

Ontario Craft

Summer 2000

Woodturning
at the Turn
of the Millenium



The Enquiring Mind
of Paul Mathieu

The Jean A. Chalmers National
Crafts Award 2000 recipient

Parade of Furniture

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by Paula Gustafson

The Enquiring Mind of Paul Mathieu

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Paul Mathieu takes pride in being called a potter, but he doesn't particularly care for clay or even enjoy working with it. His ceramic sculptures are in the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum for Contemporary Ceramic Art in Shigaraki, Japan, but he claims his work is not particularly well made. In fact, Mathieu says that the pieces are often cracked or warped, imperfect or gauche.

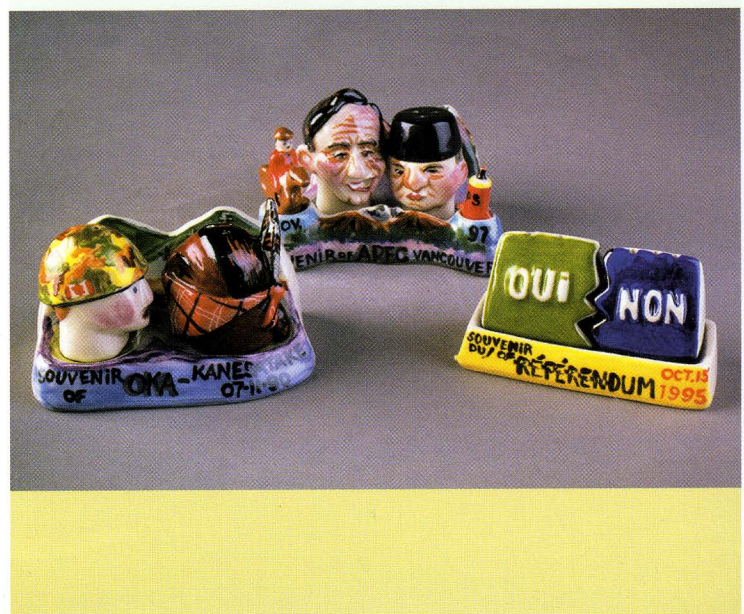
As this year's recipient of the Jean A. Chalmers National Crafts Award, Mathieu seems a contradictory choice. The 46-year-old artist from Bouchette, Québec has never fit comfortably into the Canadian craft matrix. More accurately, he has earned a reputation for speaking out, for contesting the *status quo*, then backing up his arguments with brilliantly conceived masterworks such as his *Garniture* series and, more recently, *Suite Serpentin*.

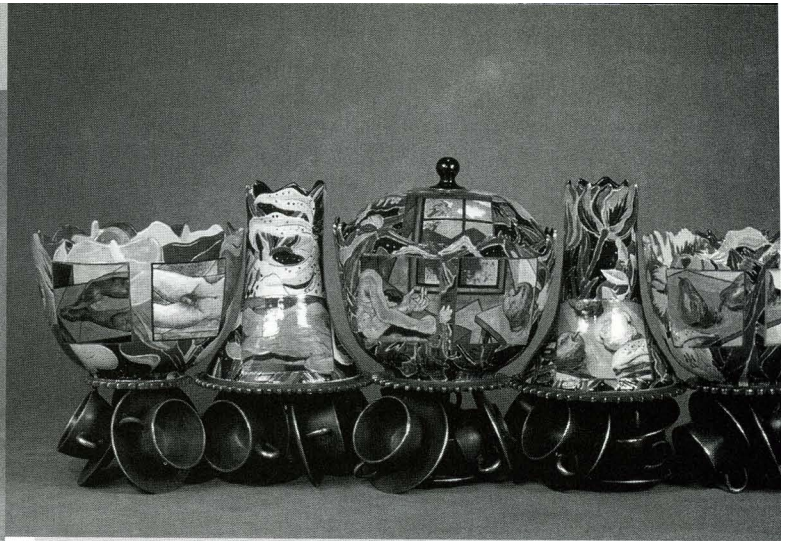
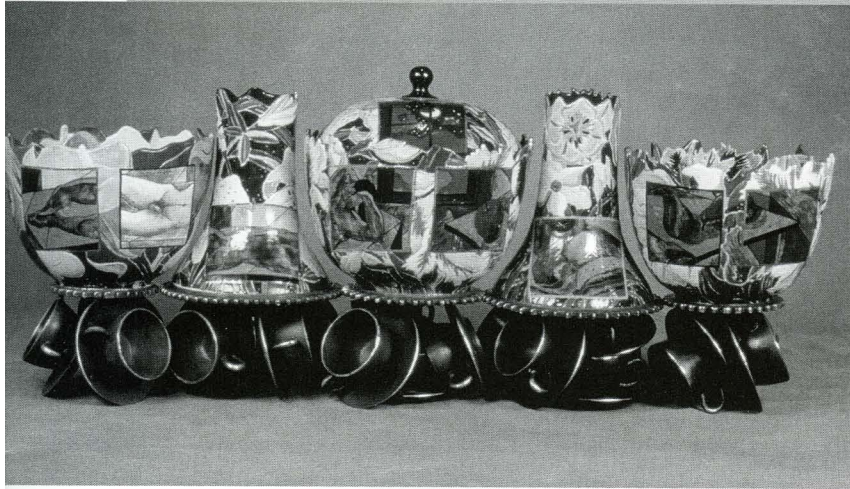
He's camera shy, but the "star" of Richard L. Harrison's award-winning 1991 video, *The Space of Pottery: Ceramics of Paul Mathieu*. A world traveller, teaching and lecturing in the United States, Mexico, England, France, Japan, and Australia, he has yet to learn how to drive a car. Reluctant to disclose information about his personal life, he nevertheless is disarmingly candid in listing his weaknesses and mistakes. An admitted loner, his days are spent in the hubbub of students and classrooms. He has never been an active member of any craft organization. In brief, Mathieu is a paradox. An intellectual who works with his hands.



Top
Trash/Flower vase, 1998, 1.77 m tall, ceramics, bronze, steel

Bottom
Detail views of individual components in *20th C. Disasters* (complete assemblage on opposite page, bottom), 1999: *Canadian Disasters*, 1999, salt and pepper shaker sets





Left
Garniture #2, Night 1993, porcelain, bronze, 150 cm long

Right
Garniture #2, Day 1993, porcelain, bronze, 150 cm long

Below
20th C. Disasters, 1999, assemblage of salt and pepper shaker sets, 45 x 50 x 10 cm.
 Detail seen on opposite page, bottom.

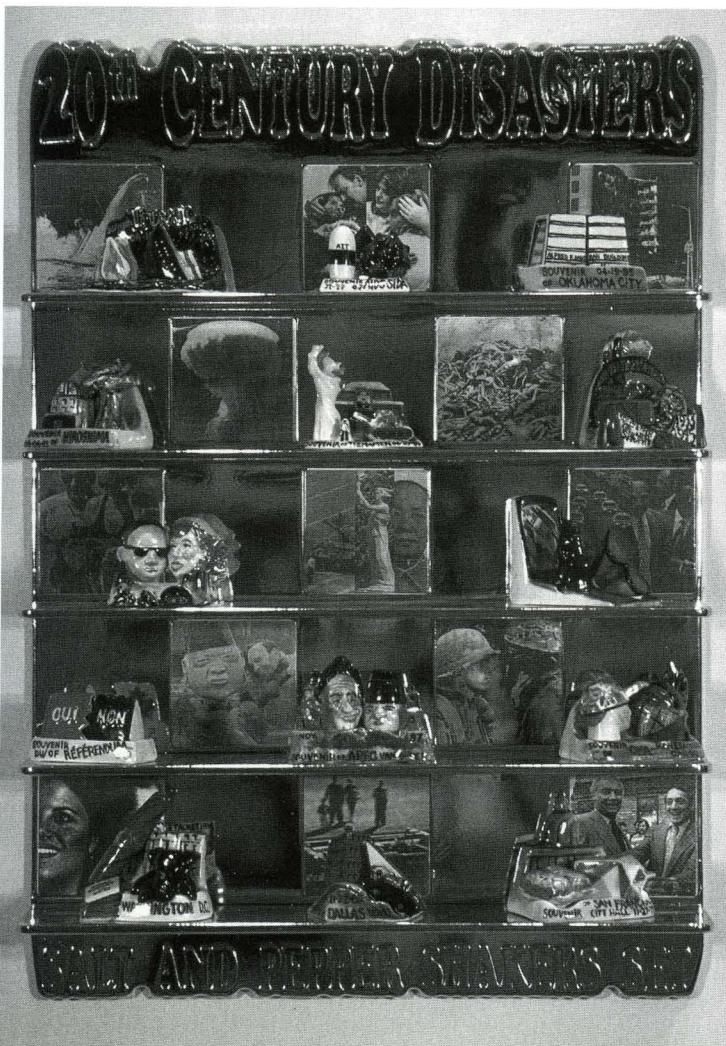
The key to Mathieu lies in the absolute honesty of his work. In concept and form, the *Garniture* series and *Suite Serpentin* exemplify his personal and philosophical principles. At first sight the *Garniture* sculptures appear to be decoratively painted chinaware perched trophy-like on pedestals constructed of bronze tea cups and saucers (see above). Examining the pieces more closely, viewers discover that the exuberant floral imagery blanketing the surfaces of the porcelain vases and lidded bowls is pastiched with images which might be interpreted as erotic or sexually suggestive.

In *Suite Serpentin*, Mathieu journeys even further down the path of sexual and ceramic ambiguity. These loosely-modelled sculptures which take their form from Matisse's languid female, *La Serpentine*, who poses with her finger suggestively in her mouth, feature dual male figures in intimate relationship with each other and with such things as garbage cans, flower pots, and mirrors.

Mathieu is unequivocal in his intention to portray homosexual experience, but he denies that these works are solely about sexuality. "They're also about 'what is a vase?' and how the bodies relate to each other, the negative space between them, and what is real," he explains.¹ The sexual content, he says, is just his way of interrogating reversals. On the simplest level, turning a figurative sculpture into a vase is a reversal. So is changing a female figure into a male figure. Mathieu's *Suite Serpentin* proposes multiple reversals. Upright figures mimic the posture and gesture of a twin or serve as props for upside-down counterparts. Mirrors compound the double-twist illusions. Among the supporting bases Mathieu has contrived for the acrobatics are toilets stacked rim to rim – a reference to Duchamp's *Fountain* urinal, the seminal 20th century challenge to traditional art canons.

In both bodies of work Mathieu uses Dada-ist tactics to dispute the elevation of fine art over craft. Reinventing the role of ceramic art in post-modernist theory is at the core of Mathieu's oeuvre. Prior to moving to Vancouver three years ago to head the ceramics program at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, his professional career was located in Montréal, where he was originally a student of Léopold L. Foulém; an experience, he says, "that had a profound and continuous influence on my life, as an artist and as a person." His other compatriots were Richard Milette and the late Jeannot Blackburn. Individually and collectively, this group of ceramists have blown away the traditional categories of high/low, fine/decorative art – most effectively by deconstructing the ubiquitous and utilitarian teapot.

Using a strategy somewhat similar to the way feminist artists in the 1970s employed textile arts to assert women's issues, the informal Montréal group combined the rigours of Foucaultian gender-identity theory (including homoerotic imagery consistent with gay liberation) with the effete excesses of beaux-arts craftwork. Initially, their works created ripples of interest, but given what he calls an embarrassing lack of critical analysis about contemporary Canadian craft, Mathieu despairs if our academics and institutions will ever recognize these sculptures within the parameters of post-modern art.





He believes that one of the reasons for the inattention is due to the prevailing ranking of art materials, which he says places ceramics at the bottom and pottery even lower. Another reason, he says, "is that the work, more often than not, needs to be touched, manipulated, assembled and disassembled in order to be fully experienced and appreciated. The taboo around touch, still sacrosanct in art experience, makes their exhibition impossible or problematical at best."

Matisse sculpted *La Serpentine* "so that the movement would be comprehensible from all points of view."² Mathieu's *Suite Serpentin* sculptures are also intended to be examined in the round, and from a birds-eye view. In the case of the *Garniture* series, manually turning each illustrated piece 180 degrees brings forward a different picture. Day shifts to night. A festive meal reverses to the dregs of the morning after. Individually, each of these sculptures is endlessly fascinating to look at, to think about, and to enjoy as sensation. Collectively, and with the numerous other exemplars Mathieu has produced during the past two decades, they comprise a body of work that defies dismissal. Yet, he points out, only a very few art museums have a policy of collecting contemporary Canadian crafts, and national exhibitions of contemporary Canadian crafts are rare.

"Can you imagine if the National Gallery was not showing photography? If they had not done so for nearly thirty years and had a policy not to acquire or exhibit photography? Or women artists? Or First Nations artists?" Mathieu asks, not bitterly, but with a sense of astonishment. As an internationally-recognized artist, teacher, essayist, lecturer – and, by his own definition, a potter – Mathieu is applauded for his uncompromising advocacy for ceramics, and for crafts in general. Perhaps it's time Canada's own museums and galleries listened up.

Paula Gustafson is a Vancouver arts critic and editor of Artichoke magazine.

Endnotes:

1. Interview with Paul Mathieu, December 18, 1998, cited in "Paul Mathieu: Suite Serpentin," *Espace*, No. 48, Summer 1999, pp. 42-44.

2. Quoted in Bruce Hugh Russell's essay for the catalogue accompanying *The Pottery of Paul Mathieu: Suite Serpentin*, published by the Burlington Art Centre and The Stride Gallery, 1998.

Left

Afternoon Sun (After C. Cavafy), 2000, (Side A) porcelain, five pieces, 150 cm

Right

Afternoon Sun (After C. Cavafy), 2000, (Side B), porcelain, five pieces, 150 cm

Below

Soil/Flower vase, 1998, ceramics, bronze, steel, 1.25 m tall

