

SHADOW

by Kay Whitney



Installation view of *Shadow* at Gerald Peters Gallery. Works shown, from left to right: Del Harrow (on pedestals), Cary Esser (on the wall), and Ben Jackel (on pedestals and suspended from the ceiling).

For many potters and ceramic sculptors, porcelain is considered the pinnacle of ceramic representation. White-bodied clays offer a vacancy, an emptiness to be brought to life with colors or clear glaze. This white material is seen as a blank slate, devoid of connotations. But whiteness is more than the absence of all color, it's weighted down with cultural associations. It's considered the antithesis of black and inevitably bears unconscious racist and colonialist connotations. Dark clays tend to be the exception rather than the rule, although black can't escape its entrapment in the reverse side of a binary. The five artists in "Shadow," an exhibition at Gerald Peters Gallery (<https://gpgallery.com>) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, use black's spectrum of meanings in their work to expand it past the abstract boundaries. Their works express a personal shadow as well as a societal one.

There is No Light Without Shadow

Any artist working on the dark side of things is dealing in metaphor. The color black has its own language in art, representing

the mysterious, the immaterial, and the spiritual. It speaks of a long political, religious, and social history. The diverse objects in this exhibition are not about rays of light meeting an object and casting shadows, they are not something shaded, they are of an independent category, more singular and complex. Black, after all, is a combination of all colors, not the absence of them. There can be no light without shadow—only against the dark of the night sky are stars visible. A shadow is something cut off from light, possibly ambiguous. In a more interesting territory it's a phantom, a follower or constant companion, a shelter, an obscurity, a trace. Because it's part of a binary, it also represents alternative possibilities. It is in this last sense that the five artists in the exhibition *Shadow* situate their work.

It's no oversight that Mark Del Vecchio, the exhibition's curator, has entitled it *Shadow*—it's both as singular noun and a phenomenon that concerns him. His choice of these five artists encompasses Jung's notion of the shadow as the seat of the creative

unconscious. Del Vecchio has placed disparate dark objects next to each other and without didactic prodding asks the viewer to decide the relationship between them.

Cary Esser's work in *Shadow* was inspired by visiting the ancient caves of Cappadocia, Turkey, and by seeing historic examples of the Native American *parfleche*. Continually in use since pre-contact times, a *parfleche* is a Native American envelope or parcel made from rawhide and traditionally used to hold tools or food. It's the folds of the hide that interested Esser, "I think of these pieces as bodies, especially in the relationship between their interiors and exteriors." She has been working on this *Parfleche* series since 2014. Esser fabricates her *Parfleches* by casting hollow tiles in plaster molds and deliberately seeking imperfections such as ragged edges and air holes. These earthenware envelopes with their black glazes and shadowy interiors are primal and ceremonial in appearance, speaking of use, decay, history, and the passage of time.

Historical and Industrial Inspiration

Because of both artists' interests in historical objects, Esser's work is in dialog with Ben Jackel's. For the past ten years, Jackel has

been working in hyper-realist style on a series of objects based on medieval armor, drones, and various other instruments of conflict. He says, "The objects I choose must have a darkness to them, they must be linked to the battle for human survival . . . reminding us to cherish this life." Jackel is attracted to objects that are both beautiful and strange, particularly since they are isolated from their original contexts. Along with battleships, mechanical devices, and stealth bombers, armaments from different eras provide the basis for his obsessively worked and finished replicas. These objects, so closely associated with death and subjugation, are made beautiful by their satiny beeswax finishes and their densely detailed surfaces. His WW1-vintage *Gas Mask* references 18th-century portraiture busts while also encompassing images of more recent events, more recent fears. It seems animated by an unreadable expression somewhere between cartoonish humor and terror.

With their frank beauty and gleaming finishes, Jami Porter Lara and Del Harrow's works forge an odd partnership. Existing at opposite conceptual poles, both make black objects characterized by flawless handling. They share a conceptual area in terms of how their sculptures evoke iconic objects—hers referencing Native American vessels and his Modernist machine objects.



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1 Cary Esser's *Parfleche*, 16¼ in. (41 cm) in height, earthenware, glaze, 2017. 2 Cary Esser's *Parfleche*, 16¼ in. (41 cm) in height, earthenware, glaze, 2018.



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3 Ben Jackel's *Bat*, 3 ft. 11 ½ in. (1.2 m) in length, mahogany, graphite, 2018. 4 Ben Jackel's *Hoplomachus*, 25 in. (64 cm) in height, stoneware, beeswax, 2018.



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Both create surfaces that replicate hard, gleaming industrial materials such as glass or plastic. Porter Lara's work is created using pit firing and stone polishing—ancient ceramics techniques indigenous to the Chihuahuan desert. The forms she uses are inspired by plastic bottles—specifically those discarded by immigrants crossing the high desert. These mass-produced items have been transformed by another influence, the historic pottery of Mata Ortiz. Porter Lara harvests her clay in New Mexico and coil builds her vessels. She uses a press mold to duplicate the bottoms of the plastic bottles, carving the spouts with a needle tool. Covered with a micaceous slip, these are fired in her backyard pit using reduction firing, thus producing an intensely black surface. The letters and numbers of her titles identify where she sourced the clay and when she fired each piece.

Harrow's elegant artwork mates the processes of ceramic sculpture to those of industrial design. His work expands the perimeters of fabrication techniques by questioning the dichotomy between hand and machine production. His work may be coil built or fabricated with digital modeling software and milling machines that create plaster molds for slip casting. The objects are meant to be the visual expression of abstract concepts or the ideas of artists or philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Georg Simmel; his titles often bear the names of those who have influenced him. About his work, Harrow has said; "Through this group of ceramic sculptures I'm also working toward asking questions like . . . How can an object contain a thought . . . and then a mind?"

Like Esser, Harrow and, to some extent, Porter Lara, Mathew McConnell uses plaster slip-casting molds as part of his fabrication process. He has been making black-surfaced sculpture for many years. His work is characterized by imagery drawn from online photographs of contemporary art. He fabricates detailed



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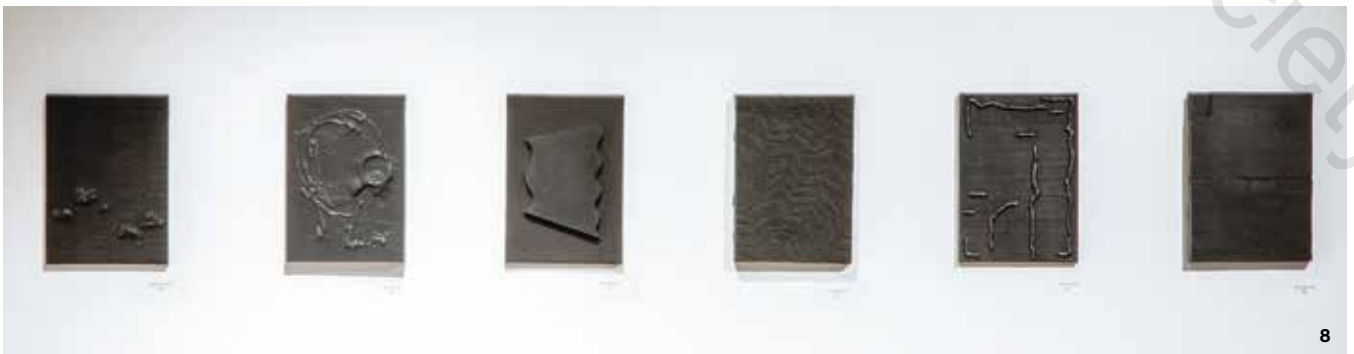
5 Del Harrow's *Simmel*, 17 in. (43 cm) in diameter, stoneware, 2019. 6 Del Harrow's *Black Mapplethorpe*, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, stoneware, 2019. 7 Mathew McConnell's #27, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, earthenware, bone charcoal, graphite, 2018. 8 Mathew McConnell's wall pieces, earthenware, bone charcoal, graphite. 9 Installation view of Jami Porter Lara's pit-fired foraged clay vessels. 10 Jami Porter Lara's *LDS-MHB-EEMR-1219CE-02*, pit-fired foraged clay, 2019.



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models of these images from various materials and uses them to create plaster molds. The results are precise facsimiles made of earthenware with intensely black surfaces created from a combination of burnished charcoal and graphite, materials more closely associated with drawing. By migrating his work to the wall, McConnell has made a hybrid of drawing and sculpture. This series of wall pieces provides two different experiences; from a distance they are light-absorbing rectangles, close up they reward the viewer with intimate objects that are inventive, playful, and conceptually dense.

Cary Esser is a professor and the Kathleen Collins Chair in Ceramics at the Kansas City Art Institute in Kansas City, Missouri. Del Harrow is an associate professor at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado. Mathew McConnell is the director of the MFA studio art program and an associate professor at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Ben Jackel is a lecturer at California State University. He is also the curator/gallery director at Alfa Romeo Tango gallery, Battleship Iowa Museum, in San Pedro, California. Jami Porter Lara is an artist based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. In 2017, Artsy named Porter Lara one of the artists shaping the future of ceramics.

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