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(VERSION I)

GERALD A.
BROWN

SPEAKING WITH PRECISION

CURATED BY GERALD A. BROWN
(VERSION I)

Introduction

The exhibition *Speaking With Precision* includes five artists of color from various backgrounds, levels of study, and making styles. Each artist uses ceramic abstraction as an opportunity to create their own visual language, designed to bend to the curve of their voice and wield the ferocity of their tone. Their work explores a range of intersectional experiences of colonialism, sexuality, class, machines and mental health within communities, intimately sharing interior thoughts with the public. This writing will analyze the rebellious, disruptive nature of abstraction, its amplified power when combined with ceramics, and Black and Brown artists' usage of the subgenre's ability to break monoliths for how they are expected to communicate.

A ceramic abstract artist holds both tools and materials designed exactly for them and by them. Each of the five artists in *Speaking With Precision* use ceramic abstraction to express intimate ideas, recontextualizing their communities and nourishing their own self-journey. Displaying a variety of visual cues and symbols, the curation of these ceramic abstractionists is based on a multi synthesis concept of spiritual technique called *jing*, related to options in battle, or in this context, artistic communication, derived from quietness.

The basis of this theory on *jing* is inspired by a pop culture reference of being "the myriad of options one has during battle on how to direct their energy, both internal and externally" (*Avatar Fandom*). Digging deeper into the historical origin of this reference, in Chinese, the word describes mental quietness, an ability to completely focus on the inner body and resist distractions. To amplify the power of this internal focus, *jing* can be combined with the act of integrating the external body with the internal body (taichiforhealthinsitute.org), allowing the user to control the direction of their energy flow and how it is used. The martial art of Tai Chi incorporates this control of energy in the four *jing* fighting options: listening, doing, yielding, and an explosive attack. With the ability to create multiple combinations of attacks or defenses using the four fighting options, *jing* empowers the user to have a heightened sense of awareness of self, their placement in the world and the connection between the two.

In *Speaking with Precision*, each artist uses an awareness similar to *jing* to freely communicate what they are internally processing without being distracted by the public's gaze. They implore a mental fortitude that protects and fuels their artistic manifestations. Reminiscent of the fighting options in Tai Chi, the artists can devise a plethora of different communication combinations, further sharpening the precision of their aesthetic delivery. The ability to have endless ways to communicate counters the presumptuous notion that artist's of color work should operate in one way. With the expectation to make 'race work' that appeases controlling stereotypes, a large, dark shadow is casted over the artist's head, insisting that they feed into the necessity to either go along with the monolithic view or spend their time explaining their being. But by using a mental focus similar to *jing*, the artist can implement techniques that tell more nuanced narratives and recenters their autonomy over their work.

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The five communication combinations present in the exhibition are inward (embrace), outward (inquisition), cyclical (sustain), back and forth (mirror), and ascend (rebuilding). Each combination uses a technique to uniquely convey intricate observations that integrate the artist's external with the internal and the directional flow between the two. The variety of the combinations are fluid, adjusting to fit the personal and intersectional identity of each artist. Below are explorations of each artist and the way they use a communication combination to achieve their work:

Syd Carpenter (embrace) Born in Pittsburgh, PA, Syd Carpenter is a world renowned artist who is a veteran in ceramic abstraction. As a practicing artist for numerous decades, Carpenter uses family, history, community and her passion for gardening as inspiration for her work. She connects her personal identity as a gardener to environmental observations of other Black people and their historical/contemporary transitions, internally reflecting on herself and her surroundings.

"As a gardener myself, the discovery of this study of African American gardeners was revelatory. The gardeners described their relationship to their spaces and the sense of independence derived from providing for themselves and their communities. The farms are a lesson in resourceful ingenuity and pragmatic beauty. As fewer and fewer African Americans remain on the land as farmers, their testimony to the value of their way of life appealed to that part of me that also needs the garden as physical and spiritual sustenance." -Artist Statement

This gentle reflection depicts a flow inward from the external to the internal, creating an embrative effect. This communication combination is of a single function, emphasizing the flow in one primary direction. Carpenter intimately shares the revelatory impact of how connecting with the history of other Black farmers generates a loving energy for her community, her family lineage and thus, her own personal identity as a fellow caregiver of the earth. She allows these sentiments to influence the symbols used in her sculptural compositions, subtly alluding to agriculture staples, homes, farm equipment, and most notably, clothes pins. At a glance, the symbols are less coherent, leaving a mystery for the audience to solve. But as they become more familiar, a deeper connection to the symbol's meaning is revealed. Whether it is a subtle reference to a family member of Carpenter's or an expression of the livelihood of Southern Farmers, the audience gets a peek into Carpenter's affection and internal processing about Black American connections to agriculture. Throughout her practice, the compositions have evolved over time, telling stories within stories about the resilience of Black Farmers. With the rise of technology in the North and families' desire to escape Jim Crow, working in the countryside became less aspirational. Outlasting the impacts of industrialization, racism and classism, Syd's work is a testament to the families who have maintained their land through several generations.

Donte Moore (inquire) Similar to Syd Carpenter, there is a connection present between the artist's personal identity and their surrounding environment also occurring in Donte Moore's work. Lessons from his early life in small town PA and slowly grasping the inner workings of the world sparked a curiosity for systems. Moore grew to see multiple perspectives at once, feeding his interest to see hidden dualities and conflicts happening simultaneously. Inspired by the TV series, *How Things Worked*, questions became a guiding source for his development. Investigation became essential to his process, pushing him to reevaluate his own sense of function and purpose. The deeper he searched for answers about himself, the more he began to wonder about the systems around him and their overlapping coexistence.

"The hand serves as arguably the most important natural tool to humans. Our hands are just as

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capable of creating things as machines are, with more time and effort. Machines are designed to replace human capabilities because they are faster, require less energy, and can create flawless products every time. Although I want my work to be recognized as handmade, I feel a sense of satisfaction when I hear a viewer say, "I can't believe you made that." I'm also interested in how humans are conditioned like machines. Unlike humans, machines do not have feelings, which is why they can do the same repetitive job forever. Human emotions can create a breaking point at any given time, whether mentally or physically. Conditioning and training prepares a human to understand their role in the system." -Thesis

This analysis echoes a similar single function combination used by Carpenter but in an opposing direction. Rather than flow inward, creating an embrace connection from the external to the internal, Moore uses an outward flow to depict a combination based on inquisition, generating an extrospective effect. This outward flow empowers Moore to use the agitation of questions to discover hidden threads between the human and the machine. Though the two entities are in opposition of one another, they are one in the same, uncovering a question of duality that appears throughout Moore's work. Intensely trained in symmetrical, double walled forms, Moore, himself, embodies the duality of the human and machine as one. Concurrently, by using the wheel as a tool, he also challenges the aims and restrictions of perfection of himself and the world. Chasing efficiency, the desire for perfection is relentlessly insatiable and not realistic to what is natural. Incorporating more instinctual and less regimented practices, Moore used abstraction to develop other making techniques to simply throwing cylindrical forms. Constructing wheel-thrown objects together with handbuilt objects, the hand and the machine push and pull one another, creating compositions suggestive of power plants, circuit boards, and other industrial technology. With painted surfaces of oranges, browns and blacks, the work illustrates the impacts of life eroding the surface of a machine, just like the human body. The imperfections pay homage to the wisdom bestowed from "old age and decay", revealing the beautiful natural process of how things work and eventually evolve, regarding both the hand and the machine everlasting aims toward their purpose.

Leonor Marion-Landais (sustain) In single function combinations, the direction of the flow is dictated by the movement of the artist's internal thoughts in relation to what is external of the self. Like with Syd Carpenter and Donte Moore, the flow can capture the development of the artist and articulation of their interior as an advance, but can there be a single function combination that acts as a defense? Leonor Marion-Landais uses a combination that is similar to a neutral jing, residing on a cyclical flow designed to protect the self. Her practice is completely structured around the healing abilities of repetition through clay. Infatuated with the rhythmic process of mass making or hand dotting surfaces, the work's only purpose is to serve her and her interior. She makes on command and in response to the body, neglecting the urge to entertain doing more or less to satisfy the audience. The making is therapeutic to her body and acts a resistance to mental health challenges.

My work essentially deals with control. Control over external and internal sources. It started as an exploration of grief after losing my father. The urge I felt to get control over a situation such as death, that knew I couldn't control...The repetition and transformation of forms, overly decorative patterns, impulsive and at times almost repulsive application of dots became the language in which I am able to express and visualize my feelings and anxieties. The act of making these forms always comes as a search for release, calmness, understanding, absolution. The combination of handbuilt and thrown forms as well as the action of merging them together into organic forms is a meditative experience that culminates with a sense of chaos and tranquility. - artist statement

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With work that prioritizes Marion-Landais' bodily needs, she is able to make work that is expressive about her internal process while protective of the sacred function the work serves for her. The work sustains her interior, making it not about advancing, but staying and withstanding. In a current series of work, she uses emotion, anxiety or bodily stress to pinpoint a base color as a marker for the interior and guiding direction of the organic composition. From there, similar to Moore, she uses the wheel as a tool to throw a variety of open and closed forms. Once assembled, supplemental colors are chosen to create complimentary or friction to the base, often creating a vibrant effect that alludes to initial inspired feeling. The heavily layered colorful dots often take a long time to cover the surface, providing a therapeutic, meditative space for Marion-Landais to work through internal thoughts. The colors drape over the abstract form like a car cover, hugging tightly to the curvature of the piece but maintaining the mystery underneath. The forms use obscurity to preserve privacy. The self-expression never crosses over to publicness; it stays intimate and allows the viewer to be solely a guest. With a process heavily emphasizing self-care, the final object becomes an ode to resilience and necessity to tend to mental health.

Daniel Alejandro Trejo (mirror) - With these combinations, some techniques require multiple components or functions to effectively support an artist's self-expression. This does not mean multifunction combinations are more effective than single, but more refined and adapted to the user's needs. Pulling from experiences as a queer Latinx boy growing up in conservative town in California, Daniel Alejandro Trejo uses his work to think through so many complexities converging at once. With the hyper awareness of being "too visible or appearing ambiguous", the natural reaction to these dominant forces is to cling to literalness and avoid nuances, reducing yourself down to a shell of an idea. This process becomes restrictive and destructive, stripping away everything that is whimsical, freeing and authentic. Trejo found solace in striking a balance in dis/familiarity, allowing one to give into desires while still negotiating safety. Using coded language and subversion, Trejo could flip the challenge of ambiguity to his advantage.

"The tolerance for ambiguity is challenged; similar to the awkward and uncomfortable questions, and preconceived notions of queer individuals that are asked by those who abide by heteronormative/binary constructs. Being too visible or too ambiguous can jeopardize existence in its entirety, and enact violence that is physical and emotional resulting in abject gossip, slander, and perception of "the other" enabling abandonment or rejection."

In close contact with various forms of violence and the unsettling nature of their everydayness, Trejo's work depicts the battling of the internal versus external, requiring multiple forms of communication to support his interiority. Akin to Leonor Marion-Landais, the work is protective and guarding of his body from opposing forces, but simultaneously, the work is on the offensive like Syd Carpenter and Donte Moore, vocal and declarative. In order to do both at the same time, Trejo implements a multifunction combination based on mirroring. By creating a flow that moves in multiple directions back and forth, the work can express more acutely a range of emotions and thoughts that bounce from offensive to defensive. Trejo is able to use the ambiguity of playful, soft pastels on various open silhouettes to encourage whimsy and youth, but also allude to emptiness and loss. The organic shapes outline a faint memory, fantasy or remembrance, fragmentations of what was or potentially hopes to be. Trejo turns the fear of ambiguity given by the world and reflects back a new usage of it, validating his needs. In an environment built on the hyper consciousness of being othered, abstraction becomes multi-purposeful weapon for Trejo to affirm and sustain his interior.

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Aisha Chantal Bryant (rebuild), Growing up in a Haitian American household near the DC area, Aisha Bryant was raised on a collection of Black diasporic food and traditions. Communicated in gradual waves, she developed a critical awareness of the world informed by her family's Caribbean immigrant and Black American identities. But the dual nature of French finery embedded into the Haitian culture as well the American prestige of the classical artistic training further complicated the awareness, instilling a desire for perfection of white academia. Wrestling with a confluence of written histories and oral traditions within her body, Bryant uses her experience to reimagine the recultivation of the global Black body.

Bryant's work investigates the subjects of postcolonialism and identity using ceramic materials to mimic the erosion of time, the distortions of histories told by mouth and by academia. Her current body of work brings together previous work in digital video and ceramic sculpture, exploring the removal of the Black body as a public spectacle of trauma and the inability to choose or feign ignorance of the repercussions. She views this work as a physical agglomeration of histories, experiences, language, religion, and culture, avoiding the convention of streamlining it for easy consumption. Pairing depictions of fine Sevres porcelain forms with objects that evoke the Caribbean environment, she manipulates the standing hierarchy of visual cultures in the West.

The confliction of personal as well as global histories can be challenging to parcel through, provoking a delusional self-doubt. Without a mental anchor, this paradox can be immobilizing and deteriorating. These complexities intersecting at one spot are causing a clash between the internal and the eternal. In a similar vein as Daniel Alejandro Trejo, Bryant implores a multifunctional combination that creates a flow in multiple directions between affirmation and assertion. Instead of mirroring, Bryant uses reimagination of herself, her family and community, creating a rebuilding of knowledge and worth. With an ascending flow upward, this combination allows her to blend sarcasm, irony, and optimism in a form of communal protection as well as pursuit. Her forms use the understanding of classical pottery while interrupting its utilitarian familiarity with abstraction. Similar to Donte Moore, Bryant also pushes back on the rigidity of pottery and takes it a step further by challenging a vessel's assumed apolitical, objective nature. Through distorting the perfectly thrown classical vessels and melting drippy, colorful glaze, the clash of the internal and external are dynamically illustrated. A fine porcelain ware merging with African diasporic staple crop, Bryant captures the essence of thriving in this amalgamation of conflicting identities, visualizing the radicalization of internal thought while adjusting the duality of contempt. Like the rich, lusher, runny glazes on the classical forms, the Black body is no longer valued and defined by extension of imperial worth, rebuilding one's own connection with their body and the world.

Conclusion

Black and Brown intimacy manifests so naturally in ceramic abstraction. Not bound by trite ideals of vulnerability meaning weakness, the ceramic abstraction depicts the strength exuded by the interior of each artist. No two artists are the same so the depiction of that strength does not look the same, creating a sense of pride in one's unique approach to self-expression. This liberating feeling affirms the artist that what they say means something and they do not need to change their communication aesthetic to fit other's understanding. It is not uncertain and receding. It is declarative. It is precise and it is enough.