

Jeanne Quinn

Ceramic In(ter)ventions



A Review by Glen R Brown



SOMETHING LIKE A PLAY IN THREE NON-SEQUENTIAL but interrelated acts, Jeanne Quinn's exhibition *Ceramic In(ter)ventions* consisted of a trio of installations, (*Rorschach Curtain*, *A Thousand Tiny Deaths* and *Everything is Not as it Seems*) all of which had been shown previously, although not in this particular grouping. The dynamic between these works was obtrusive, as impossible to ignore as that generated through the juxtaposition of parts within each installation itself. Consequently the impression created by the exhibition as a whole is best conveyed not through a work-by-work description but rather through a less systematic and more speculative, even admittedly inventive, discussion of themes, ideas and questions tentatively formed in the interstices between the installations themselves. Such rambling is appropriate for an exhibition that implicitly invited the viewer to interpret through association, drawing as much upon his or her own contextual resources as upon those provided by the works themselves. I will, therefore, follow the exhibition's lead and offer some impressions, limiting them, in the interest of brevity, to three of many possible interpretative themes.

First, the exhibition's title and the incorporation of ceramics into all three installations (a trait not always true of Quinn's art), nudged the viewer toward consideration of medium: not just the material nature of ceramics but also the medium's applications and history. The physical properties of fired clay were highlighted by *A Thousand Tiny Deaths*, in which scores of black porcelain pots were suspended

Facing page: A Thousand Tiny Deaths. 2009. Black-porcelain, balloons and string. Site-dependent installation. 129 x 72 x 144 in.
Above: Everything is Not as it Seems (Detail). 2009. Porcelain, wire, paint and electrical hardware. Site-dependent installation. 138 x 204 x 288 in.

from the ceiling, each secured by inflating a balloon within the vessel, tying it off, and knotting it onto the a dangling string. The rigidity of the vessel walls contrasted with the elasticity of the balloons, emphasising the tensile strength acquired by the porcelain through firing (a relatively weak tensile strength to be sure, but one at least sufficient for a vessel to resist the force of gravity on its own mass). The suspension of fired porcelain elements from pins and wires respectively in *Rorschach Curtain* and *Everything Is Not as It Seems*, likewise emphasised tensile strength, the latter installation adding drama to the proof by invoking light to demonstrate the translucency and, consequently, the obvious thinness of the porcelain forms. At the same time, the fragility of fired porcelain was made clear by *A Thousand Tiny Deaths* as the inflated balloons decreased their internal pressure over time and gravity played its part.

Still following an interpretative thread defined largely by medium, the viewer, depending upon his or her background and knowledge, could easily have read into Quinn's installations a reflection on the history and applications of ceramics. After all, *A Thousand Tiny Deaths* dangled vessels not of one uniform shape but rather of diverse types with connections to specific cultures and historical periods: the



meiping vase, the ambrosia vase, the squat *lekythos* and so forth. The fate of Quinn's sombre black-porcelain vases and jars recalled the countless unknown accidents that terminated the 'lives' of all but a tiny percentage of the millions of ceramic vessels produced over the past 10,000 years. In this context *Rorschach Curtain* could be seen as representing the equally import tradition of ceramics as *tessarae*, tiles, or other architectural ornaments, its small biomorphic elements suggesting in particular the *rocaille* of 18th century European salons. A literal pendant to that interpretation, *Everything is Not as it Seems* was, in its wedding of porcelain and light, evocative of Sèvres candelabra or Meissen chandeliers.

The interpretations that I have so far set forth depend on a certain literalness (on the material properties of porcelain and the history and applications of ceramics) but the value of Quinn's exhibition lay more in its figurative potential. In this regard, a second line of interpretation opened in relation to the metaphor most commonly invoked by art: the tragedy of the human as hybrid of finite matter and intangible soul. *Rorschach Curtain*, with its titular reference to a psychological test of cognitive and emotional functioning, suggested the mind in both its rational and unconscious capacities. More

specifically it invited self-reflection, implicitly urging the viewer to interpret its scores of small, asymmetrically arranged components by looking inward into his or her own mind and calling on the resources of individual experience and personality. In this respect, *Rorschach Curtain* was a synopsis of the exhibition as a whole. In its metaphorical role as mind, it influenced the reading of *A Thousand Tiny Deaths* as a meditation on the body and the central fact of impermanence. *Everything is Not as it Seems* became, consequently, an implicitly mystical work, its points of light glowing softly on white porcelain surfaces and its levitation in the dimness of a large and otherwise empty gallery inducing speculation on spirit.

Did Quinn intend such interpretation? The question is ultimately rhetorical, since it returns one to reflection on the nature of the exhibition itself, which seemed tendentially to obscure the artist's intention, except inasmuch as that intention was to facilitate imagination. With that in mind, I will propose that a third potential thread for uniting the installations could have been loosely spun from consideration of science – not the materials science that would focus more narrowly on the physical nature of porcelain and be given to testing properties such as tensile strength and frangibility. Rather, Quinn's



Facing page: *Rorschach Curtain*. 2006. Porcelain, wire, pins and paint. 38.5 x 51.5 x 3 in.
Collection of Patricia Ammann, Boulder, Colorado.
Above: *Everything is Not as it Seems*.
Below: *A Thousand Tiny Deaths*.

installations could have inspired musings on some key concepts in particle physics. *Everything is Not as it Seems* created, after all, a fair approximation of ion trails, each sweeping arc suggesting the trace of a beta particle or muon careening through the superheated liquid of a bubble chamber. Alternately, the strings of spheres, like the dotted lines in diagrams, could have been read as photons, the quanta of light that simultaneously exhibit the properties of particles and waves. Interpreting *Everything is Not as it Seems* along these lines could have lead naturally to a reading of *A Thousand Tiny Deaths* as reflective of the probabilistic character of the subatomic world. Like the individual atoms of a radioactive isotope, the precariously hanging vessels were doomed to disintegrate at an ultimately measurable rate, but the observer could not have predicted with certainty which of the vessels would be the next to fall.

By inviting such free interpretations, *Ceramic In(ter)ventions* recalled both the intent and effect of the installation decades ago, well before the format's depletion as a metaphor and its contraction into a mere emblem of contemporaneity – or worse yet, a device for conveying the antiseptic versions of radicalism so often perpetuated by academies today. The installation was once a heuristic device in the struggle for a new epistemology of art. Privileging context over essence as part of a general critique of representation, the installation format did more than rupture the once seemingly autonomous work of art and disperse its interior across a complex weave of relationships. It performed an equally traumatic operation on the mind of the perceiver. The installation format disrupted illusions of the certainty of interpretation that were once a natural consequence of belief in the artist-to-work-to-viewer chain of communication. Jeanne Quinn's *Ceramic In(ter)ventions*



effectively revived that disruptive capacity and, as a consequence, imparted to the installation a freshness, vitality and challenging elusiveness that it no longer commonly manifests in the field of ceramics or the art context at large.

Glen R Brown is a Professor of Art History at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, US. All photos by Bruce Mathews.