

Nouveau **Moche** Pottery

Jonathan Kaplan

CANADIAN SOCIAL CRITIC MARSHALL MCLUHAN coined the phrase “the media is the message”. This declaration is not as simple as it seems. The word media means so many things that trying to force it into single meaning is like carrying Jell-O™ with rubber bands. The plurality of meanings makes this phrase a conceptual master key for the two major movements of Modernism. Define media as the material from which objects are forged – the statement embodies the reductionism

function: to deliver content to an audience. Their unique mechanics distinguish these media. The creation of objects for display in authoritative institutions (such as galleries and museums) is just another tradition. Jonathan Kaplan’s recent works of pottery, *Nouveau Moche* reflect this tradition. He merges his own cultural history with forms and motifs appropriated from Moche Pottery to create his art. In doing so, Kaplan illuminates the ramification of McLuhan’s statement.



Nouveau Moche Ware – Gone Fishin’. 2010.



Nouveau Moche Ware – Fish and Bird (Double). 2010.

of orthodox Modernism. Critics like Greenberg, Fried and Krause all propose that the role of the artist is to make the essential qualities of the material opaque to the viewer. Change this definition of media to mean the social institutions that celebrate the object and the meaning changes. McLuhan’s dictate embodies the conceptual ground of subversive movements like Dadaism and Pop-Art. Consider that print, broadcast, theatre and the internet are all distinct media. They do not differ in their primary

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The most immediate influence on Kaplan’s work from his own cultural history is Pop-Artist Andy Warhol. Conceptually, both artists build on the same historical source: the Dadaist art movement. They adhere to and diverge from this precedent in similar ways. The Dadaist asserted that the crucial element in turning objects into art was the identification of an object as art by an authoritative institution. The best known Dadaist artist, Marcel Duchamp, created the world’s most famous



Nouveau Moche Teapot. 2011. 13 x 6 in.

ceramic art piece, *The Fountain*, a graffiti scrawled urinal. The work offered was not visually appealing, well designed or remotely uplifting. The only thing that made this work art is that it was shown in a gallery and later in art history texts. The subject (urinals) was not normally associated with art. Use of subjects not normally associated with fine art creates the most obvious link between Duchamp and Warhol. Kaplan uses fish and birds for his images while Warhol made thousand of images of soup cans and celebrities.

Kaplan and Warhol, however, veer away from Duchamp on different aspects. First of all,



Nouveaux Moche Ware 5 – Big Fish. 2011.

Duchamp's *Readymades* are not representational. The wine rack he places in a gallery not only looks like a wine rack, it is a wine rack. Relative to this, there is a formal difference. Furthermore, Duchamp shows *The Fountain* on its side so that any quality of proportion is obliterated. His works have little or no visual appeal. On the other hand, Kaplan and Warhol conceptually create depictions of beautiful objects. A consistent source of this beauty is

imperfection. For example, each takes what would be considered flaws in the manufacturing process to generate beauty. Warhol's silkscreen reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (and his use of streaks and light spots) create beauty. This dynamic also plays out in Kaplan's *Gone Fishing*, a pitcher form with a stirrup handle dissected by a slipcast fish. It is where the glaze drips, pools and pulls from the body of the form that makes it far more beautiful than a uniformly glazed version of the same object.

All three artists use reproduction techniques to fabricate their works. As indicated by Kaplan's title, *Nouveau Moche*, he uses Moche pottery as a source material for his work. Moche culture thrived on the



*Nouveau Moche Ware – Deconstructed Bird. 2011.
14 x 8 in.*

north coast of Peru between 100 CE and 600 CE. One of the more distinct aspects of Moche ceramics is the use of a ring shaped stirrup spout. Kaplan repeats this form throughout his work. He produces the stirrup spout by combining slip cast Fisher-Price toy rings and commercial corrugated plastic tubes. Curiously, this production method closely mimics the process originally used by the Moche. Moche potters create the distinctive round spouts by pressing clay into moulds. This appropriation generates a sense of irony. People typically assume

that constructing an object with only the hands and maybe a few simple tools imbues the object with a magical aura. This aura is projected on the 'primitive' arts. Somehow, the absence of our clever ways of making things creates a sense of purity. By appropriating casting technology as well as the form from the source, Kaplan tweaks this association.

The second aspect of Moche Pottery is that it depicts highly detailed and graphic martial and sexual images. Kaplan's images are considerably more innocuous. While he may have had many reasons for this divergence, one might be the difference in what the media accepts. The primary difference between Moche and Post-Modern America is that of monolithic and pluralistic cultures. Moche society



Nouveaux Moche Ware 2 – Janus Bird and Blue Fish. Both 2011.

would have one class structure, one set of manners and one collection of mores. Contemporary America is a quilt of different norms that defines the contemporary media. In a monolithic society, the rules of what can be and cannot be depicted are clear whereas they become blurred and confusing in a pluralistic society. This is evident in the multiple meanings attributed to Kaplan's fish image. One person can read them as simply being or as a naturalist emblem while others steeped in Christian ideology might see them as symbolic or moving. My first impression was that *Big Mouth Billy Bass*,

a rubber fish mounted on wood, would flip away and play popular songs when it passed by. Unlike his Moche predecessors, Kaplan cannot guess what or how a viewer is going to read his images. So the media is defining the work.

In defining the act of appropriation, Kaplan states, "We take bits from our visual universe and distil them, funnel them through our brain matter with the hope of defining a style, a voice, of our own works." Through this thought process, Kaplan



Nouveaux Moche Ware 11 – Deconstructed Bird. 2011.

offers a third spin on McLuhan's mandate. The artist becomes the media. Their uniqueness and sameness within whatever culture they work becomes the message.

Tony Merino is a freelance writer in Dallas, Texas, US. He earned his MFA from the University of North Texas in 1992. Since then he has published and lectured internationally on contemporary ceramic art. This year, Merino presented a lecture: "The Politics of Perception: Post-Foucauldian Ceramics", at the NCECA Conference in Tampa, Florida, US. All photos by JC Bourque.