



Visual Culture & Gender • Vol. 10 • 2015

an annual peer-reviewed international multimedia journal

Karen Keifer-Boyd & Deborah Smith-Shank, editors • published by Hyphen-UnPress

**THE FEMALE BODY AND IDENTITY:
FOUR ARTISTS FROM BODY & SOUL: NEW INTERNATIONAL
CERAMICS MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN**

ANTHONY MERINO

Abstract

In her influential book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir presented a radical notion that “one is not born a woman but becomes one” (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 283). In this essay, I explore how four artists—Klara Kristalova, Jessica Harrison, Chris Antemann, and Tip Toland—visually present in their ceramic work different nuances of Beauvoir’s thesis on the social construction of women’s identity. From an analysis of the four artists’ work in the 2013-2014 exhibition, *Body & Soul: New International Ceramics*, held at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York, I tease out contemporary views on body and identity in selected ceramic work by four artists.

Keywords: *body, identity, Simone de Beauvoir, feminist art, ceramics*

The Female Body and Identity

The term “female” is pejorative not because it roots woman in nature but because it confines her in her sex. (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 40)

Physicists define fluid as a condition of matter, which conforms to the shape of its container. Using this definition, identity can be defined as semi-fluid. Many factors—both innate and learned contribute to a person’s identity. Human identity is neither fully dependent nor independent of the human body. There are thousands of genetic quirks—including gender assignment, breast and penis size, skin color, hair type, body shape and facial hair—that determine how the world defines people. Human identity is never completely liberated from the shape, size, and color of the body. Appearance also plays an important role in how people define themselves.

The body is both a physical entity and a political construction that defines the identity of the person whom it contains. This dynamic served as a primary context of Simone de Beauvoir’s groundbreaking text *The Second Sex*. Judith Butler, in writing about de Beauvoir’s work on identity and the body, states:

When Beauvoir claims that woman is a “historical situation,” she emphasizes that the body suffers a certain cultural construction, not only through conventions that sanction and proscribe how one acts one’s body, the “act” or performance that one’s body is, but also in the tacit conventions that structure the way the body is culturally perceived. Indeed, if gender is the cultural significance that the sexed body assumes, and if that significance is codeterminal through various acts and their cultural perception, then it would appear that from within the terms of culture it is not possible to know sex as distinct from gender. (Butler, 1988, p. 519)

Butler adds that society imposes pre-scripted roles on the gendered person. The person begins to assume that assigned role. In doing so, the line between innate and enforced identity becomes blurred (Butler, 1988, p. 520).

Gender becomes an important factor not only in defining people through their bodies, but also in assigning certain roles to them. These dynamics are central to the narratives that Czech-born, Swedish artist Klara Kristalova constructs. *Growing*, 2011, depicts a young woman whose body morphs into a tree. The befuddled face looks out, perplexed by the changes to her body. Kristalova is one of four artists included in *Body & Soul: New International Ceramics*, an exhibition held September 24, 2013 through March 2, 2014 at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. Her work addresses the complexity of asserting identity independent of society. Kristalova, Jessica Harrison, Chris Antemann and Tip Toland take different positions on how social expectations inform identity.

Art in America critic Aimee Walleston described Kristalova’s work as “[c]rudely painted and roughly shaped” (Walleston, 2014, p. 28). This style links and mimics the aesthetic of unskilled and outsider art. The artist palms and pinches clay into

loosely formed mounds that read as shorthand. Her style evokes a modernist tradition of determined primitivism. Rooted in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ideal of the noble savage, this type of construction allows the viewer to be less restrained by manners and conventions while at the same time creating an aura of honesty (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2015). In creating roughly formed clunky pieces of ceramic, Kristalova engages a movement that romanticizes objects that reflect influences of naïveté. The artist effectively leverages the myth of innocence.

All of Kristalova’s works deal with identity as a public construct. This is most gruesomely manifested in *Hollow*, 2009 (Figure 1), a three-quarters sculptural portrait of a young woman from her head to her knees. Kristalova replaces the face with a concave indentation, while the figure stands in a still pose with her hands to her sides. Dressed in a heavy black coat, the features exposed are the base of her neck and parts of her palms and fingers. The depiction of a figure with no face and the body cloaked obliterates identity. Every element of the subject that would differentiate it from any other figure is all but obscured. Even the figure’s gender is only suggested by its tapered body and shoulder-length hair. The lack of identity markers and individuality may unsettle viewers. The body is more than just a container of our identity. It is the greater part of identity.



Figure 1. *Hollow*, 2009, Klara Kristalova. Glazed stoneware. Courtesy of the Speyer Family Collection, New York.

In an interview with *The Huffington Post* (2014), Kristalova stated, “Amongst the other themes I have been doing, my current work is about the different changes and development in people’s lives during adolescence” (para. 3). In *Sally*, 2011 (Figure 2), the artist depicts a small figure seemingly being deposited into a larger body. In this work the artist captures the sense of alienation of adolescents. In talking about her own formative years, Kristalova said the transition from girl to young woman was forced and uncomfortable. In an interview she states,

I used to read a lot and finally began to find a harmonious existence. I remember myself then as feeling strong and independent, with a confident sense of self, and a lively inner life. This lasted for some years, but then slowly I was obliged to get used to some new friends, who were mainly interested in pleasing boys. That’s when I started to adjust and forced myself to be a girlish girl, which didn’t suit me at all. I was never content in that role. When I look back on it, I don’t understand why I let myself go that way. That is what keeps interesting me. (Kristalova, 2009, video)

Kristalova illustrates this experience through *Sally*. The piece is rendered as two separate figures—the girl nesting in the shell of a slightly larger figure like a matryoshka doll.

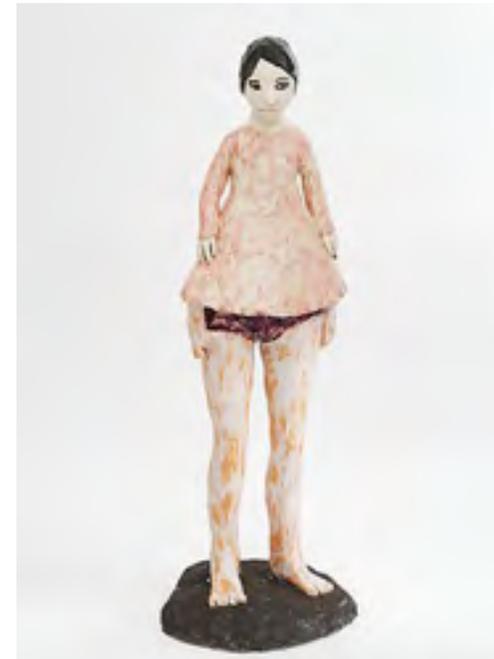


Figure 2. *Sally* 2011, Klara Kristalova. Glazed stoneware. Courtesy of Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York.

In this work the body becomes almost a container separate from the personality that embodies it. The idea of maturing sexuality alienating a person from their body echoes in many literary forms. During a 2009 interview, Kristalova listed many of her cultural influences and she mentioned the more secular work of Hans Christian Andersen, “if it was not too religious” (Kristalova, 2009). The clumsy fit of the adolescent woman into her body, is one of the central themes of Andersen’s most famous work *The Little Mermaid*. The story is of a mermaid who is told the only way to achieve immortality is through the seduction of a human male. In order to be able to obtain this, however—the heroine must have two things done to her. First, her body has to be mutated. Her fishtail will be split and turned into a pair of human legs. Second, her voice will be taken from her. In this Andersen creates a frightening metaphor about female sexuality. It is the transition from subject to object. Extending the metaphor of the body as the container of identity—sexual maturity is the point where the container is closed. The female body becomes her identity.

This observation parallels the evolution of a girl’s view of her body. Kristina Arp states that Beauvoir’s concept of bodily alienation is her most valuable contribution to discourse on how society informs how women view their body. Arp states: “[T]he young girl comes to look upon her body as something alien to herself as the result of social conditioning” (Arp, 1995, p. 162). One of the issues that Arp has with Beauvoir is that she sees women as more inert rather than involved with their alienation. She states of Beauvoir:

Beauvoir’s depiction of the female body as passive and inert in its biological role gives credence to those critics who charge that Beauvoir has associated female characteristics with immanence. The problem is that this identification leaves the implication that women have to somehow rise above their bodies to achieve transcendence and thus fulfillment as a truly human existence. (Arp, 1995, p. 162)

Arp’s criticism casts Beauvoir as proposing the premise of the little mermaid. At the center of the tale is the idea that unlike humans, merfolk have no soul. The only way to gain a soul is to transcend their biological condition; in this case being creatures of the sea. Some of Kristalova’s works illustrate what Arp sees as a primary flaw in Beauvoir’s description of females becoming alienated from their body.

Arp’s criticism of Beauvoir’s stress of women needing to transcend the condition of their bodies certainly resonates in Anderson’s story. In describing the effects of the *Little Mermaid’s* transition, Andersen details how the change from merfolk to human caused excruciating pain but was also a source of her feminine charm. He stated:

Every footstep felt as if she were walking on the blades and points of sharp knives, just as the witch had foretold, but she gladly endured it. She moved as lightly as a bubble as she walked beside the Prince. He and all who saw her marveled at the grace of her gliding walk. (Andersen, 1836, p. x).

This effectively extends the main characters from physical to social containment. It is not enough to be painfully objectified, the female must now adhere to rules of deportment and etiquette.

English artist Jessica Harrison uses a far different style than Kristalova, yet her works are just as visceral. Harrison alters porcelain figurines to comment on both the unrealistic and antiquated nature of ideals of femininity. Each figurine asserts feminine beauty, which is more than a genetic accident of conforming to certain proportions and having exact symmetry. The sub-context of the figurines pertains to the importance of deportment. It is not enough just to be beautiful. Full feminine beauty requires one to act in a way perceived to be beautiful. In doing so Harrison extends the idea of a body as not just a container but contained.

Containment on its most essential level is a method of confining an entity. On its most essential level, society is a matrix of rules governing all of the entities that comprise it. Generally, a lot of these rules are intended to apply equally to everyone. There is an entire subtext of rules that are gender specific. Harrison uses both gore and absurdity to illustrate these rules at play.

This involves a paradox of both referring to and obscuring sexual markers. Harrison selects figures where there is a play between accentuating and obscuring sexuality. The subjects are pinched tightly into dresses at the waist that bell out into huge plumes of fabric, indicating the anatomical presence of wider hips without showing them. Harrison also incorporates gory elements into these pieces. For example, in *Ethel*, 2013 (Figure 3), Harrison shows a woman stepping forward, pulling her intestines out of her abdomen with her right hand while her left carries the innards.



Figure 3. *Ethel*, 2013, Jessica Harrison. Found ceramic, epoxy resin putty, enamel paint. Courtesy of the artist.

Harrison's figurines create irony. On a surface level, Harrison uses the kitsch association of the figurines as a foil for the gruesome images. The driving dynamic of Harrison's work is that the manners and mores constructed around the display of the female human body—act as a metaphoric container that conceals identity. In making these forces opaque, Harrison reveals how women are contained. The core narrative opposition in Harrison's work is between kitsch and gore. These two aesthetics are oppositions because the former conceals while the latter reveals. Kitsch takes an animal or person and slathers so much sentimentality on top of it that any naturalism is lost. Gore takes an animal or person and strips away its outer façade. This reveals the inner biological mechanics of the living.

The gory elements of Harrison's work, including the articulating ridges on the brain in *Amy Jane*, 2010, and the fully articulated aorta in *Eleanor*, 2014 (Figure 5), exude precision. This anatomical correctness serves to magnify the kitsch element of the work. Harrison reminds us just how distant most representations of the body are from the reality of the body.



Figure 4. *Eleanor*, 2014, Jessica Harrison. Found ceramic, epoxy resin putty, enamel paint. Courtesy of the artist.

The other striking element of Harrison's work is the blood. Sometimes the blood is used in a humorous fashion. In *Ruby*, 2010, it pools under the wound of a decapitated head. The figure has her hand up in the air as if flustered by the inconvenience of her head being separated from her body. Having the blood pooling on the floor beneath the head does two things. First, it gives a visceral context to the work. Also, blood operates as a linking mechanism between the head and the body. Visually, Harrison uses this absurd juxtaposition to illustrate how gender roles are divorced from human nature.



Figure 5 *Andrea*, 2013, Jessica Harrison. Found ceramic, epoxy resin putty, enamel paint. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. *Georgina*, 2010, Jessica Harrison. Found ceramic, epoxy resin putty, enamel paint. Courtesy of the artist.

In many works, Harrison depicts decapitated women; including *Andrea*, (2013) figure 5 in which a woman is posed holding her severed head up to an invisible party as an offering; *Georgina* (2010) figure 6, the artist depicts a seated woman with a severed head sitting upside down in her lap, and *Alexa* (2014) figure 7, in which the subject offers up her head in her upturned palm to the viewer. The last piece is particularly funny as the subject's vacuous smirk is clear. This disconnect between the horrific nature of the body, and the bemused facial expression generates humor. More than being just funny, a warped irony informs this work. Famed psychologist Sigmund Freud identifies decapitation as being symbolic of castration. In his essay, *Medusa's Head*, he writes:

To decapitate = Castration. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion of this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother. (Freud, 2003, p. 33)

So in these few works, Harrison layers on a level of investigation of female/male sexuality and Freud's equating of male castration to female sexuality.



Figure 7. *Alexa*, 2014, Jessica Harrison. Found ceramic, epoxy resin putty, enamel paint. Courtesy of the artist.

According to French philosopher Hélène Cixous, only through the extreme act of decapitation can women experience being castrated. Of being castrated, Cixous states women are:

Outside language, the place of the law, excluded from any relationship with culture and cultural order. And she is outside the symbolic because she lacks any relation to the phallus, because she does not enjoy what orders masculinity—the castration complex. (Cixous quoted in Donovan, 2012, p. 111)

Through all of her work—the sentiment/gore dichotomy mirrors sexuality as defined by Freud. The female organs are objects of both attraction and repulsion for men. As sexual objects they attract men. As representations of the castrated men, they repulse men.

In this and other pieces, blood adds to the gruesome quality of the work. In *Mari*, 2010, a ceramic woman with her neck slashed, Harrison stains the edge of her fan with a bead of red designed to mimic blood. The presence of blood serves two ends. First, not only does it magnify the shock value, but it also references the menstrual cycle. This creates an ironic counter-text to the sexual innuendo of the work. Harrison's strength comes through using an antiquated but historically cherished craft to comment on contemporary society. Her work asserts that many of the gendered expressions we celebrate are just as mannered and antiseptic as any Victorian doll. Harrison provides a measure to illustrate how far cultural norms are from physical realities.



Figure 8, *Feast of Impropriety*, 2011, Chris Antemann in collaboration with Kendrick Moholt, archival paper, ink. Courtesy of the artists.

In contrast to Harrison, Chris Antemann's work skirts the line between critical and celebratory. Included in the exhibition was a photograph of her slip cast porcelain work, *Feast of Impropropriety*, 2011, (Figure 8). In this piece, Antemann depicts a menagerie of figures engaged in unabashed pursuit of carnal and gastronomic pleasure. Like Harrison, Antemann leverages the kitsch elements of the form she works in to add to its narrative. The bodies become like the frivolous decorations that litter the work. They have the content of fancy cake icing; light, pretty and completely irrelevant. It is sexual excess as imaged almost devoid of consequences. *Feast of Impropropriety*, 2011 invokes a sense of chaos. The figures dangle precariously, and the food is randomly scattered on the table.

Reading Antemann's work, one assumes that the lifestyle she depicts is unsustainable. The frivolousness of the work undermines this subtext, but it serves another purpose. The light salaciousness of the artist's work is the packaging she uses to convey a subversive message. Just like the fable of the wolf in sheep's clothing, Antemann contains her subversive content in seemingly innocuous sexuality.



Figure 9, *Feast of Impropropriety*, DETAIL 2011 Chris Antemann in collaboration with Kendrick Moholt, archival paper, ink. Courtesy of the artists.

Antemann cleverly reverses one of the most dominant tropes in Western art—men are clothed, and women are nude—referencing one of the most iconic examples, *Manet's Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe (The Luncheon on the Grass)*, 1862-63, where two fully clothed men share a lunch with a naked woman. This work also invokes the Guerrilla Girls who have conducted a “weenie count” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art since 1988 in which they document two things: the percentage breakdown between male and female artists represented in the collection and the percentage of nudes depicted by gender. In 2012, less than five percent of the artists but 85 percent of the nudes included in the exhibition were female (Guerrilla Girls, 2015).

This poke at the norms of art, where women are routinely depicted nude and men get to keep their clothes on, almost gets lost in the typhoon of decadence. By making the work so seemingly superficial by depicting young beautiful people engaged in a fantasy of consequence-free lust, the obvious subversive element becomes almost covert.

Harrison and Antemann share several characteristics. Most immediately, they both create their images by altering porcelain figurines using kitsch as a subtext of meaning. Figurines depict women less than they depict simulacra of women. Both artists exploit the hyper-idealized quality of the figurines to make a political point. The transparencies of the objectification in these forms lend themselves to parody. Figurines embody historic Western ideals of female beauty and deportment. This dynamic creates a bridge to Beauvoir's assertion that one isn't born, but becomes female. They express some of the more superficial social roles cast on women. This is an important first step. If one can accept that there are silly and arbitrary gender-based conditions, then one is more likely to be open to understanding more subtle and serious societal restraints placed on gender.

While using cultural forms that are opaquely artificial, Harrison and Antemann can explore more sober social issues. Their work does not excite much empathy from the viewer, which is the downside. This quality is really evident when compared to *Body and Soul's*, most naturalistic American artist, Tip Toland. Most of the artist's works are done at full scale and are highly detailed. Through this trompe l'oeil style, Toland provokes a great deal of empathy for the subject of her works. In talking about this refined naturalism, Museum of Arts and Design curator of ceramics, Peter Held states that the outward appearance of the work has internal resonance. In the exhibition catalog he states:

American Artist Tip Toland's unsparingly realistic figures conjure up the depths of human emotion, seducing the viewer with her mastery of lifelike detail. Her aim is to give voice to the psychological and spiritual realms of being. (Held, 2014, p. 13)

This comment also extends the effects of how the body as a container defines the contained. Almost as important as how our body defines us to ourselves is how it defines us to others. Held asserts that psychological insight can be rendered through surface details.

This tension between how we personally identify ourselves and how we are identified by society resonates in *Toland's Grace Flirts* (Figure 10) a full-scale sculpture of an early pubescent woman wearing a pair of toy wax lips. This creates a sensation of exaggerated sexuality. This single detail looks both absurd and tragic in contrast with the exacting physical and psychological realism Toland infuses into the rest of the work. Toland captures a dynamic of maturing as a woman. Beauvoir commented on this in *The Second Sex*, stating:

The young girl feels that her body is getting away from her... on the street men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy. She would like to be invisible; it frightens her to become flesh and to show flesh. (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 333)

The wax lips appear playful, but they are echoes of an adult practice—using lipstick and/or plastic surgery to enhance sexuality. Culture tells women that natural beauty is not enough for attractiveness. In the process of becoming female, a woman places her value in how she is judged by the other gender. Beauvoir writes, “In fact, she will gain value in the eyes of males not by increasing her human worth but by modeling herself on their dreams.” (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 402). Toland’s obsessive accuracy and ability to render gesture makes the work truly extraordinary. First, the subject of *Grace Flirts* stands like a post, with both sides of her body in an almost perfectly straight line from its feet to its shoulders, generating a psychological narrative of being compressed.



Figure 10. *Grace Flirts*, 2008, Tip Toland. Stoneware, paint, pastel, hair, wax lips. Courtesy of Barry Friedman Ltd., New York. Photo courtesy of Andrew Bovasso.

Even the narrative of *Grace Flirts* reflects what Beauvoir identified as a limitation placed on girls at puberty. Male children are encouraged to take up sports, many of which involve violence and defeat of another. While this distinction has changed a little, Beauvoir identifies women’s sports as not being based on a quantitative expression of power—pinning, outrunning, knocking out or out hitting an opponent—but on sports based on “specialization, submission to artificial rules” (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 397). Toland depicts this phenomenon. Her subject stands at the end of a diving board, competing in a sport that exemplifies winning in conformity with the expectations of a judging panel.



Figure 11. *Grace Flirts*, 2008 DETAIL, Tip Toland. Stoneware, paint, pastel, hair, wax lips. Courtesy of Barry Friedman Ltd., New York. Photo courtesy of Andrew Bovasso.

Toland hints at a psychological narrative as well. The figure grasps itself around the bottom of its ribs, suggesting a kind of protection mode, and the figure’s head is slightly tilted. The figure looks up and out to the side of its eyes as if it is looking for the audience’s approval. The end result is a crushingly poignant image of a woman just about to become sexually attractive. The figure painfully tries to conform to the expectations it fears. Toland captures a sense of inevitability and a limit on power that reflects what Arp sees as a characteristic of Beauvoir’s work, observing that “a woman never has the choice to break free from her socialization altogether” (Arp, 1995, p. 173).

The use of the surreal links the works of Kristalova, Harrison, Antemann and Toland. All four artists employ surrealism to carve out an abstract intellectual space for the viewer to engage their work. The body is the container in which our identities exist, but it is far more than just a physical container—it is a political container. The latter is far less obvious but may be far more important to understand. For the most part, the physical characteristics of our bodies are the quirks of genetics determined by random bends in protein. Our bodies exist in a socio-political realm where there are far more subtle and limiting forces placed on them. Like Beauvoir, Kristalova, Harrison, Antemann and Toland all render these ethereal forces tangible.

References

- Andersen, Hans Christian (2013). *Den lille havfrue* [The Little Mermaid]. (J. Hersholt., Trans.). Odense, Denmark: The Hans Christian Anderson Center.
- Arp, Kristina. (1995). Beauvoir's concept of bodily alienation." *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Margaret A. Simons. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. (2011) *The second sex* (First Vintage Books Edition). New York, NY: Vintage Books. (Original work published 1952)
- Butler, Judith. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitutions: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519-531.
- Cixous, Hélène. (1981). Castration of decapitation. *Signs*, 7(1), 41-55.
- Donovan, Josephine. (2012). *Feminist theory*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Freud, Sigmund. (2003). *Medusa's Head* from the Infantile Genital Organization. In M. Garber & N. Vickers (Eds.). *The Medusa Reader* (J. Starchey, Trans.) (pp. 84-87). New York, NY: Routledge.
- The Guerrilla Girls (2015) Retrieved from <http://www.guerrillagirls.com/posters/nakedthroughtheages.shtml>
- Held, Peter. (2013). *Body & Soul: New International Ceramics*. New York, NY: Museum of Arts and Design.
- Kristalova, Klara. (2009, July). *Art world* (Sue Hubbard, Interviewer). Retrieved from http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/klara-kristalova/press/736/artist_video
- Museum of Arts and Design. (2014). *Body and soul: New international ceramics*. Retrieved from <http://www.madmuseum.org/exhibition/body-soul>
- The Huffington Post (2014, March 4). *Eerie feminine sculptures capture the dark side of childhood*. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/04/klara-kristalova_n_4870308.html
- The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. (2015): Retrieved from <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/movements/195232>
- Walleston, Aimee. (2014, June 24). Klara Kristalova: New York, at Lehmann Maupin and Perrotin. *Art in America*, 24, 28-29. Retrieved from <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/klara-kristalova>

About the Author

Anthony Merino is a curator and critic working from Adams, Massachusetts. Mr. Merino's first review was published in the January 1993 issue of the *New Art Examiner*. Since 1993, he has had more than 100 reviews published and given lectures on contemporary arts internationally. He is a frequent contributor to *Popmatters*, *Arts-Fuse*, *Arts & Opinion* and *Ceramics: Art and Perception*. Links to most of his online work are available at <https://independent.academia.edu/TonyMerino/Papers>. He can be reached at tdubis65@hotmail.com.

He is working currently working on a project *50 Women: A Celebration of Women's Contribution to Ceramics*, an exhibition opening at the American Jazz Museum in Kansas City, opening March 15th, 2016.