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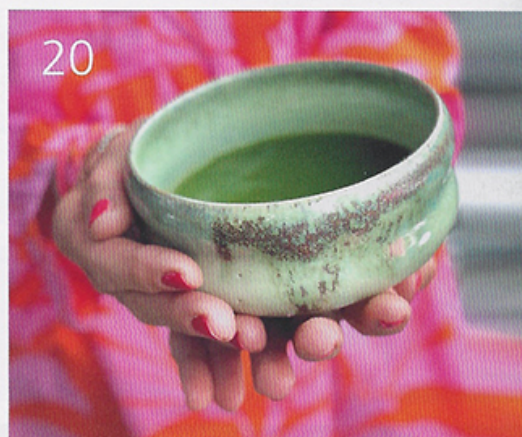
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NAN SMITH: Thirsty Nests

GLEN R. BROWN



Two white candles, their charred wicks like sightless eyes, overlook the radial symmetry of an undulating, glassy blue disk: a surface of water agitated into concentric ripples by the dipping beak of a black-and-white bird. The tonal dichotomy of the creature's plumage underscores an imperative. The bird drinks to maintain the hydration necessary to life; it drinks or it dies. Likewise in the black and white of an either/or, an empty bowl, empty cups, and a tipped pitcher spilling out its own disk of rippling blue serve as reminders that birds are not the only animals vitally dependent on water. Do the extinguished candles lament a lapsed vigilance? Are they half-melted accoutrements of a wake? As climate change increasingly elevates water, through extremes of scarcity and excess, to the status of destroyer of worlds, even subtle messages like those carried by the *Thirsty Nest* still lifes of American ceramist Nan Smith press with crystalline clarity the message that opportunity is not infinite. The time to act is short as a candle length and consequential as a dying flame.

The content of Smith's sculptures plays freely with the poignancy of fleeting moments, but complicit in the effect is the factor of a loaded genre. In Western art, the history of the still life is laced with pathos, a consequence of frequently staged allegories in which ephemerality plays a principal rhetorical role. Symbolism is not inevitable in the still life, however. Artists like Cézanne and Picasso, for example, found melancholy messages, in fact, symbolism of any sort, easy enough to shake from their still lifes, leaving them effective vehicles for investigating conceptual structuring of perception. The still life stands against a varied historical backdrop that, beyond the simple denotation of objects, emphasizes a range of possibility from the tendentiously symbolic to the perceptually analytic.

This potential for diverse meaning plucks Smith's work back from the brink of transparent messaging, despite its flirtation with content that could serve as simply educational. The imperative of water management provides the unifying

Water: CodeBlue - Thirsty Nest #3, (Detail) 2023, glazed porcelain, gold lustre, wood, metal, h 40.64 x w 85.73 x d 58.42 cm

photo - Allen Cheuvront

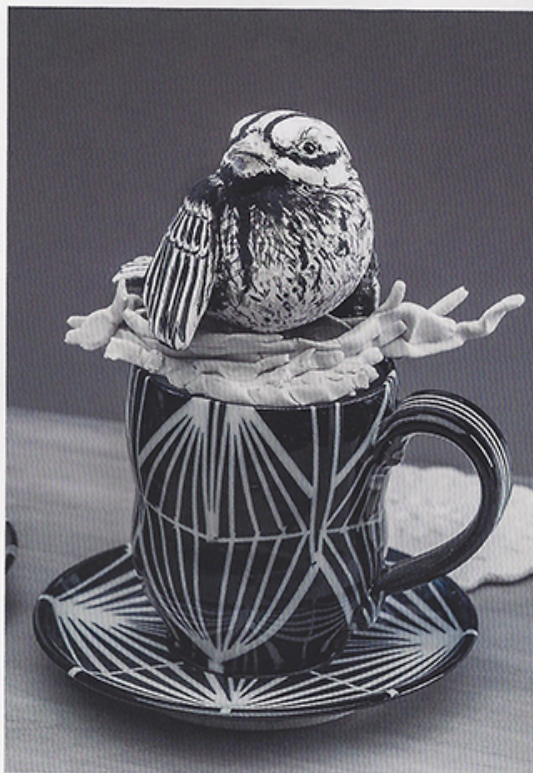


Water: CodeBlue - Thirsty Nest #1, 2023, glazed porcelain, gold lustre, wood, metal, h 33.02 x w 59.06 x d 38.1 cm photo - Allen Cheuvront

theme for her *Water: Code Blue* project, which runs from a 2020 installation through each of the seven still lifes of the *Thirsty Nest* series then overflows those to fill another installation completed in 2024. The still lifes, independent enough to explore complexity, add to the primary narrative implicit propositions about the conceptual status of objects in the world and in art. Their multivalence is largely automatic, conditioned by the varied nature of their components. Some are non-representational functional objects (cups, mugs, bowls, platters), some non-functional representations of functional objects (doilies, candles, bird nests), and some representations of objects for which designations like functional or non-functional are irrelevant (birds, apples, and fish). These different kinds of objects serve as nodes for interpretive channels through which the still lifes can be navigated.

Modes of representation in still-life painting can vary from high abstraction that primarily emphasizes the expressive qualities of formal elements like color, as in a Jawlensky still life, to detailed extremes of naturalism in trompe l'oeil compositions like those of William Harnett. That the same range is possible in ceramic sculpture is evidenced by the still lifes of Betty Woodman on one end of the scale and those of Richard Shaw on the other. But still lifes in sculpture, especially ceramic sculpture, can easily invoke a denotative ambiguity that is not possible to achieve in painting - at least not without wandering into the realm of collage or relief assemblage. Smith's still lifes emphasize this ambiguity by including alongside representations of organic objects like apples and birds and non-functional representations of functional objects like candles fully functional vessels that in effect represent themselves: a pitcher, for example, that could contain actual water but spills an exclusively representational water onto a real wooden surface. By simultaneously stressing these three kinds of representation, Smith's still lifes invite contemplation of the relationship between perception

Water: CodeBlue - Thirsty Nest #1 (detail)
photo - Allen Cheuvront





Water: CodeBlue - Thirsty Nest #2, 2023, glazed porcelain, gold lustre, wood, metal, h 31.12 x w 76.2 x d 60.96 cm photo - Allen Cheuvront

Water: CodeBlue - Thirsty Nest #2 - (detail) photo - Allen Cheuvront



of the material world at large and representation of that world in the material forms of art. That invitation also has a role to play in the narrative function of representation in the works of the *Water: Code Blue* project.

In addition to sculptures and installations, that project includes five years of Smith's investigation of water conservation issues in Israel, Ireland, and the United States. "Everywhere that I've researched, water conservation issues have to be handled differently," she relates. "Water shortages can result from weather events but also development and industrial encroachments. My conclusion is that water conservation has to be handled locally. Education has to be targeted to the area. That got me thinking about a more personal approach to bringing the idea of water conservation to individuals."

With that objective in mind, Smith conceived of still life sculptures as implicit invitations to intimate conversation. To that end, the bases in the *Thirsty Nest* series resemble serving trays, carrying drinking vessels in anticipation of guests and consequently discourse. The vessels can be divided into two groups. The first - cast white water bottles sealed with gold-lustered caps - are semi-trompe l'oeil, semi-abstract representations that would fit in the ghostly fingers in a George Segal sculpture. The second are cups, mugs, bowls and platters suited to actual use outside of the still lifes: a possibility that for Smith connects not only to the concept of invitation to a discussion but also to dissemination of the water-conservation content of the works from art to the practical context of application in the world.

On a personal level, the functional vessels represented for Smith something of a return to roots. "I started my ceramic career as a vessel maker," she explains. "Vessels have been present in my work intermittently, but I'd never focused on sculptures or installations that were vessel-centered. In these works

I wanted to use vessels to create interest through variety. In each of them I consider the patterning: where there's a break in a form and how that relates to the placement of the pattern on it. I'm not just striping things. I'm stopping where the form stops. I'm enhancing a curve by punctuating the points where the curve begins and ends. I made a hundred cups before I started the still lifes to get the surface that I wanted and to develop a repertoire of patterns. The problem was to create sets that weren't redundant but that used similar elements."

The solution lay in combining diverse patterning with a consistent focus on the extremes of the tonal scale: the hand-thrown porcelain vessels – like the sculpted birds, fish, apples, and candles with which they share space – are decorated exclusively in black and white. While that high-contrast combination is personally appealing to Smith (a fan of Dalmatians), in the context of the *Thirsty Nest* series it suggests a clear-cut moral perspective on environmental responsibility. "My question in this work," Smith asserts, "is what kinds of obligations do we have to nature? What will happen to wildlife without water conservation? What will be available to the birds? They do their job in the ecosystem, and I'm questioning whether we will do ours."

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Water: CodeBlue - Thirsty Nest #4, 2023, glazed porcelain, Gold lustre wood, metal, h 57.15 x w 66.04 x d 40.64 cm photo - Allen Cheuvront

NAN SMITH

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NAN SMITH

American sculptor Nan Smith was born in Pennsylvania in 1952. She completed a BFA in ceramics Summa Cum Laude at The Tyler School of Art, Temple University under porcelain master Rudolph Staffel in 1974 and an MFA at the Ohio State University in 1977. Professor Emerita at the University of Florida, she taught ceramics in the nationally prominent programme between 1979 and 2019. Smith's sculptures have been exhibited at SOFA Chicago, the American Museum of Ceramic Art, the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, the Harn Museum of Art, and numerous other venues in the United States, Ireland, Israel, and Korea. She has received an NEA-funded Southern Arts Federation Fellowship in Sculpture, four State of Florida Individual Artist Fellowship Grants, and a University of Florida Research Foundation Professorship. Her work has been featured in the books *The Figure in Clay*, *World Famous Ceramic Artists Studios*, and *Florida Sculptors and their Work 1880-2020*, as well as the journals *Ceramics Monthly*, *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, *Sculpture*, *Ceramics: Ireland*, *World Sculpture News*, and *China Ceramic Artist*. In 2012 she served as juror for Lark and Sterling publishers' 500 Figures in Clay. She lives in Gainesville, Florida where she maintains her private studio.



photo - Allen Cheuvront