

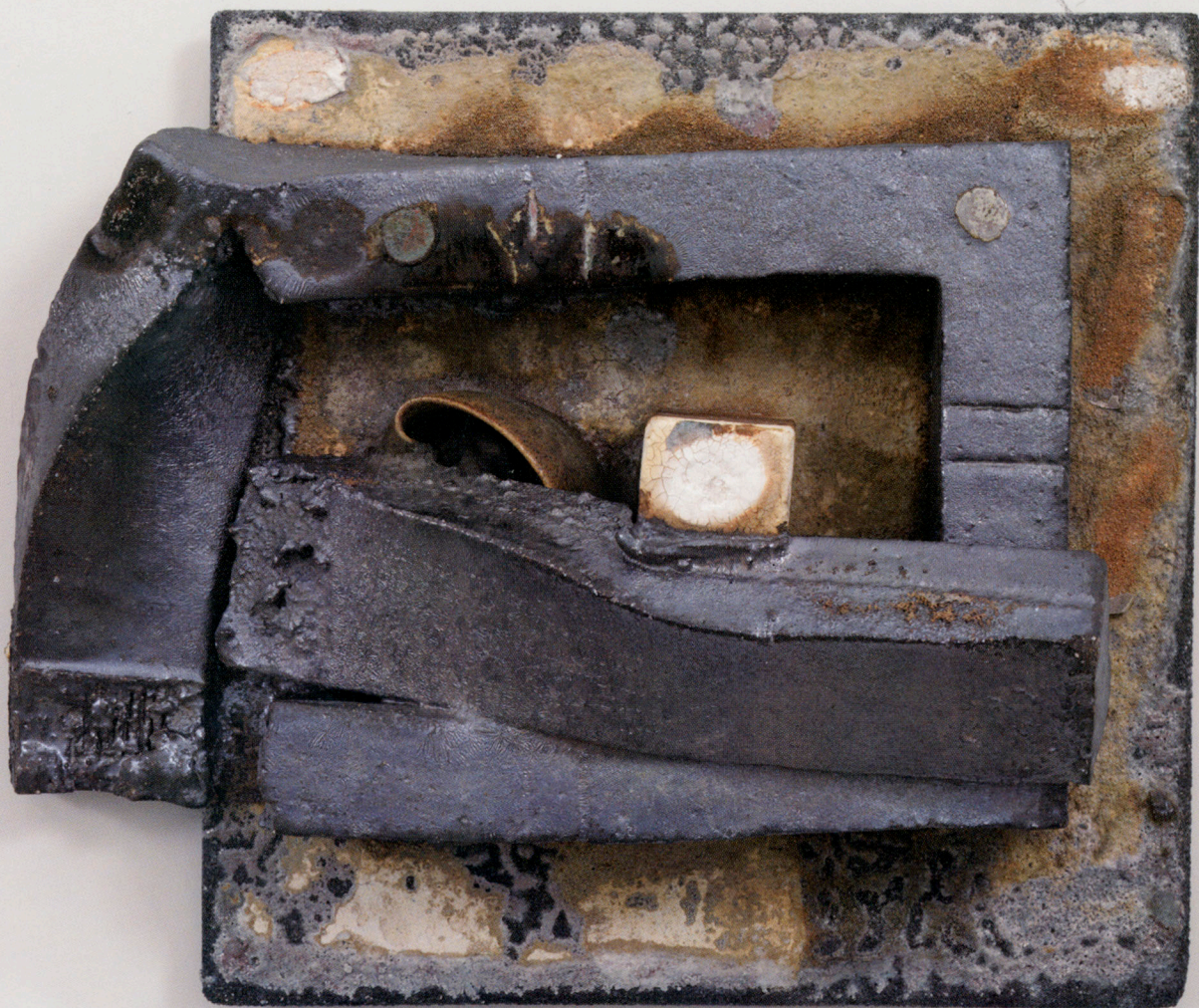
# Ceramics

## Art + Perception

2021

# #117

USD	\$20
EUR	€18
CAD	\$27
AUD	\$27
GBP	£15



# Seeking Sustainability

Written by **Brian Benfer**





In 2020, the International Bone China Symposium in Kaunas, Lithuania celebrated its long history with the material and its ability to be a catalyst for conversation, exploration and community. The theme of this year's event was *Sustainability*, a topic that seems to speak to so many things happening right now around the world. While we all gravitate towards a specific definition or notion of this concept, the organizers expressed

their interest in this term simply as a means of exploring "a way of existence". One could only assume this took into consideration a number of variables that include the gamut of social, economic and environmentally conscious iterations of "sustainability" – all of this translated by the artists and through a material that is based on roughly fifty percent agricultural waste (i.e. bone ash).

**Change is difficult and it is fair to say the Coronavirus will likely never be celebrated nor considered timely, yet it is serving a role whether we are aware of it or not**



The very nature of contemporary symposia is to establish interconnectedness, find common ground, and to create a dialogue between disparate entities from various cultures and nations through a unifying subject or shared material. To spend time with other people in close proximity, sharing techniques and philosophies related to their lives, artistic works, and their different backgrounds. The entire premise of this format could easily have been derailed by the Coronavirus resulting in the cancellation of the event, yet the organizers managed to somehow slip in between the waves of COVID by including ten artists capable of coming together for two weeks to participate in this year's symposium. Notably, with the exception of Alison Safford – an American artist operating remotely and sending digital files to be 3D printed by her Lithuanian collaborator Uršulė Baužaitė, all the remaining participants managed to exist in the communal workspace for the duration of the event.

This year's artwork had a range of technical approaches and conceptual agendas, keeping in line with the tradition of the event, which

encourages interpretation of the theme via the material. Some of the artists participating had smart, interesting and even comical translations of the concept of sustainability, while others seemed to struggle conveying it. Undoubtedly, there is always room for interpretation regarding any thematic event, as we all bring a different perspective to the table. Yet, when a specific, overarching topic is the premise of the entire project you are engaged in, it is reasonably considered obligatory for participants to address the subject to some extent.

Both formats for providing information – the visual/physical work as well as the verbal/written – should help impart upon us, the viewers, a small glimpse into the artists vision, and it was surprising to see the number of people with little to no verbiage to supplement the visual work. The biggest problem with this is that all too often, we see work standing alone, without any written accompaniment and frankly, the visual interpretation does not provide us with the appropriate segue into understanding what the work is attempting to discuss. Of course, one could just assume

Previous page left:  
**Ceramic Painting**  
**Exploration #2**, Mark  
Harmon (UK).

Previous page right:  
**Mothers**, Audrius  
Janušonis (Lithuania).

Opposite:  
**Drops**, Elina  
Titane (Latvia).

Below:  
**Wooden Arrow Meets**  
**Soft Porcelain**, Rokas  
Dovydenas (Lithuania).

that because the symposium theme was *sustainability*, that the work is speaking directly to that topic. This is enabled, in part, by the field of ceramics as the variable of language is something that is not necessarily expected as with some of the other visual disciplines (and how many iterations of romanticized verbiage related to vessel making do we really need anyway?). While the mentality that “the work stands for itself” is still accepted in many circles, it seems difficult for many of us in the discipline to buy into, because our work is often situated outside of the material canon and exists with non-ceramic based disciplines and venues. This in turn, requires a more thorough explanation including verbiage related to the physical work being presented, and a necessity for considering our language as something that must be sustainable as well.

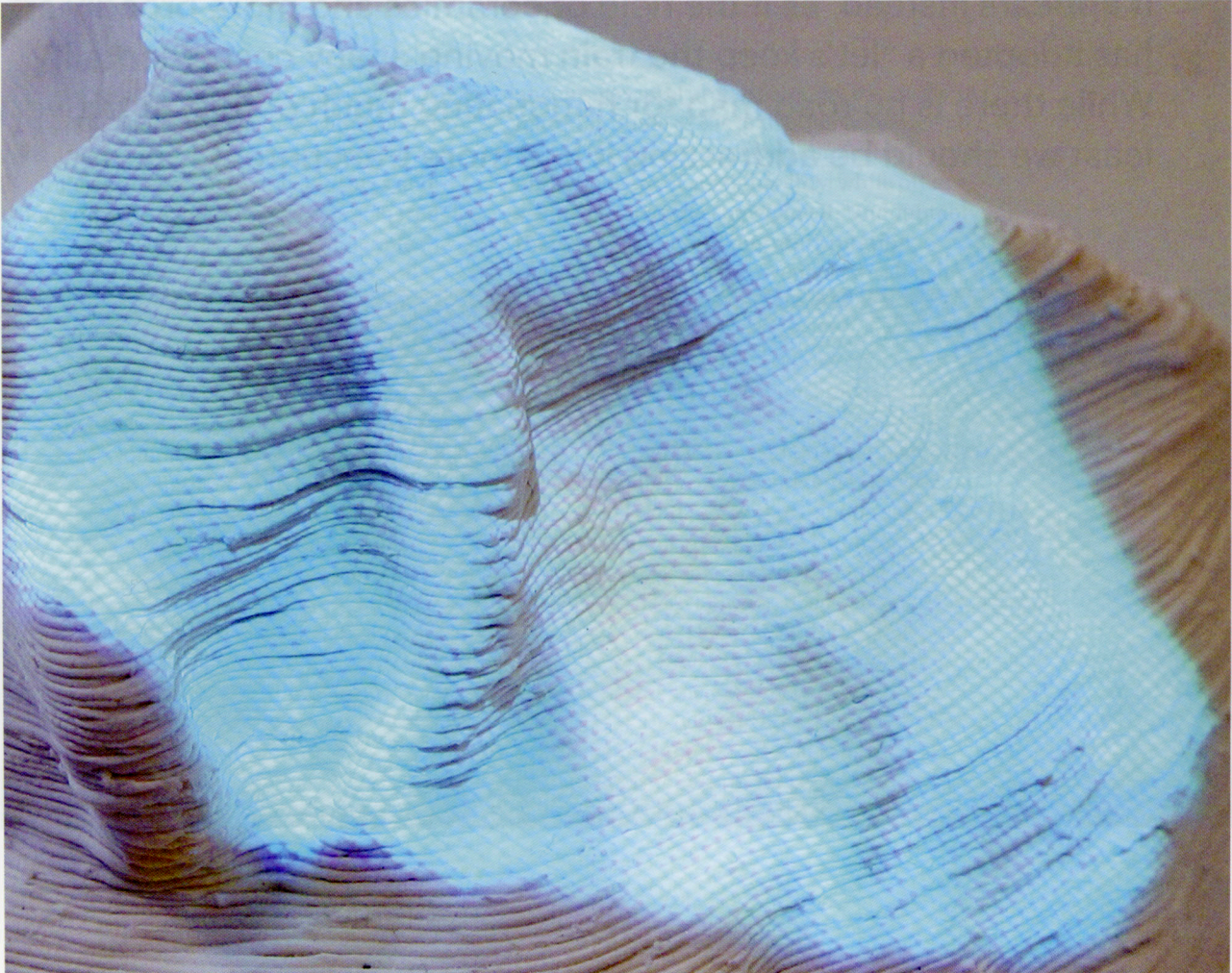
In this assessment, it would be negligent not to mention some of the obvious variables dictating this year’s event. As we know, the pandemic is a global issue with some regions suffering greater losses than others and many countries have instituted restrictions on both domestic and international travel. This was an obvious hurdle in the selection process, influencing the potential inclusion of participants from many places around the world. Let us also not forget to mention the effects of limited travel as it relates to the city, one that is typically hyperactive in the summer with the local cafes, restaurants and bars inundated with tourists. While the dates were, in fact, adjusted slightly and the event, shortened to accommodate for potential virus surges and the imposition of additional restrictions, this didn’t stop the symposium from taking place and producing some thoughtful and impactful work.

**It appears instead, as if the field of ceramics and more broadly art, has adopted a “let’s keep the train moving at any cost” mentality. While there is no road map for negotiating much of this, at the very least we should be addressing it in a more transparent manner**



It is not only the International Bone China Symposium navigating things differently today than it did a few years ago. For the majority of people, there have been changes to their daily routines. Communal events and large gatherings feel anachronistic, with many celebrations and holidays either heavily influenced or avoided completely. With the majority of exhibition venues and academic institutions moving into remote formats of viewing and learning, we have certainly begun to understand, if we did not before, the importance of existing in physical spaces and the importance of “in-person” interactions (this relates both to our relationships with other individuals as well as with objects and artwork). The desire for connectivity and interpersonal interaction has been exacerbated during this time, causing many people with pre-existing mental health conditions to spin into the depths of depression. This is yet another reason why the symposium organizers should be applauded for their efforts in providing this opportunity for artists as they have for so many years.

With all that is currently happening around the world, it would be remiss to not mention a number of ironies related to the theme of this year’s symposium and to some of the larger issues currently plaguing the field. Regarding the event itself, it is acute amongst the restrictions of the pandemic, that clay used by the participants comes from Britain. This is a prime example of the global market and the reality of present-day makers, and it speaks to our need for outsourcing, even within the field of ceramics which is rooted in indigeneity. We could also mention present economic concerns, the increased operational costs for events, and a decrease in funding many are experiencing. This is not an isolated issue and is even affecting museums and major academic institutions, many of which are facing budgetary issues and eliminating not only the hiring of new positions but also implementing freezes on replacement positions. Museums and organizations, traditionally in roles of supporting artists, are now more frequently looking to the artists themselves for donations



# I questioned the dated and idle nature of the symposium format and sought to challenge what I see as our participation in the ongoing stagnation of the field

of their work for fundraising efforts—a terrible precedent and sign of market volatility. Adding to these issues, we have an increase in MFA graduates every year that are dribbled into an already oversaturated market, making it all feel less and less as if sustainability is truly something being considered. It appears instead, as if the field of ceramics and more broadly art, has adopted a “let’s keep the train moving at any cost” mentality. While there is no road map for negotiating much of this, at the very least we should be addressing it in a more transparent manner.

To measure sustainability, it would make sense that we first ask if the current level at which we are operating is enough. To maintain a level of mediocrity would essentially be defined as sustainable, yet it should not be the level at which we set the bar. We should have higher expectations for ourselves, the field, and humanity as a whole, keeping in mind that they must also be equitable. It is necessary to look at the larger picture, beyond what is impacting us personally, and make accommodations that aren’t always blatantly obvious to some. This has been an ongoing disconnect between various groups, and there has been a heightened sense of the divide shaping our perception of this scenario of late. While things will not change overnight, acknowledging and addressing systemic issues is moving the conversation in the right direction.

With the theme of this year’s symposium in mind as it comes to an end, only time will tell if this sort of event is capable of being maintained over the long-term; and one major aspect of sustainability is to acknowledge what it is that we are losing. What began as an experience working in a local factory alongside of technicians and industrial equipment has relocated into a modest institutional venue with dated equipment, limited funding, and decreasing enrollment. Sustainability will not be easy, nor is it a guarantee, but seeing so many things globally in a major recession, extinction for many venues and programming is more of a reality than most would care to

admit. The efforts thus far by the organisers of the International Bone China Symposium in maintaining the program are admirable to say the least, and it is without question that the event would have ended some time ago if not for this ongoing ardor. Maybe that is, in part, why the theme of this year’s event came to be, as a way of acknowledging the continued effort and desire to preserve the history of bone china in Kaunas, Lithuania. While sustainability may not be the first word of choice in defining the perseverance of the event and its organisers, one cannot deny the fact that with so many things in a state of flux, tenacity and passion go a long way.

My own prior contributions to the International Bone China Symposium have included being a part of the selection committee, a participant, and writing about the event and overall nature of symposia. I questioned the dated and idle nature of the symposium format and sought to challenge what I see as our participation in the ongoing stagnation of the field. The Coronavirus has brought an entirely new variable into this larger questioning, forcing many changes and a re-examination of the current modalities. While the present scenario may be a temporary situation, it will not be the last time we are forced to deal with change, nor should it be. Present circumstances should cause us all to pause, to re-evaluate what is truly important in our lives, and to look towards a future with sustainability as an essential component in the success of both our personal pursuits as individuals, and our collective goals as a community. Change is difficult and it is fair to say the Coronavirus will likely never be celebrated nor considered timely, yet it is serving a role whether we are aware of it or not. With so many people going through extreme financial and psychological hardships, it is hard for most people to imagine reflecting on this time as being positive or beneficial in any way. What can be stated however, is that when this pandemic finally does subside, we should all remember this time as one of adaptation, endurance and ultimately, an effort towards sustainability. ■

**Wound Topography,**  
Alison Safford (USA)  
and Uršulė Baužaitė  
(Lithuania).

**Further info**  
More information  
regarding the  
International Bone  
China Symposium in  
Kaunas, Lithuania  
can be found via their  
website (<http://www.porcelianosimpoziumas.lt/en/>) or Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/porcelianosimpoziumas/>).

**About the author**  
Brian is an artist  
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