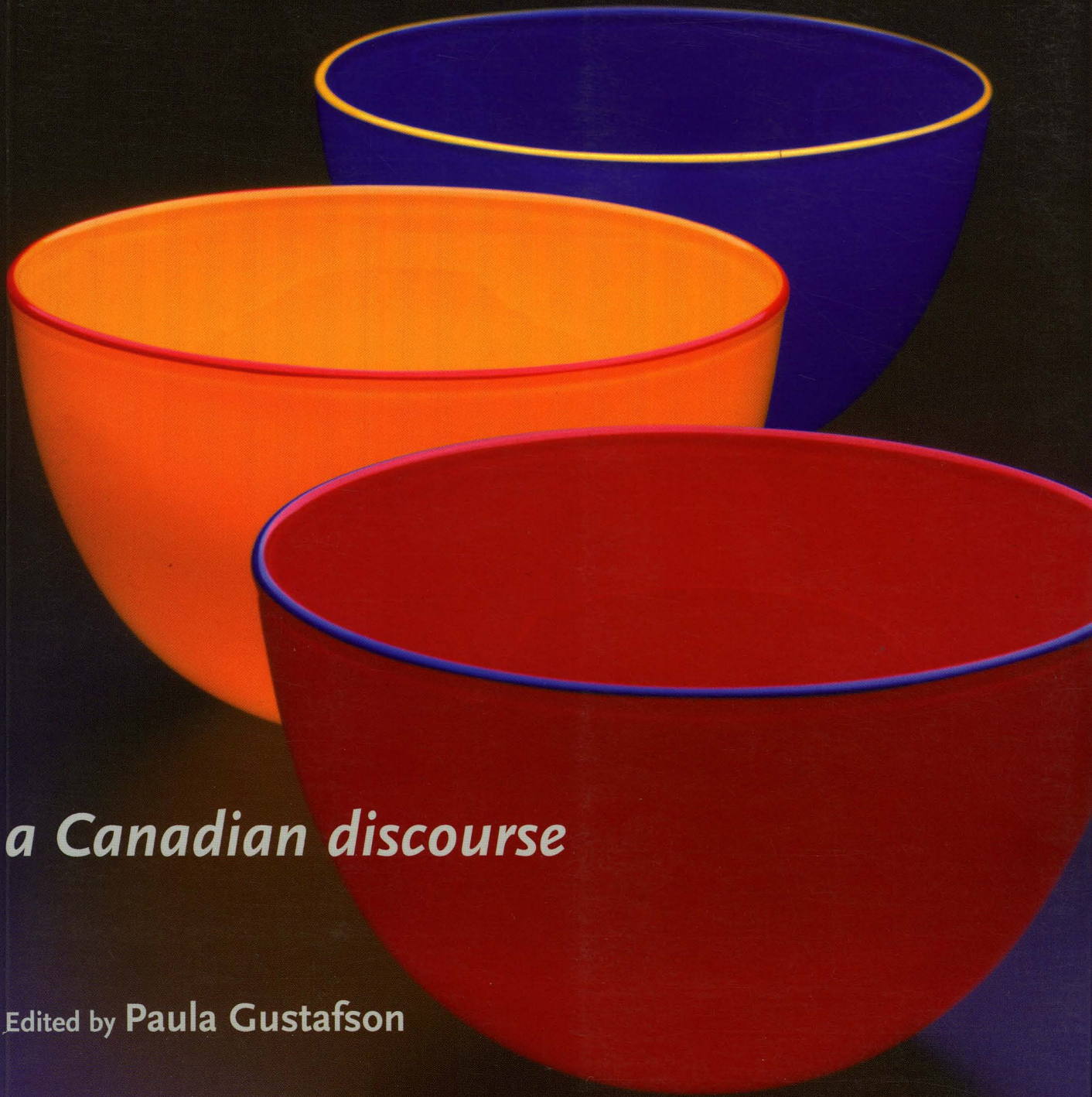


CRAFT

Perception and Practice

a Canadian discourse

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GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE MATTER

by Gloria Lesser

Quebec-born Paul Mathieu uses ceramics as sites of exploration of clay as part of larger social and cultural contexts. His works are conceptual studies based on his thesis that cultural systems condition our perception of reality. Mathieu is indebted to *le discours* of French postwar intellectual nationalists, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss, while never necessarily avowing France and civilization synonymity.

Deconstructivist Michel Foucault's writings on power, knowledge, and sexuality have provided the greatest stimulus. Foucault's interpretations of space have been signposts: public versus private space, leisure versus private space, or cultural versus useful space. Paul Mathieu sees analogies in the peculiar properties of pottery-space, and his article for *The Studio Potter* and a video by the same name by video-artist Richard L. Harrison, further developed these concepts.

Mathieu's fabrication in clay is intimately connected with philology, aspects of which constitute the aesthetics themselves. Pottery-space is pottery-cultural space where art and craft merge. From Foucault, Mathieu clarified his own notions of universal or contextual space based on shared premises that change with time and culture; juxtaposed but unrelated images projected in single sites or spaces, technologically; spaces that can act as repositories for the accretions of culture, either the permanent or the transitory (the museum); that ritual space demands rites of passage to imply the metaphors of accessibility of opening and closing.

The artist's characteristic porcelain, turned and press-moulded stackable dishes, are unified by drawn imagery of the total image which he refers to as the continuous void. Void and mass are camouflaged, veiled by

drawn three-dimensional images on two-dimensional surfaces, or volumes and perspective flattened with painted two-dimensional imagery. The problems of representation of realistic two- and three-dimensional drawing and foreshortening on flat and curved surfaces have always been of primary concern for vase painters, not only Roman *trompe l'oeil* muralists and Renaissance easel painters, as has been reiterated by Western art historians. Mathieu uses plates as canvas is used—as support—and he uses cups and teapots to refer to three-dimensional form. Form and volume are shown as inseparable in ceramics. The decoration carried through the levels or layers of dishes unifies the narrative while alluding to collage in its references to superimposition.

The Mortal Secret of Immortality, 1990, a six-piece luncheon service, was first bisque fired, then stacked to form a sculptural unit. The iconography deals with cycles in the waxing and waning of nature. The first image of the magnolia bud was drawn on the uppermost piece, the cup; the next image added in the void left by the removal of the cup to show the stem in the colourless glass, and the image of the leaf which continues on the plate beneath it. The sequential images of the magnolia deal with the exotic, short-lived species in the state of its decline. When the plates are stacked, the drawn rim, the continuous image, makes reference to the nature of the plate as vessel. While floral arrangements are generally decorative accoutrements to table services, and the study of a flower in a transparent vase could refer to that famous image in Roman wall painting, Mathieu appropriates and incorporates such images in order to refer to the nature of ceramics and to underline the primacy of context as the first premise for art criticism.

Mathieu uses the concept of open-stock series of mass-produced components to show the symmetry of wheel-thrown pieces. The completed pieces form a total image, while the individual dishes retain their ceramic individuality and autonomy. They always remain functional pieces albeit embellished with highly decorative surfaces. The object of the vessel still determines its function and the rhetoric is always the continuing discourse of ceramic literacy. In order to reconstruct a workable model of literacy, he

Afternoon Sun (front view), 2000
porcelain, 150 cm long
Paul Mathieu
Photo: Paul Mathieu



64 | draws lessons from history, pointing out myths that get in the way of clear thinking.

In his stacks of dishes—elegant, energetic deft tablescapes—in his oxymoronic, highly structured pile of porcelain plates there is invariably an inner imagery which is more than just that jumble of messy plates, which forms environments beyond the anthropomorphisms of pottery.

By various strategies he reveals processes, stages, and specific queries pertinent to ceramics: art as craft; decorative art as fine art; ceramic sculpture as decorative art; and clay as both support and surface metaphorically beyond that strict definition and old argument of vessel as volume.

The Arrows of Time (for SWH), 1991, won the first prize for the Fourth National Biennial of Canadian Ceramics. For this three-piece teapot, cup and saucer, dedicated to the physicist Stephen Hawking, Mathieu concentrated on theoretical premises of time and space. The image of a teapot painted on the belly of a teapot becomes a self-conscious image of itself. Objectified, the painted teapot-as-vessel defines its pouring function. The spout of the painted tipped teapot pours liquid into the adjacent teacup whose well receives the stream. Vessel and spout become metaphors for genitalia as the artist simultaneously explores haptic illusion and the kinetic and tactile inter-relationship in ceramics. Mathieu always uses specific shapes to refer to typology and function. He continually refers to the volume of a unit to underscore the form and to recall the historical functions of pots, either based on reality or metaphors.

We see in *Garniture* another favourite scheme Mathieu utilizes, which is the horizontal format, chosen to refer to the display of porcelains in bronze mounts. Originally, this was a Chinese mode of exposition commandeered by the French elite in the Baroque and Rococo periods as a badge of wealth and prestige. The images are meant to be read from left to right, front to back. However, the back is jumbled, and each vessel must

[top]

Garniture #2/Day (front view), 1991-1999
porcelain, 145 cm long
Paul Mathieu

[bottom]

Garniture #2/Night (back view), 1991-1999
porcelain, 145 cm long
Paul Mathieu
Photo: Paul Mathieu



Garniture #2 Day, 1990. Porcelain. 5 pieces. 30 x 37.5 cm x 1m.



Garniture #2 Night, 1990. Porcelain. 5 pieces. 30 x 37.5 cm x 1m.

66 | be turned 180 degrees for the total sequential image to appear. The tactile is always an important part in experiencing Mathieu's pieces. The work thus has two images but really only one side.

On the covered jar of the *Day* side of *Garniture*, a passive, reclining male nude is reminiscent of Michelangelo's androgynous female statue, *Night* for the Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici. Michelangelo's Mannerist *Night* and *Day* allegorical sculptures, locked by never-ending tensions, referred to the realm of time and man's state in the temporal world. Altering the meaning of Michelangelo's personifications, varying the imagery, the reverse side of Mathieu's *Night* is starry with a full moon, where the now mature nude, who is still male, rests after a vigorous sexual performance indicated by his changed position and sturdier body.

The open window, a *leitmotif* from Early Renaissance triptychs, serves to establish seasons and rituals in the human and Christian worlds, and also refers to the codification of Renaissance mathematical perspective. This also elucidates gender allegorical dichotomies, passive/active dualities, and behavioural schisms as clichéd homosexual comportment. *Day* also represents reverie and illusion for Mathieu, and *Night*, energy, as well as decline, waning, and decay.

These contiguous sets, recalling precedents in Dutch Baroque still-life, actually refer to the imagery of Kenzan, one of Japan's most famous potters. The fresh fruits of the *Day* are transformed, decayed or missing in the *Night* sequence. They are associated with the material/sensual contradictions and metamorphosis in still-life genre, and their analogies of cycles in human relationships.

Like Early Renaissance frescoes, where the narratives occur in sequences of bordered episodes, the decorative backgrounds can also be seen as large-scale repeat wallpaper or fabric patterns. "The multicoloured, flowered surfaces of this *Garniture* can be perceived as wallpaper in which a series of independently framed images becomes a larger panoramic still-life on the wall," Mathieu wrote in "Drawing the Continuous Image" for the *NCECA Journal* (1990–1991). The underlying iconography is always didactic. A row of these adjacent independent vessels signifies the purported nature of the unique vessel despite the tale and ornamental appearance.

Paul Mathieu's art never hovers; it unfolds. The narrative is autobiographical, topical, universal, and the sub-text is always the dialogue of ceramics as art. Content and references are related to research in the other

visual arts to prove that clay relates to the other arts within and despite its limits. He reveals prejudices and fallacies, redressing issues through their exegesis which is both diagnosis and product. ∞



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