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# LECTURE: DEATH POTS

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*Every ceramic object exists to be ultimately broken.*  
- Paul Mathieu

Consider several versions of *Socrates' Cup* by Constantin Brancusi on display in the reconstructed Brancusi studio at the Pompidou Center in Paris. The first subject of *Socrates' Cup* is death and it is always full, a fitting image for the theme of death that fills the fundament of ceramics. Expressions by artists and critics about “the place between,” “in-between,” etc., are now so prevalent that it can seem like that is the only place there is. The place in-between is so filled in that we no longer recognize other places. Yet the art of death is the ultimate in-between. Professor Nigel Llewellyn, head of research at Tate, describes *Quietus*, the title of a recent exhibition of cinerary jars and funerary urns by Julian Stair. *Quietus* is “quit” instead of “quiet.” It is to be discharged. “[T]he art of death...functions in the space between the binary opposites of Life and Death and requires a tripartite structure to give due recognition, indeed priority, to the liminal stages that fall between such simple terminal points...”<sup>1</sup>

Some features of death pots are preservation, transformation, regeneration, decadence, violence, and obsolescence. In the following examples of death pots, these features may overlap, intertwine, and fuse with one another in imaginary representation and in metaphorical allusion. Julian Stair's jars, generally contoured like human bodies, attempt to rectify the body's failure to contain after its discharge to death. The word “discharge” suggests a formlessness to be reformed or re-informed. Meanwhile the jars support the survivor's need to re-contain in order to remember the loss. An amphora originally made to transport foodstuffs from the area that is now Tunisia, was later cut in the belly in order to place the corpse of a child within. A fragment of a different amphora closed the coffin buried in Marseille. From a young age, Chinese emperor Qinshihuang devoted unspeakable resources to his afterlife. Built over several decades in the third century BCE, his enormous mausoleum complex contains thousands of life-size terra cotta warriors spread over hundreds of sites. On the other end the spectrum, Grayson Perry prepares his preservation by casting out to the marketplace prefabricated reliquaries, seeking to guarantee his memorialization among collectors, fans, and the otherwise curious.

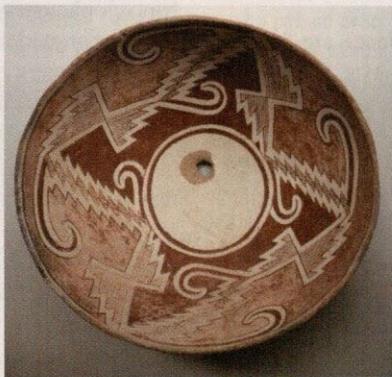
A Mimbres bowl with a hole deliberately punched through, commonly referred to as a “kill hole,” was almost certainly funerary. Mimbres bowls appear to have been used ordinarily by the living before being conferred to the dead. The Mimbres (in what

is now New Mexico) “deposited their dead in the contracted position, placing bowls over the crania.”<sup>2</sup> The drawings on the pots, of which there are thousands, including counterfeits, resemble the very few remaining ancient drawings on the walls of kivas, which are underground holy places of some Southwestern peoples. These kiva walls, like the pots, are built by coiling the earth. The similarities between pot and kiva can lead to the interpretation that

this death pot may not so much re-contain or preserve the body, but that instead it provides the deceased with a place, a kiva, a sky-vault, a new world. Was this death pot particularly linked in life to the person whose cranium it covered in death, or was it just any bowl on hand at the time of burial? Joe Bova's *White Rabbit Canopic* draws on the canopic jars of ancient Egypt. These preserve certain organs of the deceased and feature lids in the forms of heads of the sons of the god Horus who are a falcon, a baboon, a jackal, and a human, guardians of the entrails contained within. Bova transforms the jar and complicates its function by topping it with a rabbit's head, symbol of fertility. “Death of the Bear” was a popular Staffordshire transferware image of a bear hunt. Phoebe Cummings transformed the image physically and temporally in her 2013 installation called *After the Death of the Bear*. Rendered in clay instead of ceramic on a greatly increased scale to life size in the now-closed and ruinous Spode factory in England, Cummings' landscape is stripped of its characters—no hunters, no bear. Her use of clay for its own performance—its entropic collapse in drying—recalls the figurines of Dolni Vestonice, whose destruction was inherent in their fabrication.

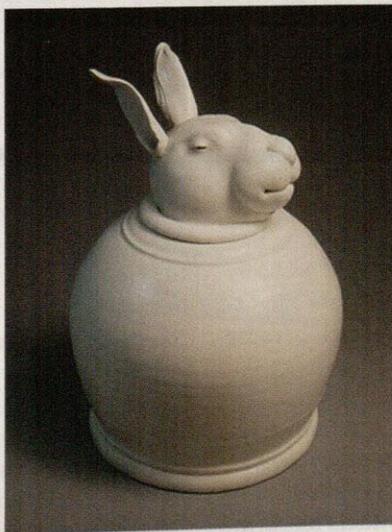
For centuries before the Tang dynasty in China, tombs of the wealthy were often raided because they were filled with so many valuables meant to furnish their dead in the next world. In response, sancai or three-color glaze—originally iron and copper lead-silicate glazes over buff clay body—distinguished an almost exclusively funerary ware from wares with other glazes made for the living. Thus preserved by the mark of death, an enormous range of sancai pots and figurines has influenced later pottery such as that of Staffordshire and Provence, as well as many artists of our time, such as Betty Woodman, for whom the sancai is not necessarily a mark of death as it was for the people of the Tang dynasty.

Inspired in part by his work in the restoration of and trade in prehistoric Native American pottery, Rick Dillingham brought about the regeneration of his own pots by breaking them during formation, then glazing the shards separately, then reassembling the pots. Cheryl Ann Thomas' collapsed coil-built pots capture



Death Pots: Above, *Bowl*, 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ " Earthenware with slip, unknown Mimbres potter, 1000-1250 CE. Photo: Brian Molanphy.

Below, Joe Bova, *White Rabbit Canopic*, 16" Porcelain with glaze, 2007. Photo: Joe Bova.



a moment of transformation and decay. Apparently vitrified, the pots collapse in the kiln; however, the coils retain their integrity, providing a folding seam, like a crumpled-up weaving. Often these are composites of more than one pot, such as *Twain*. Philippe Godderidge makes pots that are at once exuberantly colored and on the verge of losing their form. When he applies that approach to cinerary urns, the conflict is most evident between the urge to preserve and the impulse toward decay. Hilda Hellström cobbled together *The Materiality of a Natural Disaster* from Fukushima soil and polyvinyl acetate in 2012. A project by Hellström with Naoto Matsumura, it “attempts to make use of the soil from Matsumura’s rice-fields, which due to radiation had become useless. A series of food vessels containing low level radiation was created; physical memories as an allegory of the devastation, reflecting the situation in the area.”<sup>3</sup>

The most resolute manifestations of decadence are figurative. Robert Arneson’s 1990s series of *Chemo* busts, foretelling the artist’s demise, exploits the void to show that even if the figure is not a pot, it remains a container, whose hollowing-out through chemotherapy leaves the viewer frighteningly uncertain of the presence or absence of the figure. Bitā Fayyazi collected dead dogs in Iran, which served as her models for *Road Kill*, her 1998 terra cotta sculptures, as described by Claudia Clare in *Interpreting Ceramics*. She displayed the ceramics around Tehran, then buried them along with the dead dogs. In the West, we may see a kind of pathos in this project; however, in Iran *Road Kill* is daringly subversive. Stereotypically, dogs are disliked in Iran and affording them a decent burial could constitute a religious, and therefore legal, offense.

Marc Alberghina makes ceramics that may be related to the trend toward macabre decadence in much of North American figuration, though this Frenchman goes further to show the physical and metaphorical manifestations of transformation by fire with violent results in the life-size *Spontaneous Combustion, 2015*. Douris’ *Red-Figure Cup Showing the Death of Pentheus* has Dionysos at the center of one side, seated with a wine cup. Dionysos often appears to surveil a festival in his honor. However, in this case the figures around him hold parts of a human leg. On the other side of the cup, Douris painted the upper body of Pentheus, which the figures around are tearing to pieces. The figure on the left holding the tunic is probably Pentheus’ mother, who with the others, Dionysos drove to ecstatic frenzy to mistake Pentheus for a wild animal, because Pentheus has insulted Dionysos.

That ceramics and all the arts picture violent death so frequently, warrants other discussions about our proclivities beyond the scope of this paper. Given the vast range of choices, two examples are drawn from the *Caprichos* or *Disasters of War* by Francisco Goya, largely inspired by the French invasion of Spain during the First Empire. From that series of etchings, *Nobody Knows Why* shows prisoners who were tied to posts then executed. Richard Notkin gave the title *Nobody Knows Why* to a 2003 teapot, part of his *20th Century Solutions* Series. Representing a bombed out building—the spout is the chimney—it resembles many photographs of World War I, a little more than a century after the events in Goya’s images took place, though it could be from anywhere anytime in the last century. Goya’s *What Valor!* celebrates a Spanish heroine, which Peter Fischli and David Weiss reproduced in *Suddenly It All Makes Sense* (a.k.a. *Suddenly This Overview*), their series of hundreds of clay maquettes made from 1981 to 2006. The se-

ries puts heroic or even sublime events together with mundane ones on a level, banal, playing field. Humor in violent death is not just macabre it can also be slapstick. Rosemarie Fiore created a series called *Death Scenes* in polychrome stoneware featuring the Chuck Jones cartoon characters, Wile E. Coyote and Road Runner. In all these scenes, Fiore reversed the Coyote’s perennial bad luck in hunting: His fabulous devices trap his prey in gruesome detail.

Monte Testaccio is a hill of terra cotta shards piled up from the 1st to 3rd century CE, 135 feet high, in Rome. The name Monte Testaccio comes from the Latin “testa” and the Italian “cocci” both of which mean “potsherd.” A massive testament to planned obsolescence, the hill is entirely composed of pottery, almost all of it from olive oil amphorae. Ai Wei-Wei raised this point in his triptych photograph called *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn, 1995*. Whether around the Mediterranean or in China, the destruction of these containers ensured their continuous replacement for centuries. Elsewhere the destruction was ritualized, as among the Wari (in what is now Peru) over 1000 years ago. Large Wari feasting pots have been reconstructed from a three-ton deposit of ceramics that were deliberately shattered and buried; conspicuous displays of wealth through planned obsolescence.

With a team of hundreds over a year’s time, Paul Cummins created *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, nearly 900,000 ceramic poppies set on metal stems around the Tower of London to commemorate the beginning of WWI and the UK soldiers who were killed in it; a flower for each of them. The effort and scale of the temporary installation must have been impressive—Cummins lost a finger making it and millions of people flocked to see the installation in 2014. Despite that, its simplistic objective disappoints. The very enormity of the installation discounts the far greater number of civilians who were killed by famine and disease caused or exacerbated by the war. It is an extreme example of the bad art school adage: make it big, make it red. These last three examples capture something more. Juan Michel Echavarría made *Bolívar’s Platter: 1999*, a series of ten photographs of a copy of the platter given to Simon Bolívar to celebrate Columbia’s independence. This symbol of the state is progressively shattered and pulverized through the series, its destruction brought about by that which it becomes—not fine grog, but cocaine. Julie Green hopes to be part of the end of the death penalty in the United States by adding 50 plates per year to her series, *The Last Supper*, which now stands at about 600 plates. Always cobalt blue fired on thrift-shop plates, each image shows a last meal of a death row inmate. *Texas 15 June 2010* shows: four eggs, four chicken drumsticks, salsa, four jalapeno peppers, lettuce, tortillas, hash browns, garlic bread, two pork chops, white and yellow grated cheese, sliced onions and tomatoes, a pitcher of milk and a vanilla shake. A Solferino coffee cup made by Haviland in Limoges, now in the Smithsonian, was preserved like a relic after a White House servant observed President Lincoln drink from it before the performance at Ford’s Theatre on April 14, 1865. It was Lincoln’s last drop.

1 Nigel Llewellyn, “Containment,” in *Julian Stair: Quietus*. (Middlesbrough: Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, 2012.)

2 J. Walter Fewkes, *The Mimbres, Art and Archaeology*. (Albuquerque: Avanu, 1989) [reprint of Smithsonian Institution papers from 1914-1924]

3 <http://hildahellstrom.se/2015/03/09/the-materiality-of-a-natural-disaster/>