

IMPENETRABLE AMBIGUITIES

The Illustrated Sculpture of Jason Walker

by Anthony E. Stellaccio



1 *Timing Chain*, 15 in. (38 cm) in height, porcelain, underglaze, 2005.

Jason Walker's immaculately conceived and executed porcelain sculpture, with its infallible craftsmanship, detailed drawing and syntheses of two- and three-dimensional surfaces, is already well-known to the ceramics community and requires very little introduction. For those who know less about the artist than the artwork, it should not be too surprising to reveal that Walker, highly regarded for his illustration on clay, began his art career in high school as a sign-painter. An avid drawer then forced to work fast and at precarious heights, Walker's brushwork quickly became what it is still, precise and unhesitating. In college, despite the intention to study illustration, Walker discovered ceramics. Quickly becoming fixated with combining an already well-developed skill set and a new obsession, clay, Walker studied under John Neely at Utah State University and Chris Staley at Penn State University. By the artist's own measure, these two mentors contributed to the two essential components of any artist's development: technical knowledge and discipline on one hand and the pursuit of ideas and expression on the other. In the end, Walker emerged from his formal education as a talented and skilled artist rooted in studio craft and eager for his own personal journey. And *journey* has been the operative word.

In some very essential way, the same heady mixture of keen observation and self-awareness that nourished the spirits of America's Transcendentalist explorers, artists, and naturalists also defines Walker. In their footsteps, his own expeditions into the natural and manufactured landscapes of our world have given him perspective, shaped him, and fueled his imagination and creativity. Yet unlike his predecessors, Thomas Cole, Walt Whitman, John Muir, and the like, Walker's America is one where urban and natural landscapes were never more disparate and the balance between human beings and nature was never more precarious.

The imperative of our times is laid bare in the artist's work. However, through the veil of a measured and neutral persona, Walker seems more fascinated by the dynamics of our relationship with "nature" than by our increasingly desperate circumstances. Between the two is a reticent prophet who treads the very fine line separating storyteller and activist, his work powered by the tectonic friction between either/or.

Structurally, Walker's work has, until recently, remained a fairly consistent formula of slab construction with additions of hand-built, cast, and thrown elements, all made from a standard (though personalized) cone 10 Grolleg porcelain. The porcelain also provides an essential part of the palette, which, in an early phase, was comprised of raw white surfaces and a very limited range of underglaze colors. Primarily black with oc-



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2 *La Gaviota* 16 in. (41 cm) in length, porcelain, underglaze, 2006.

3 *Manifest Destiny*, 21 in. (53 cm) in length, porcelain, underglaze, 2007.



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4 *A Hand in Two Worlds*, 19 in. (48 cm) in length, porcelain, underglaze, concrete, lusters, 2009.



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5 *City Animal: We Burn Things, That's What We Do*, 17 in. (43 cm) in length, 2008.

casional accents of color, typically red and blue, Walker's imagery has been consistently flawless and painstakingly hand painted. Another defining feature of Walker's early work is its relationship to the vessel. From teapots, bowls, and plates the artist once made only limited departures by adding sculptural elements and embellishing surfaces.

Composed in this fashion, Walker made his early vessel-based work host to a conglomeration of images and motifs both drawn and sculpted. These are dichotomously divided between the manufactured—wires, bolts, gears, chains, pipes, and plugs—and those stolen from nature—fish, birds, trees, insects, animals, and landscapes—for example. The resulting juxtapositions were often either admixtures of organic and inorganic elements built around illustrated planes or biomechanical hybridizations in which form and surface were more closely integrated. Traits of the former, which have remained visible in the artist's work, recall classically decorated faience and porcelain. The latter seems to have evolved into purer forms

of sculpture as the artist gradually withdrew from conventional vessel forms.

One trait visible in both approaches, as seen in early works like *Timing Chain*, is the dark ambience of their effect. Framed by the visual signatures of technology, in eerily vacant landscapes and the eerily vacant stares of animals that have been synthesized into half-dead machines, there is a permeating, ominous absence. The heavy burden of the imagery, the dark values of the palette, the calculated coldness of an almost machine-like technical refinement, and the impenetrability of *trompe l'oeil* illusion—all are exacerbated by everything that is ungraspable and nightmarish, in an approach influenced by surrealism. Here Walker's narratives are apocalyptic and dire, but they are tempered by that certain degree of neutrality that is captured in the indifference of the machine, the lifeless stare of the inanimate animal, the desolate emptiness of the landscape, and the detached perfection of the work.

In a subsequent period, Walker's evolution is marked by a noticeable shift away from typical pottery forms. Though still retaining the idea of the vessel, the objects produced in this phase are better described as biomorphic industrial containers. This designation includes, among a number of recognizable shapes, gas cans, sewage tanks, and industrial battery forms fused together with biotic motifs—fish and birds being common. Drawings on these forms are similarly themed and evidence the more sophisticated

edge-assignments that activate and so dramatically strengthen the figure/ground-form/surface relationship in Walker's work. Consequently, the art of this period is increasingly illusionistic and conceptually cohesive—and it continued to be so as the artist's abandonment of the vessel grew more complete.

Without the constraint of containment, the animals in Walker's work assumed fuller, less adulterated forms. As this occurred, as animals became more the canvases for illustrated narratives and less the components of biotic and abiotic syntheses, as they became more like autonomous actors than like violated metaphors, a clearer, more sophisticated dichotomy emerged. The squirrel shown in *City Animal: We Burn Things, That's What We Do*, for example, like the pigeons described two-dimensionally on its surface, is an agent of nature, a subtler but stronger force that easily adapted to humanity's greatest challenge—its own concocted environments. In another work, *Manifest Destiny*, the hare too is defiant, a mocking caricature of a Manifest Destiny that lacked both empathy and foresight. In these polarities we see more of the nuances of Walker's personal philosophy, one that recognizes a dualistic, uncomfortably forced cohabitation in which civilization and nature penetrate each other in a battle of wills. The separation of people from nature is crucial to Walker's thought. It is not merely a matter of ecological harmony but a search for identity in which nature is a concept of our own creation. Surgically cut away with the scalpel of our own



6 *The Pollinators*, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, porcelain, underglaze and China paints, 2012.



7 *Blind Admiration*, 4 ft. 1 in. (1.2 m) in height, porcelain, underglaze, China paints, 2012.



8 *Stopping to Sniff the Flowers in My Concrete Shoes, I Offered a Crust of Bread to John Muir*, 22 in. (56 cm) in length, porcelain, underglaze and China paints, 2009.

self-perception, our definition of a nature outside of ourselves speaks volumes about who we are or, at least, who we think we are.

With the content of his creation ever more carefully calibrated, Walker has found increasingly compelling ways to articulate something essential about humanity. One striking tactic, unveiled at a recent exhibition of his work at Cross Mackenzie Gallery (www.crossmackenzie.com) in Washington, DC, is a seamless (even if unintentional) blending of folk art and fine art.

In Walker's art, animals have consistently served as dual metaphors for human beings and nature, the degree of separation between the two being a central question of his work. Perhaps the folk artists of past ages have not asked this question explicitly, but they have consistently examined and represented their lives through a selection of totems—often animals that have symbolized humanity's essential nature, its subjugation to natural forces, its aspirations, and also its plights.

In the exhibition at Cross Mackenzie Gallery, co-curated by Rebecca Cross and Leslie Ferrin, the first piece to be seen was a series of exquisitely sculpted and illustrated birds beneath a stalk and blossom. The piece, entitled *The Pollinators*, is technically and conceptually complex but is driven in part by the tree-of-life

archetype, its perennial image a backdrop for the artist's skill, rich vocabulary, and contemporary commentary. In two nearby pieces appears the image of the bear, one of them decorated in a balance of white and black lines with accents of gold luster. While intended to reference computer motherboards, this work, *A Hand in Two Worlds*, also mimics the form lines of Native American art from the Northwest Coast, where Walker currently resides. This effect is deepened by the traditional subject matter, i.e., the bear and the natural landscape, which are counterbalanced by references to a virtual world accessible only through technological interface. The second bear form, *Stopping to Sniff the Flowers in my Concrete Shoes, I Offered a Crust of Bread to John Muir*, is a canvas for a juxtaposition of coastal urban skyline and mountain landscape. Inserted into this context is an image of John Muir who, resurrected, becomes something of a folk hero. In all of these examples, and more could be cited, Walker pits the longevity and universality of folk art's standardized vocabulary against the conceptually incisive thrust of his personal vision, weighs the naïve eccentricities of the folk artist against the surrealist eccentricities of the fine artist, and sets up a powerful and compelling contrast between the enduring and the ephemeral, the essential and the modern, and nature and human-

ity. The resulting balance, the confounding ambivalence—half redeeming and half condemning—is achieved with the delicacy and subtlety of a virtuoso.

Yet Walker's art is not a one-dimensional achievement. At his sold-out solo show at Cross Mackenzie, one could easily see the strata of layers which this artist has steadily built and built upon, and which have gradually and steadfastly raised his work to a quality par excellence. Of course, the foundation of his work is technical acumen, everything established on the staggering impossibility of what he is able to realize in and on clay. On this bedrock Walker has consistently pushed himself and progressed conceptually. Having constantly re-evaluated his relationship with the vessel, for example, the artist has brought his background in studio ceramics full-circle to deeper contemplations of the material. This is evident in *Stopping to Sniff the Flowers...*, which was mentioned above. In this work, the artist lets his use of concrete fill what might otherwise be a conceptual gap and edge his use of clay more closely to the notion of being a natural medium subjected to powerful technological forces and farther from a mere default material. These considerations are decidedly more sculptural than what his earlier dependence on conventional vessels might have indicated. At the same time, in the same piece, the form of the animal is unobtrusively capped with an industrial screw-top cap. The addition, however slight, preserves the idea of the vessel and

attends to the inbred connotations of ceramic material while still playing upon illusion and reinforcing his conceptual focus. These qualities are only a few parts of the broad vocabulary that Walker has extensively refined over the course of his career.

The exhibition at Cross Mackenzie did not, however, end in summary. Instead, one of the most recently made pieces in the show was an example of the complex and innovative tile-work that is soon to become a greater part of Walker's oeuvre. In the new tile-work, one sees Walker's full engagement with China paints (a newly adopted material that gives his drawing greater dimension), more complex narratives, new approaches to the relationship between two- and three-dimensions, and, in short, the new boundaries that the artist is pursuing in his work. Always proceeding past far-removed points of excellence and innovation, there is more power behind the work of Jason Walker than just the compelling force of a refined and philosophically sophisticated ambiguity. And what else there is can only be called the blooming blossom of true mastery.

the author *Anthony Stellaccio is a freelance scholar and artist. He is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics and the American Ceramic Circle and currently serves as project manager and curatorial research specialist at the Smithsonian, National Museum of African Art.*



9 Installation view of Cross MacKenzie Gallery. Photo: Maxwell MacKenzie.