

THREE-IN-ONE

A conversation with Beth Katleman, Molly Hatch and Shari Mendelson

By Lillianne Milgrom

Beth Katleman, Molly Hatch and Shari Mendelson each create highly distinctive bodies of work that have catapulted them into prominence in a very competitive playing field. These three artists, though fueled by singularly unique ideas, philosophies and process, share common ground not only in their varying relationships to clay, but also in their inspired connection to the past and their commitment to a labor-intensive artistic practice.

The artists are represented by Todd Merrill Studio Contemporary in New York City. All three came to Todd Merrill's attention when he set out on a quest to discover artists that were defining design in the 21st century. He found them in the boundary-bending 'grey area' of fine art/design/craft/décor. "Katlman, Hatch, and Mendelson are of-the-moment," says Merrill. "The work they each produce manages to be totally contemporary without sacrificing evidence of the maker's hand."

Indeed, not only are these artists united in their hands-on approach to their work, but they have each redefined the artistry of bygone ages. They are stirred by the beauty, opulence and refinement present in art historical textiles, design, objets d'art and architecture and they have built upon these influences to create fresh, contemporary work.

At the start of her artistic journey, Beth Katleman was pulled in two different directions—design and fine art. Her current work is a perfect synthesis of the two. Upon closer inspection of her detailed installations, one finds clues to Katleman's nuanced views regarding art and culture. Despite her unapologetic love for royal porcelain, she is nonetheless conflicted by the despotic nature of the very regimes that supported the creation of these ornaments. Likewise, she is fascinated by the darker side of American society while at the same time admiring its "almost Pollyanna-

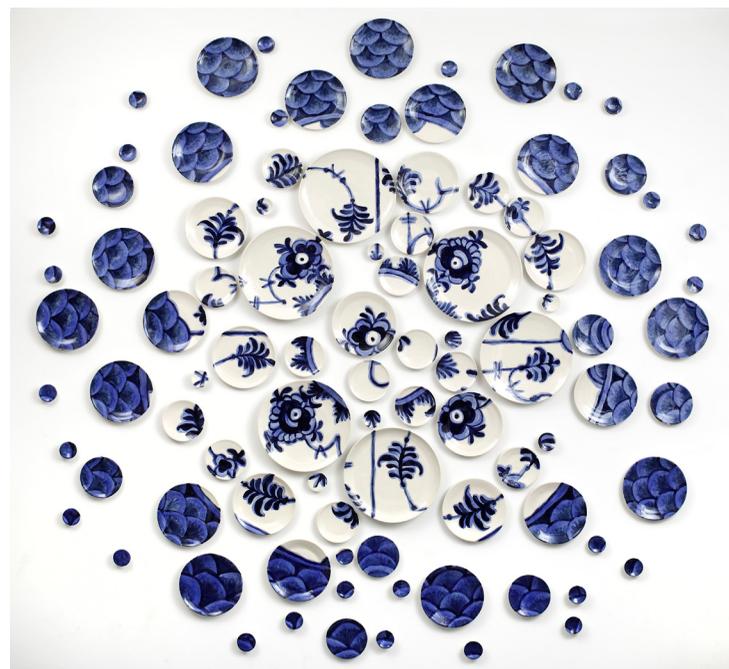
ish" optimism, progress and innovation. These dualities lend a tension to her disarming panoramas.

Molly Hatch uses the allure of decorative art history to entice the public to enter into her work and her world. Flying in the face of contemporary wisdom, Hatch embraces Beauty, insisting it is "not the Kiss of Death". Proudly calling herself an artist designer, Hatch challenges preconceived notions of the studio artist by embracing the entire spectrum of her creativity. She tests her "smaller ideas" in the commercial marketplace while creating larger one-of-a-kind ceramic installations that mine the deeper, political implications of opulence and luxury on a grand scale.

Ironically it is Shari Mendelson's work that represents the more familiar ceramic forms, even though, the artist's material of choice is recycled plastic—a material she uses to tackle the issues of rampant human consumption. Her playful, luminescent vessels remind one of the works of Beatrice Wood. Both an interest in ancient forms and her strong political views on how to deal with trash went hand-in-hand in inspiring her most recent body of work. Mendelson believes in "doing what you enjoy doing, not what is popular." All three artists have proven the validity and veracity of this approach. By demonstrating an unwavering commitment to their creative paths, these artists are role models for future and contemporary ceramicists.

Lillianne Milgrom is an international artist based in Washington DC. Her ceramic installations have been exhibited in the United States, Romania, Israel and France and her work can be found in private and public collections worldwide. She is also a writer on the arts and a contributor to *Ceramics Monthly Magazine*, *Ceramics Art and Perception*, *Art and Beyond Magazine* and *The Great Nude*.

Molly Hatch, *Deconstructed Lace: After Royal Copenhagen*, 2015, 93
Hand-thrown and hand-painted porcelain plates,
99 x 96 x 1.5 inches / 150 x 245 x 4 cm



A word with Molly Hatch

You have characterized your work as 'plate paintings'. By discarding the traditional utility and social function of plates, I am wondering what purpose they play other than serving as blank canvases for your imagery. Why ceramic plates?

MH I am not entirely discarding the utility of plates; the plate paintings are technically functional. To answer more precisely, I am interested in using the plates to give the viewer an access point into viewing my paintings that isn't possible using a traditional canvas. I grew up with a mother who is a painter and a father who was a farmer, my family placed value in the functional object, in things with use. I think I was attracted, at first, to using utilitarian forms to house my paintings and drawings because they could be valued as functional objects at the very basic level—even if the surfaces were not as approachable. There is a sort of disconnect with framed art or art on the wall. We are trained or taught how to read paintings, but without training, it is hard to know what to look for and what is meaningful in a painting. We all know what a plate is, we use them every day. This familiarity gives anyone a way to relate to the plate paintings I make. Whether they engage further with the concepts and imagery of each painting is up to the viewer. Ultimately, I want the viewer to see plates as paintings, and to think about plates in a way they may not have before.



Molly Hatch Versailles Orangerie: After Rigaud, 2014, 78 Hand-thrown and hand-painted porcelain plates, 60 x 130 x 1.5 inches / 152 x 330 x 4 cm.

Your work has one foot in the decorative arts and design, and one foot in the fine art arena. Many artists have felt the need to justify or defend this sort of duality yet you seem perfectly comfortable straddling both worlds. How do you do this?

MH Good question. I am going with my gut about what feels best for my career—if one aspect of it is no longer enjoyable or feeding my creativity, I will let it go. Much of it has to do with my work patterns and my interests. My fine art work is marketed to high-end collectors and museums, which is necessary to be able to afford to take the time it takes to make each piece by hand and paint each piece by hand. I enjoy making the plate paintings because they are long-term projects, many of which take several months to complete from throwing plates, to painting them and then firing them. The process that I go through to make each piece is at once contemplative and meditative in the painting process. This work is conceptually rewarding in the development and research of each piece.

My designs for manufacture take less time to make than the larger scale one-of-a-kind work for my gallery and are perhaps more humorous and lighter in mood in general. My designs reflect similar concepts, inspiration and source material to my one-of-a-kind objects and require much of the same research and development. I think this is a way for me to get my ideas out into the world with the help of industry. I have more ideas than I can make available to the world simply by hand. So the two are mutually exclusive—I need each aspect of my career for different reasons. I also enjoy the affordability of

the design work. The artwork is so expensive and out of most people's reach financially, I love the idea that more people have access to what I am making than just the elite and museums. I have ignored people who tell me that I can't make both careers work. It seems to be working just fine.

You have mentioned your strong connection to objects. Can you expand on the human propensity to cover and surround ourselves with objects of (subjective) beauty?

MH For me my covetousness stems from a need to learn from the object. I typically am interested in an object because I want to have more of it in my life, or I want to figure out how it was made or decorated. I love finding the repeats in patterns; I've always had. Figuring out a pattern is fascinating and rewarding.

How does surface decoration alter our emotive and subliminal response these objects?

MH For my work, the surface decoration is generally grounded in historic pattern and imagery. This reference for me is an additional access point for the viewer. I want the viewer to look at the work and feel it is familiar, yet unfamiliar at the same time. I want to encourage the viewer to take a second look, and spend more time with the work.

Your work combines both your love of painting and drawing, and ceramics. Would you describe yourself as a ceramicist first?

MH Yes, I do think of myself as a ceramicist though I

wonder if that is simply because of my training. When I am asked to describe myself, I typically call myself an artist designer.

I'm curious: Do you have an organized arrangement in mind when you begin throwing your plates or do you throw different sized plates and then design the overall installation as you start painting?

MH When I am making an organic or off-the-grid composition, I typically begin each piece with a source image and then I work the image in Photoshop to create a composition that highlights certain aspects of the source image and crops out others. I aim to retain much of the original information in the source, but manipulate it (often quite dramatically) to make it read well on the surface of the plates when viewed as a larger plate painting composition. I make the plates to the scale of the Photoshop design and hang the plates on the wall. With the help of a projector, I get the scale correct, and then I hand paint the work.

When I am making a gridded piece, I typically make the design fit a grid and manipulate the source image to make it work in a grid format. More often than not, I find it more satisfying to create a composition that is off the grid as I have more control over the composition.



Beth Katleman, *Girls at War*, 2013, Porcelain and wire, 58 x 174 x 12 inches / 147 x 442 x 30 cm.

A word with Beth Katleman

Your references and influences are drawn from a more genteel time. Although your work is very contemporary in its approach, it possesses the formal quality of a past aesthetic. What role does beauty play in your work compared to the narrative theater?

BK Beauty is very important to me. In the art world, beauty has been a code-word for femininity for a long time, and hence something to be avoided if you wish to be taken seriously. I think it has a lot to do with elitism, mistrust of the senses and privileging the intellectual over the physical.

You manage to pack a big punch using large numbers of very small, detailed and highly refined elements. Are these individual units always relegated to a role within the Big Picture or do they have a life and meaning of their own?

BK I choose trinkets that work as stand-ins for the classical or pastoral motifs you would find in a rococo paneled room or in toile wallpaper. For example, I found a reclining plastic bikini girl at a cake decorating shop. She was meant for a bachelor party cake, but I casted her in porcelain, and she became a Venus figure. Curly from the "Three Stooges" functions as a comedy tragedy mask, a souvenir pencil sharpener of Le Sacré Coeur becomes a garden folly, and so on. I am particularly drawn to dolls and souvenirs from

the 1950's, which convey a sense of American optimism.

The relatively recent sea change in the art world's embrace of contemporary ceramic art as 'legitimate' fine art seems to correlate with the move away from functional and traditional pottery towards conceptual message-based work? Your thoughts?

BK I am continually mystified by what is anointed by the art world! That said, we've had a steady diet of minimal, conceptual art for 50 years or so, and it has become something of an orthodoxy. Maybe the embrace of ceramics reflects an urge to put the "visual" back in visual arts – one can only hope...

Your work is very time and labor intensive, contrary to the mass produced pieces you collect to be used as foundational components of your installations. Are you reclaiming the artist's place in society? How do you envision the role of the artist ceramicist in the future?

BK I spend hours upon hours lovingly recreating a dime store trinket in porcelain, a material that suggests luxury and refinement. Then I take this precious throw-away and incorporate it into an opulent extravaganza that takes its visual cues from the time of Marie Antoinette. I think it has to do with my ambivalent relationship with

Beth Katleman, *Hostile Nature*, 2014,
Porcelain and wire, 96 x 70 x 5 inches / 244 x 178 x 12 cm.



Beth Katleman, *The Enchanted Hunters: Wood Nymph*, 2015,
Porcelain, wire, mirror, 63 x 36 x 6 inches / 160 x 91 x 15 cm



consumption, status, and desire. At the same time, it represents a longing for beauty and a sense of wonder. When I walk into a Buen Retiro porcelain room, such as the one in Aranjuez, I can't help but gasp.

A current of hostility and barely contained mayhem exists beneath the surface of your work. Is this in reference to the chaos that exists in the natural world, or the havoc that Man wreaks upon the Earth?

BK The narratives are deliberately ambiguous, but they have to do with domesticity and how beneath our polite veneers we all have a touch of perversity (some more than others!). Through advertising and social media, we present a very sanitized version of ourselves. Also, let's face it—I work late at night casting smiling, miniature woodland creatures in porcelain. A dark sense of humor goes with the territory...

Would you address the pragmatic challenges of working with porcelain in large-scale, complex installations?

BK I get around that by working in a modular way. I am looking for a sense of lightness and space in my work. The wall and the wire elements enable me to achieve that lightness.



A word with Shari Mendelson

Even though you do not work with clay, much of the inspiration for your recent body of work is derived from studying old glass and ceramic vessels. What is it about the history and aesthetics of ancient forms that speak to you?

SM First of all the forms of the ancient work are gorgeous and often funny, charming and surprising. Their history interests me almost as much as their form. I am especially drawn to vessels because they offer an intimate connection to the maker and the user. Looking at a 1st-century Roman glass vessel becomes a meditation on time and ephemerality. It puts our time on earth into a perspective that I find somehow comforting.

I am struck by the irony that both fired clay shards and non-degradable plastic last for millennia. Could you comment as to the organic/inorganic nature of your work?

SM Previous to this body of work I had been making work from purchased sheets of plastic. I was horrified by the amount of scrap plastic that I was throwing away. I realized that the plastic bottles littering the streets offered the same qualities that I was looking for—color, shape, pattern, transparency, and translucency. I began thinking about what future generations would say about our plastic trash in the same way we study those clay shards looking for clues about ancient civilizations. I don't think we will look like an advanced society when the trash of our time will be analyzed.

You have spoken about the value of objects over time. How do you hope your sculptural creations will be valued and understood in the next century and beyond?

SM This is not something I really think about. Honestly, although the plastic pieces will remain, I don't think they will be thought about much in the next century. I tend to think the future will be more apocalyptic. The next century will probably have more important things to think about than my sculpture—like survival on a planet that is too hot, dry and full of trash. I hope I'm wrong.

Part of the mystique of your work is the dichotomy they present between ancient forms and contemporary materials. Do you see yourself creating future works that do not reference the past?

SM I have been drawn to objects from the past for as long as I can remember. Looking to history grounds me and offers a lifetime of resources to draw from. For now I am immersed in historical references but it's hard to say what will happen in the future; the direction of the work moves organically. The materials that I use may change over time although I think I will always be conscious of the amount of disposable resources that go into the making of it.



Shari Mendelson, *My Metropolitan*: "In this digital collage, I replaced the art in a Greek and Roman gallery at the Metropolitan with vessels made from discarded plastic bottles."

How closely do your completed sculptures resemble their original sources? Once you begin to construct your vessels, do they take on a life of their own?

SM Some of my pieces are closely related to the source material. I will look at a photo of a historical piece and try to imitate the curves and textures with my plastic scrap and applied mediums. Sometimes I just look at the bits and pieces of material on my worktable and start building without a particular reference object in mind. Other times I start with a specific object as a reference but if the new sculpture doesn't work as an independent piece I alter it so that it stands on its own.

The ancient vessels that inspire your work were beautifully crafted by hand as are your sculptural forms. What are your thoughts on the growing number of contemporary artworks that do not require hands-on skill or craftsmanship on the part of the artist?

SM For me, the working process is the pleasure. When I am working in my studio, I am focused and relaxed. While my hands are busy, my mind can wander to think about the meanings of the piece, time, and history. The visual decision-making that happens when my hands are busy is a crucial part of my process. Different artists have different ways of working – there is room for all – but for me there is nothing more satisfying than getting my hands dirty making something.

Shari Mendelson, *Large Syrian Vessel*, 2015, Plastic, hot glue, acrylic polymer, mono filament, paint, 24 x 15 x 15 inches / 61 x 38 x 38 cm.

