

THE POTTERY OF MATHIEU



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SUITE SERPENTIN

With an essay by Bruce Hugh Russell

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Trash/Flower vase
ceramics/bronze/steel
H: 68", 1998

Suite Serpentin

It is not an uncommon experience to open a library art book and find that its illustrations has been defaced by childish drawings of sexual organs. A female nude will have acquired giant breasts, or a full-length male portrait will sport an enormous penis. Occasionally such embellishments will be reversed, transgending a Venus or Philip II. Despite one's immediate reaction of annoyance, there remains something delightful in these acts of vandalism. One supposes that these embellishments represent some sort of necessary and no doubt therapeutic performance of anxiety concerning the mysteries of gender and adult sexuality. From time to time adult artists have undertaken works which exhibit a similar sentiment, the most obvious example being Duchamp's infamous transgending of the Mona Lisa, *L.H.O.O.Q.* In a certain sense the large body of works by Picasso which rework figures and even specific paintings from the canon of Western art seems to partake in a similar childish fascination with sexual organs. The recent works of Paul Mathieu exhibit a similar exuberance, taking as their point of departure two of the most canonic masterworks of modern sculpture, Matisse's *Serpentine* and Rodin's *Age of Bronze* which he couples in fantastic erotic gymnastics. By amendment, multiplication, and reconfiguration Mathieu has created complex new works which address far more serious issues than their apparent whimsy might suggest.

Trash/Flower vase (detail)
ceramics/bronze/steel
H: 68", 1998





American Standard/Flower vase
ceramics/bronze/steel, H: 68", 1998

Paul Mathieu has a long association with a group of Montréal artists who have consciously worked as sculptors interrogating the genre distinctions which envelop works in clay. By taking as their subject matter what Mathieu has termed "the epistemology of ceramics and pottery,"¹ they have sought to lay bare the irrelevance of the outmoded hierarchies of high and low, fine and decorative, in sculpture. It is no coincidence that this informal group with which Mathieu has been associated with since the late 1970's, Léopold L. Foulem, Richard Milette, and the late Jeannot Blackburn, are all gay men. In embracing a medium denigrated as effete and superficial these artists have found a vehicle to explore their own social status as gay men and as artists in contestation of received social roles.

The *Suite Serpentin* has been called by Mathieu "virtual pottery." These works pun the reification of works of art as receptacles of cultural value and explore the hollowness of the casts as vessels, "... they are at the conceptual level about pottery as volume and containment." The functionality of these pots contradict their materiality in being formed of one of the most ancient and valorized high art materials in the Western beaux-arts tradition. They challenge the hierarchies of medium in which fired clay is relegated to inferior status as *decorative art* while a clay model reproduced in bronze is esteemed as a work of *fine art*. They also interrogate the problem which the

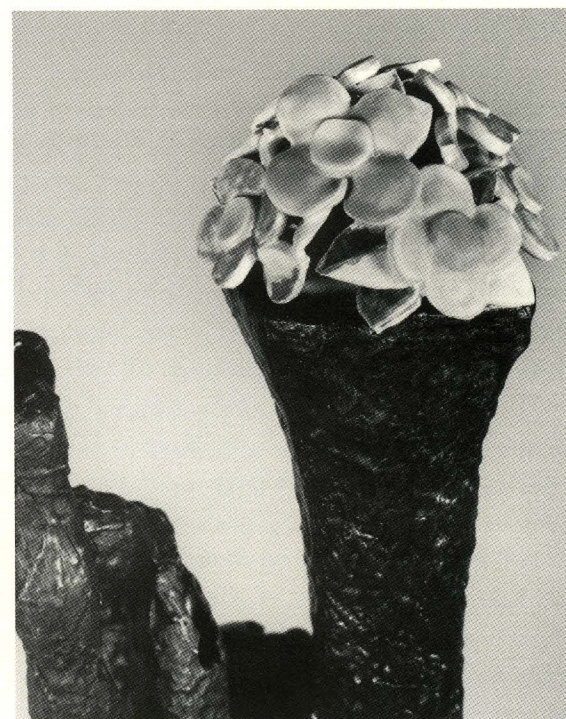
American Standard/Flower vase (side view)
ceramics/bronze/steel, H: 68", 1998

American Standard/Flower vase (detail)
ceramics/bronze/steel, H: 68", 1998

proliferation of estate casts of bronze sculptural masterworks pose with regard to originality in the age of mechanical reproduction.²

Despite its size the status of Matisse's *Serpentine* is unequivocally immense. As a multiple it stakes out its pre-eminence in casts present in numerous public collections around the world. When, in 1988, the Oxford University Press published a small one volume *Dictionary of World Art*, *La Serpentine* was selected to grace the spine of its dust jacket, the covers of which present details of Michelangelo's Sistine frescoes and a Frank Stella painting. Here she stands apotheosised against a sky blue field as a definitional figure of art itself on thousands of bookshelves.

Mathieu speaks of his new works as "playing on reversals: upside-down, exterior/interior, contained / container, sculpture / pottery, representational / functional..."³ but also as "inversions," not just in terms of literally standing the prototypes on their heads, but deliberately invoking the now displaced terminology of sexology and psychology which referred to homosexuality as an inversion of hetero-normative sexual relations. Mathieu has literally inverted Matisse's choice of subject by altering the gender of the *Serpentine* to conform to his own sexual object choice. He also seems, in the sexual acts portrayed by the conjunctures of the figures, to be making manifest both the phallicism of the pedestal on which the

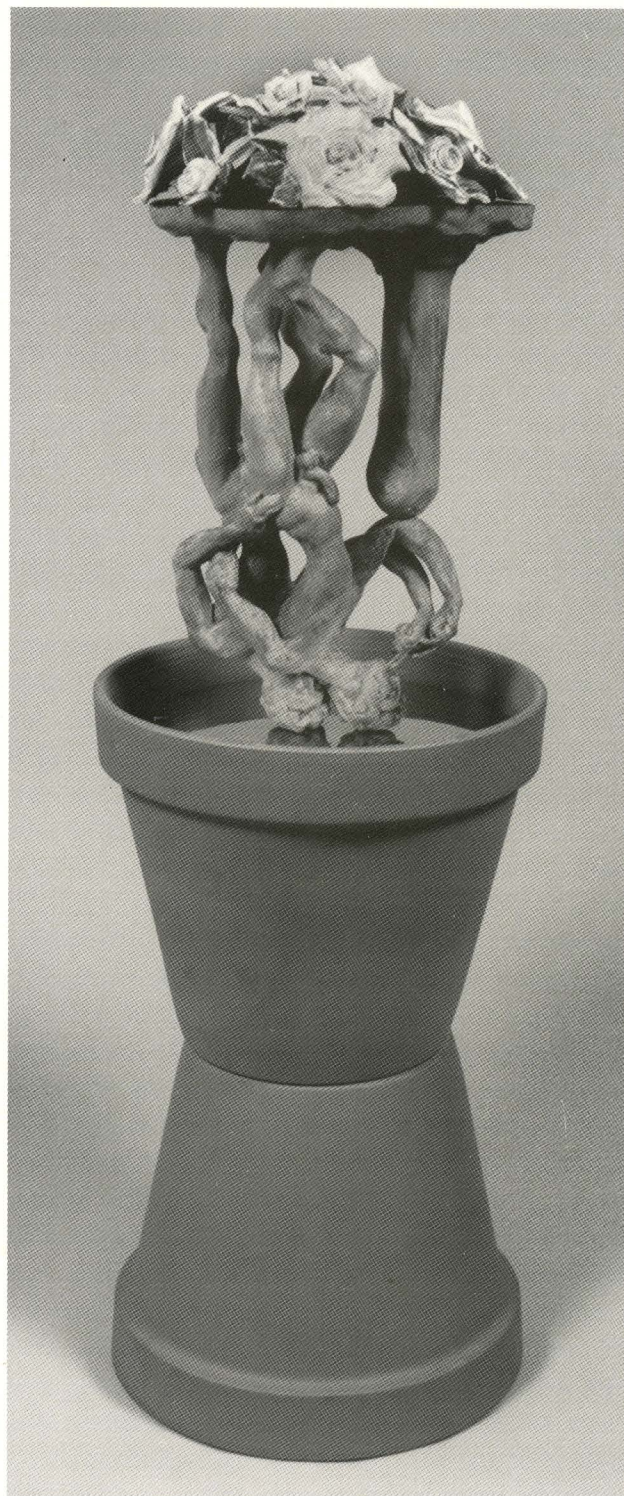


Soil/Flower vase

ceramics/bronze/steel, H: 48", 1998

Serpentine rests, and the fellatio suggested by the finger in her mouth. But these are only the most obvious of the transformations at work in the Suite.

Matisse's sculpture of 1909 is itself a transposition of a popular erotic carte de visite format photograph depicting a slightly plump female model in tights and fancy posing costume, her finger as in the sculpture inserted suggestively in her mouth and leaning on a pedestal. This popular image served as the pictorial basis for Matisse's self-consciously sophisticated exploration of what his critics refer to as the linear arabesque. He described the photographic model as "a little fat but very harmonious in form and movement. I thinned and composed the forms so that the movement would be comprehensible from all points of view."⁴ The work expresses its materiality as much as it represents its subject; the self-conscious expression of its origins as modelled clay is as important a signifier to Matisse as its more ostensible representation of the female form. Significantly, in this context, Matisse likened the figure's hands and arms to handles. I think it is this self-conscious representation of clay in bronze that provokes Mathieu. The potter inverts the bronze sculpture and make it serve by the insertion of a bouquet of ceramic flowers a function conventionally associated with clay vessels. Thus we have a curious sequence of inversions and reversions: an image



Soil/Flower vase (top view)
ceramics/bronze/steel, H: 48", 1998



from popular culture becomes high art; high art becomes decorative art; a canonic sculpture becomes a vase; and a representation of clay is made to do the work of clay.

It is also no coincidence that Mathieu has singled out a work by Matisse as the subject of his transsexual operations. Matisse, like Mathieu, throughout his *œuvre* consistently played dangerously close to the conventional boundaries between decorative and high art. Obsessed with colour, the distillation of form to pattern, and taking as his recurring subject exotic interiors, it is only the magic he effects which separates these works from illustration or decor. An artist like Mathieu, forced by the stigma attached to his chosen material – clay – to interrogate conventions of artistic hierarchies associated with the “decorative” arts would gravitate to this most decorative of Modernist masters. There is also perhaps something attractive, in the comfortable and frank eroticism of Matisse, a languor which reverberates with heterosexual privilege and patriarchal authority, the contestation of which Mathieu’s wit could not resist. Yet these are serious works, not mere pastiche. One suspects that were the old master still with us he would be fascinated by the way in which, for example, his point of departure in *Serpentine*, the exploration of the linear arabesque in sculpture, is underscored and amplified by the form’s repetition. But even here one suspects yet

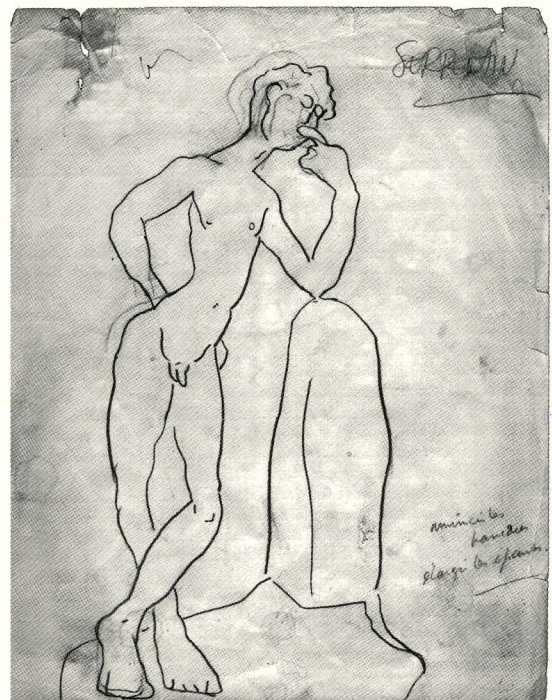
Manhole/Flower vase (in progress)
ceramics/bronze/cast iron (resin)
H: 40", 1998



Le Serpentin, pencil on paper (first sketch)
H: 11", early 1980's

another level of wit: Mathieu seems to have turned three dimensional form into the repeating patterns of fabric or wall paper. The artist has discussed further differentiation's between his work and the prototypes of Matisse:

The Matisse is a formal exploration using the human form (female) for abstract purposes. My version (male) is more eroticised and sexualized (even when there is only one figure). Also the Matisse is an image of a figure, it is still a "representation", mine is an image of a



La Serpentine, Henri MATISSE,
H: 22 1/4", 1909

sculpture and it represents sculpture as an image. For that reason, it is not so much two male figures that are kissing, sucking, fucking, but two sculptures doing these acts. This is a distinction that is reinforced by the use of the Rodin in one of the pieces. Art as representation becomes both the subject and the object of the work.⁵

The *Age of Bronze* is no less iconic. It is without doubt one of the most magnificent sculptural representations of the male nude in



the entire canon of Western art. If his peers are the works of the notorious Michelangelo and the tainted classical Greeks, what are we to make of this sensuous lad invented by such a conspicuously heterosexual Pygmalion? No doubt chosen by Mathieu as the amorous partner of his little golem because of his consummate beauty, one suspects his name has something to do with it as well: bronze clay gets to play around with epic *Bronze*. However, in a sense the *Age of Bronze* is a stand-in for another work within the oeuvre of Rodin which provides a significant precedent for Mathieu's acts of multiplication. During the years 1881 to 1886, while working on the monumental *Gates of Hell*, Auguste Rodin reworked the maquette for his *Adam* of 1880, rotating three casts of this powerful interpretation of the newly created progenitor of humanity. Here prelapsarian innocence is transformed by replication into an ominous representation of the *Three Shades*, a cloning operation in which these Dollies huddle with gestures no longer of modesty but rather the implication of sexual intimacy and complacency. The *Three Shades*, one of the most provocatively homoerotic works in Rodin's oeuvre, seems lost amidst the bewildering complexity of the *Gates of Hell*, scarcely noted on its lintel, its striking impact visible only when seen in isolation. Yet it is, no less than Monet's *Rheims* or *Haystacks*, a fascinating early excursus into the recurring modernist exploration of the implications of seriality.

The implications of seriality with regard to *the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* is underscored by Mathieu's reference to the quintessential modernist serial totem, Brancusi's *Endless Column* in the stacked flower pots which serve as base for *Soil/Flower Vase*. This is echoed by the stacking of the repeated figures, themselves. This seriality is indeed endlessly repeated by reflection in the Narcissus' pool of the mirrored surfaces of several of these piece's bases. Such references are compounded by the evocation of Duchamp's infamous *Fountain* in the stacked toilets of *American Standard/Flower Vase*. As in Robert Gober's 1987 *Pair of Urinals*, the exhibitionistic and onanistic gesture implicit in Duchamp's prototype is made homosocial by repetition, with the difference that while Gober explores the scopophilic and voyeuristic implications of the public washroom, Mathieu's toilets are actually coupled in erotic embrace.

Mathieu and Gober are by no means unusual in making Modernism itself a subject of representation. Mathieu's *Suite Serpentin*, like the works of artists such as Sherrie Levine raise questions of commodification, originality, and authenticity in their replication of modern masterworks.⁶ For a significant number of contemporary artists such as Zelig-like manipulations seem a necessary ritual of the *pompes funèbres* of Modernity. It is now some time since the teleology of the *avant-garde* devolved into a repetitive endgame, but given its continuing

tenacious hold on the discourse of art it is hardly surprising that much recent visual art has been concerned with laying to rest its ancestral ghosts. Vancouver artist and critic Reid Shire recently wrote that

If modernism's forms ... refuse to disappear, if they continue to surface like repressed memories of a period that meant something, perhaps its because their meanings are far from exhausted and are at a point of transparent flux ... One could speculate that... humorously redeploying its tropes, ... renders modernism safe for our prurient entertainment.⁷

But Mathieu's variations on *Serpentine* and the *Age of Bronze* explicitly address issues of sexuality and engenderment as well. The *Suite Serpentin* shares with a number of recent works by such diverse contemporary gay artists as Gober, or Keith Mayerson and Lari Pittman, a re-inscription of the Modernist canon in the image of their desires.

One of the anomalies of cultural modernism is that while the identitary homosexual, for Foucault a definitional symptom of modernity, was a persistent trope of this century's literary canon, parallel representation in the visual arts was relatively underdeveloped. Homosexuality was an obsessive preoccupation of such diverse writers as Proust, Gide, Genet, Mann, Crane, Lawrence, Musil, Cavafy, Garcia Lorca, etc. It

was also a privileged, if at times less than flattering, subject of the new representational popular media such as film and photography. Yet there was a telling absence of equivalent portrayals in the conventional pantheon of Modernist fine art. The few artists who did explore homosexuality to a significant degree in their work, including Gosta Adrien-Nielsen, Otto Meyer Amden, Christian Schad, Duncan Grant, Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and Yannis Tsarouchis are likely to be unknown even to specialists outside of their national contexts. Literary theorist Pierre Macherey has warned that what is precluded in cultural discourse can be as significant as that which is manifest.⁸

For Mathieu in these recent works, as for other artists of the post-Stonewall generation, this anomalous lapsus in the visual symbolic order has become a major subject of their work, equivalent to the preoccupation of their peers with the exploration of the body in relation to disease and abjection, or broader implications of gender and identity. A useful analogy of what is involved here might be genetic manipulation. If the very codes by which the art institution reproduces itself are inscribed with heteronormative discourse, such returns to repressed instances of homosexual desire in the matrix of Modernism, actualizing what was latent, is perhaps necessary.

It is useful to recall a comment made by that most ambiguous of modernist prophets,

Walter Benjamin, who observed almost seven decades ago:

Once modernism has received its due, its time has run out. Then it will be put to the test. After its end, it will be apparent whether it will be able to become antiquity.⁹

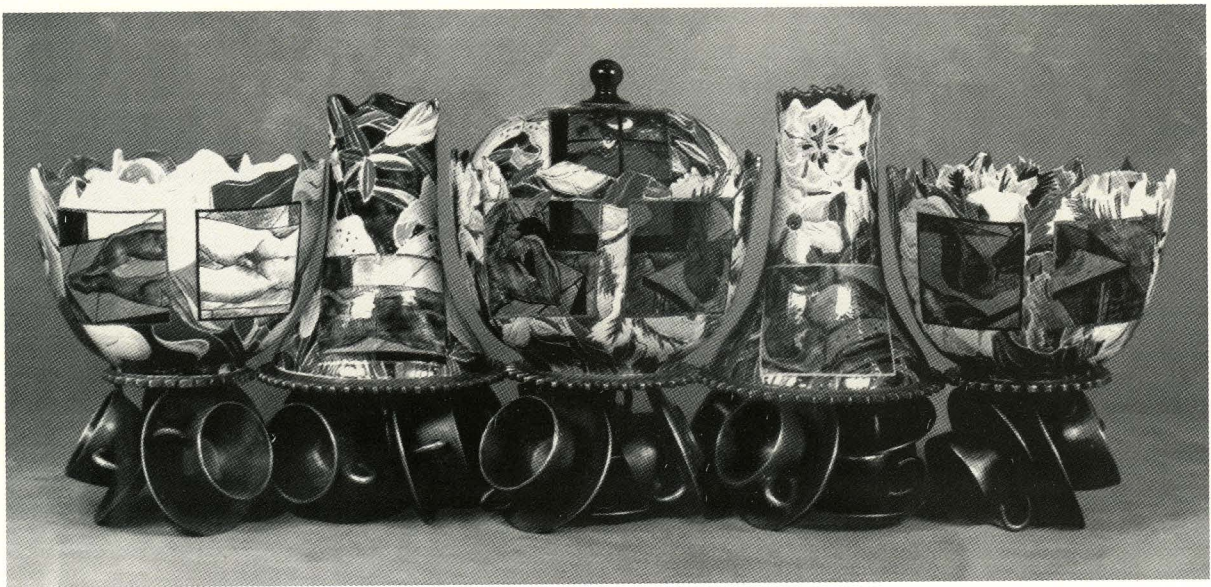
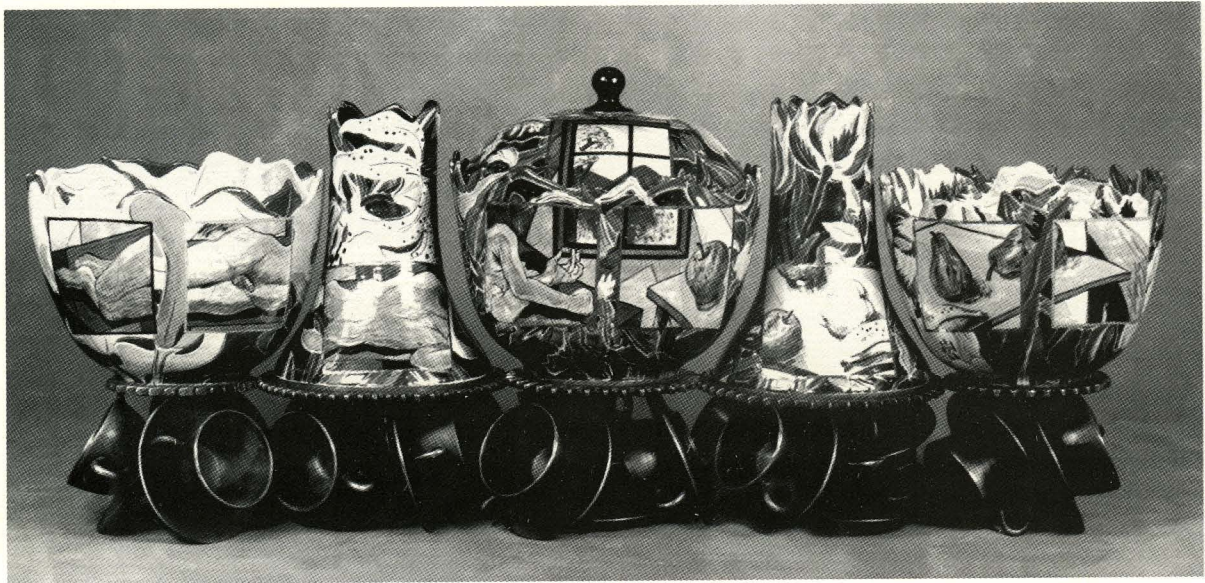
Notes

- 1 Paul Mathieu. "Artist Statement", Ms., n.d.
- 2 There are, for example, more than fifty casts of the large version of the *Age of Bronze*.
- 3 Letter to the author, 19 February 1997.
- 4 Alicia Legg, *The Sculpture of Matisse*, New York 1972, p. 62.
- 5 Letter from the artist, 28 January 1998.
- 6 Levine and other artists whose work was characterized as *appropriation art* where the focus of **Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture**, at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston 1986; see also Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art." *Artforum*, September 1982, pp. 43-56.
- 7 Reid Shire. **6, New Vancouver Modernism**. Vancouver: Belkin Gallery, 1998, p. 60.
- 8 Pierre Macherey. **Theory of Literary Production**. London, 1978, chaps. 13 & 14.
- 9 Walter Benjamin. **The Paris of the Second Empire in Beaudelaire**. London, 1973, p. 17.

Garniture # 2, porcelain/bronze

L: 175 cm., 1991-96

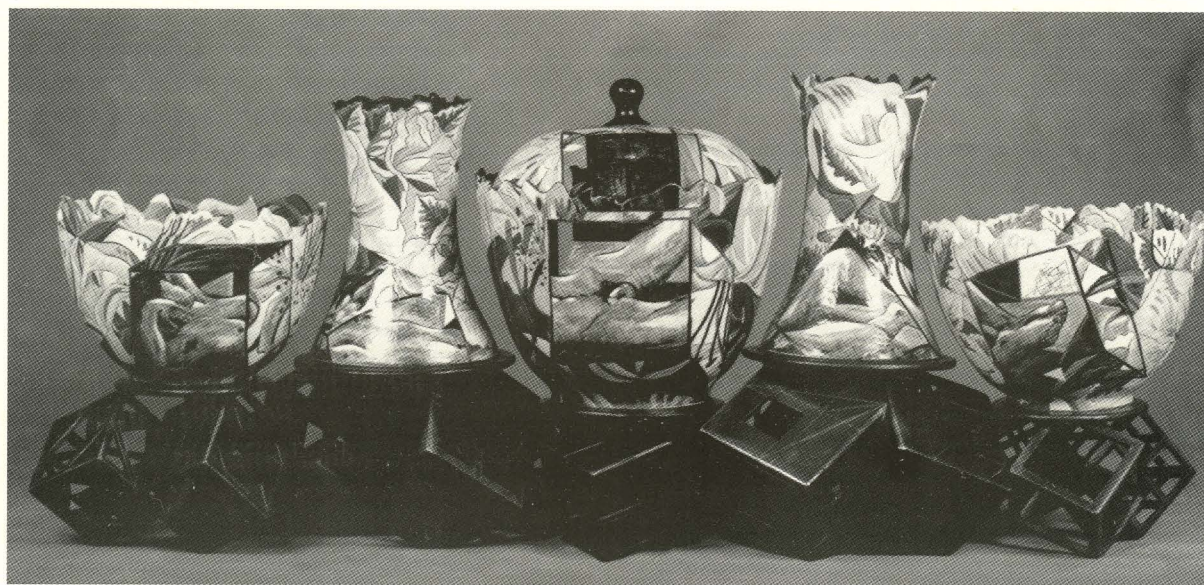
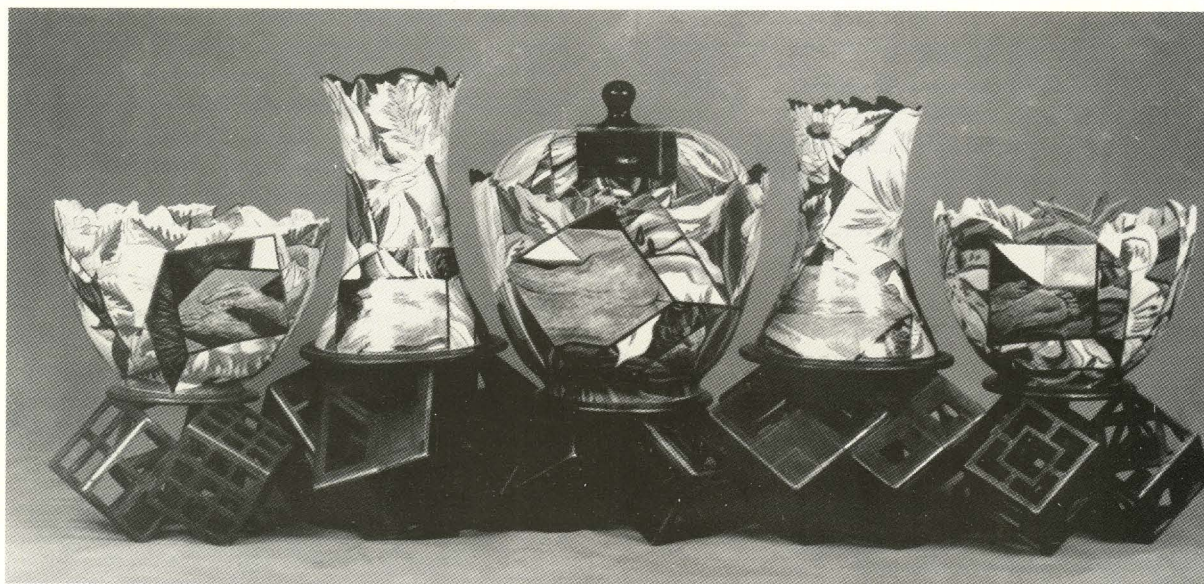
Top: day / Bottom: night



Garniture # 4, porcelain/bronze

L: 175 cm., 1994-96

Top: front / Bottom: back



Paul Mathieu — Resume

Born July 28, 1954, Bouchette, Quebec, Canada

EDUCATION

- 1987 MFA, UCLA, Los Angeles
- 1984 MA, SFSU, San Francisco
- 1982 The Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta
- 1982 UQAM, Montreal, Diploma in Printmaking
- 1979 North Staffordshire Polytechnic,
Stoke-on Trent, UK
- 1977 Alberta College of Art, Calgary
- 1975 Cégep du Vieux-Montréal

GRANTS, PRIZES and BURSARIES

- 1996 "A" Grant, Canada Arts Council
- 1994 6th National Ceramics Biennial
(Trois-Rivières and Public Prizes)
- 1993 Tama Art Studio Artist in Residence Program,
Tokyo, Japan
- 1992 Pierre Legault Prize, 5th National Ceramics
Biennial
"B" Grant, Canada Arts Council
- 1991 Bourse "A", Ministère des Affaires Culturelles,
Quebec
Project Grant, Canada Arts Council
- 1990 Prize, 4th National Ceramics Biennial, Trois-Rivières
- 1989 Bourse "B", Ministère des Affaires Culturelles,
Quebec
- 1986 Prize, 2nd National Ceramics Biennial, Trois-Rivières
UCLA Graduate Fellowship
- 1985 Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, Quebec
(Travel Grant)
- 1982-87 Fonds FCAR, Quebec (Graduate Research Grant)
- 1985 Grand Prix des Métiers d'Art
- 1984 Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, Quebec
(Expenses Grant)
- 1978 "B" Grant, Canada Arts Council

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- 1996-present Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design,
Vancouver, B.C.
- 1996 École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts,
Paris, France

- 1991-96 Concordia University, Montreal
- 1995 Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design,
Vancouver, B.C. (summer)
- 1991 Allende Institute, San Miguel, GTO, Mexico
- 1988 Université du Québec, Montreal
(Ceramic Sculpture)
- 1985/88 Cégep du Vieux Montréal
- 1984 San Francisco State University
(teaching assistantship)
- 1980-81 Cégep du Vieux Montréal
- 1976-80 Centre des Arts Visuels, Montreal

SELECTED GROUP SHOWS (with catalogue **)

- 1997 "Foulem, Mathieu, Milette", Musée du Québec**
- 1996 "White on White", Canadian Clay and Glass
Gallery, Waterloo and touring**
- 1995 NCECA Clay National, Minneapolis and touring**
- 1994 6th National Ceramics Biennial, Trois-Rivières **
Tama Art Studio, Machida Art Gallery,
Tokyo, Japan **
- 1993 "Subversive Crafts", MIT List Visual Arts Centre,
MA. **
"The Illusion of Place", Greenwich House Pottery,
N.Y.
"Les Vaisseaux d'Art", Musée Marcil,
Saint-Lambert, Quebec **
Four Quebecers in Syracuse, Everson Museum,
Syracuse, N.Y.**
- 1992 International Ceramic Competition, Mino, Japan **
International Ceramic Invitational,
Taipeh, Taiwan **
5th National Ceramics Biennial, Trois-Rivières **
The Canadian Craft Museum, Vancouver **
Gayramics, Galerie Lieu Ouest, Montreal
The Society for Contemporary Crafts, Pittsburgh **
"The Eccentric Teapot", Shigaraki Museum, Japan
- 1991 The Hand and Spirit, Scottsdale, AZ (NCECA) **
Quebec Impressions in Clay,
Galerie Barbara Silverberg, Montreal
4th Nat. Ceramic Invitational,
The Canton Art Institute, Ohio **

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