in a specific way.

Is choreographing the viewer's experience always a part of your approach?

In general, I'm involved in [the installation], in either the space-making nature of it or placing the objects so that it alters the space. Partially so that it dictates how people interact with this stuff. I don't know that there's any deeper meaning to it. I think it's just experiential ... it's movement and sightlines.

What leads you to explore duality and oppositions in this exhibit?

I did a show in Tokyo in the fall of 2016 called "Blue." Every piece in the show was blue, except for one, the last one that I made, which was white. Often the last piece I make for one show sets the tone for the next body of work to come.

As it happens, I flew home from Tokyo on Election Day in November 2016. I have made almost exclusively white and black work since then. Maybe I purged all of the color out of my system with the Tokyo show. Maybe the polarized political climate of America has me feeling colorless.

Working within defined limits are always important to me, which is one reason that I love working on the potter's wheel so much. The circle is always with me. I have no choice but to embrace that limitation.

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Thinking about defined limits more ... you mentioned the potter's wheel, which is intrinsic to the medium. Are there ever self-imposed constraints?

In architecture you always have some sort of context, whether it's a program, the use of the building, or the physical site. You always have to respond in some way to something. So maybe since that's how I was trained, that makes me more comfortable than waking up thinking I can do whatever I want. For the first 10 years I was working I used just one clay body, it didn't vary at all. And also I only worked with electric kilns.

Those are both fairly limiting things. There's so much variety possible within ceramics that, even if you use the same clay, same kiln, and same glaze, and only vary the water content of the glaze and the temperature you'd have wild variations. Particularly with [ceramics] you need to self-impose a lot of constraints otherwise you'd drown in options.

When you talk about contexts, are you thinking in terms of just physical space?

Every project is different. There are all sorts of contexts. There's the context of New York, there's the context of the art world within New York...

Do you ever seek out certain contexts?

I do. I've been working on a project for almost 10 years at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth. The original building is a Louis Kahn building from 1972, which is really incredible. Then they decided to build a second building by Renzo Piano. And then, next to those two buildings, is a third, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, built by Tadao Ando. So there's these three

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architects facing each other [and] I made a project about that, using materials from the site — clay, trees, water, construction materials.

Do you often use site-specific materials in your work?

More recently, yes. In Rhode Island that's what I've been doing almost entirely for the last three to four years. It has a lot of unpredictability because, in the case of Rhode Island, the materials are all natural. I was using a lot of cornhusks and seaweed. I'm doing two things. I'm putting them in the kilns right on the pots and also I'm burning it, making ash, and mixing glazes with it. Very primitive, but really interesting results.

Where do you have the least and most control in your work process? Is it on the wheel, mixing glazes, applying glazes, firing the pieces? Where do you find yourself experimenting most?

I could have the most or least control in any aspect of the process. Throwing is very fluid and can be extremely improvisational if and when I allow it to be or want it to be, which is most of the time. Typically, I will sit down with a basic idea for the day, like "I'm going to use 25-pound balls of clay and make closed forms, eggs, etc." or "I'm going to use 15-pound balls of clay and a baseball bat and make very expressive lumpy pots today."

I am very loose and open with glaze mixing and glaze layering, multi-firing, etc. I don't take notes when glazing and use unsophisticated application techniques (pouring, brushing, dipping, etc.).

Experimentation, volatility and improvisation are some of the primary draws of working with clay for me.

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As a discipline, ceramics is constantly battling between the labels of “craft” and “fine” art. Your work is seen as muddying this distinction. Is this an intentional disruption on your part?

I spent too much time worrying about this— the art/craft/design discussion — for the first five or so years of my career. In the end, my conclusion is that I can’t think about it and don’t really care anymore.

The places where those distinctions still most strongly exist are in museums and the market follows suit. But I think in another 50 years or less those boundaries will be gone. For my work, it is important to me that the work contains good craft, that it’s well made (even if it looks like a train wreck) and that it’s “well-designed,” but all in the service of being art.

Does the installation come as an afterthought or is it always in the back of your mind as you’re developing the pieces?

Never an afterthought. Sometimes the installation is conceived of before the work is made and the work is made in service of the installation. Usually it is a back-and-forth between the work and installation design process.

You mentioned the last piece you made for the Tokyo exhibit lead to this current one at Friedman Benda. What was the last piece you made for “Occupation” and have you started working on the next project already or do you have a vision for it?

The last pieces I made were 12 or 13 pieces in Rhode Island last summer. Eight are here [in “Occupation”]. I think what’s coming is more of those figures that have the ear-feet things. The surfaces with these glazes were super expressive.

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When you showed me the object it looked like one of those old-timey diving helmets...

The diving bell.

Yes, exactly.

The thing about those figures is that when you see them together, and when they're in that monochromatic group, they have so many references.

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