

‘ARE WE THERE YET?’



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For over 40 years, Leslie Ferrin, director of Ferrin Contemporary and Project Art, has been a leader in the field of ceramics. A new show, “Are We There Yet?” celebrates the gallery and its artists with a survey of work from the last 40+ years.

A journey in ceramics

Ferrin Contemporary’s long history in the spotlight with new exhibition

If you go

‘ARE WE THERE YET?’

What: Exhibition of 20 artists, spanning the 40+ year history of Ferrin Contemporary

Who: Ferrin Contemporary

With: Chris Antemann, Russell Biles, Cristina Cordova, Raymon Elozua, Sin-ying Ho, Sergei Isupov, Steven Young Lee, Courtney M. Leonard, Beth Lipman, Lauren Mabry, Crystal Morey, Kadri Parnamets, Peter Pincus, Paul Scott, Mark Shapiro, Linda Sikora, Bobby Silverman, Rae Stern, Mara Superior, Jason Walker and Kurt Weiser.

Where: Ferrin Contemporary, Building 13, Mass MoCA, 1315 Mass MoCA Way, North Adams

Reception: 5 to 7 p.m., Thursday

Gallery hours: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursday through Saturday

More information: 413-346-4004, ferrincontemporary.com

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By JENNIFER HUBERDEAU
The Berkshire Eagle

NORTH ADAMS — Sometimes, the only way to move forward is to look back.

Leslie Ferrin, director of Ferrin Contemporary, at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art is doing just that with “Are We There Yet?” It’s an exhibition that is one-part retrospective, one part celebration. It’s a show about evolution, of transition.

It’s an introspective show, for Ferrin, who after 40-plus years in the ceramics market is pondering the next phase of Ferrin Contemporary.

“Our gallery was really oriented from the artist point of view. Our mission statement right from the beginning was to do for others, what I didn’t see, as a possibility for myself an artist, when I started out,” she said, during a recent interview with The Eagle. “It’s been about thematic exhibitions; helping artists who are going through bumpy parts of their production, to find a way to keep their work lively. It was always done that way and at the end of it, we’ve always invested it all back in. I think the next phase is going to be working with the artists on catalogs and books and that kind of thing, working with

Leslie [van Buren] and The Artist Book Foundation.”

An opening reception for the show will be held 5 to 7 p.m. Thursday. Following the exhibition, which runs through Sept. 2, Ferrin Contemporary will move from its space at Mass MoCA, where its been located since 2014, and relocate to Project Art, which Ferrin runs, in Cummington.

A 40+ YEAR SURVEY

The show is a survey of artwork, of Ferrin’s career, of the life of the gallery.

It was in Northampton, in 1979, that Ferrin, freshly graduated from Hampshire College, opened Pinch Pottery, a working studio, shop and gallery space (that would become Ferrin Gallery) with ceramic artists Mara Superior and Barbara Walch on the bottom floor of Thorne’s. She would run the shop/gallery space while the working studio would be run by the three women and four additional female artists.

In 1987, the business moved to Main Street and Ferrin Gallery was established.

Superior continued as an artist, Ferrin took on the role of gallery director and Donald Clark joined the partnership.

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Ceramics

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(Pinch! is still operating today, run by its new owner Jena Sujat since 2002 and continues to offer works for sale by founders Superior and Walch.)

After 20 years in Northampton, in 1999, the Ferrin Gallery became a virtual space, existing only online. In 2004, in its next evolution, Ferrin Gallery, helmed by Ferrin and Clark, took on retail space in Lenox, before moving to North Street in Pittsfield, where it existed from 2007 to 2012. She opened Ferrin Contemporary at Mass MoCA in 2014.

It was also in 2004 that Ferrin and artist Sergei Isupov, who she represents, purchased a renovated 8,000-square-foot former mill building in Cummington. From there, she runs Project Art, a program that offers ceramic artist residencies, internships and studio rentals, as well as workshops hosted by Ferrin Contemporary artists.

As the gallery evolved, so did Ferrin’s role, which has come to include: curator, tour guide, gallery director, collection specialist, agent and mentor.

“It’s a really creative role to be the one who brings the [artist’s] work into the public. You have to understand the artist’s perspective and the public’s perspective and then bring those two things together,” Ferrin said during a 2019 interview with The Eagle.

ARTISTS EVOLVE ALONGSIDE GALLERY

The exhibition, which is in-person and online, emerged during COVID-19, when shuttered galleries found themselves reaching both artists and clientele through the internet. It was then Ferrin began cataloging artist works,



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TIM BARNWELL PHOTOGRAPHY

Russell Biles’ Gone Too, 2015, is part of “Are We There Yet?” at Ferrin Contemporary in North Adams.

gallery shows, museum exhibitions, sales, acquisitions. She, along with her team began a database, that eventually told the story, not only of Ferrin Contemporary, but of the artists themselves.

During that time, she’s seen the work of her artists transition and evolve as well — a total of 20 are represented in the show.

Ferrin said the project began with 25 artists, who she had either been working with for 40 or so years or who had “significant career movements” that she had interacted with. From there, the selection depended on who had work that could be shipped in time for the show.

The creation of the database, she said, allows her to know what items debuted when. “I can go through every one of these artists and say this is, 2015, and this was the first time this happened or, this was made in 1979.”

Some of those early works are on display as part of “Are We There Yet?”

“Here is one of the first pieces we showed by Sergei [Isupov] when we began working with him in 1996,” she said, motioning to a work. “This is from

1979 and it was from a series that he was making during his divorce from the American woman he was married to at the time. So it has all this sort of anguish and it comes from a very personal story. These references are, pain, anger ... but it all also has all these classic symbols and this classic beauty.”

At the time, Isupov was making teapots. His work, now more figurative, has grown in, even in size. Last summer, he created giant sculpture, fired in an outdoor kiln at TurnPark Art Space as part of a benefit for Ukraine. Ferrin says he hopes to be able to continue firing works in the kiln in the near future.

New and old works from Chris Antemann, artist known for her contemporary parodies of 18th-century porcelain figurines, show her evolution as an artist, Ferrin said.

Antemann joined Ferrin’s list of artists in 2003. In 2011, Antemann has worked in collaboration with the Meissen Porcelain Manufactory in Germany.

Her time in Germany refined her technical skills, Ferrin said, which can be seen in Antemann’s most recent works, created in her Oregon studio during the pandemic.

A NEW CHAPTER

The transition to Project Art in Cummington isn’t the end for Ferrin Contemporary, Ferrin said, just the next chapter. She’ll continue to work with her artists — working as he does now to position them in museum exhibitions and with museum and private acquisitions. She’ll also continue to host artist workshops and talks from Project Art.

“We’re already working with a few of the artists on books,” she said. “Others we’re cataloging their works, getting them ready for what’s next.”