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## Exhibition Review

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# **Circuit Céramique aux Arts Décoratifs: La Scène Française Contemporaine**

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[Ceramics at Les Arts Décoratifs: The Contemporary French Scene]

Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, September 17, 2010 to February 20, 2011. Curated by Frédéric Bodet.

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### **Reviewed by Alison Britton**

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Alison Britton is a ceramic artist and Senior Tutor in the Department of Ceramics and Glass, Royal College of Art, London.

“Circuits Céramiques” was a festival initiated in September 2010 for the forty-fourth assembly of the International Academy of Ceramics, meeting for the first time in Paris. This ceramics bonanza was the occasion for major museum exhibitions at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, reviewed here, but also at Sèvres, and smaller exhibitions at a further forty galleries and cultural centers.

The Arts Décoratifs exhibition is ambitiously complex; it includes ninety works of all kinds by sixty-nine French artists. Notably, more than half of those included are emerging artists. Curator Frédéric Bodet introduces the younger and less established in the field in a trio of themes on the fifth floor, where the exhibition begins, and then substantiates these themes as you descend through the fourth and third floors of the permanent collections located in this spectacular building. With the help of a map, you track down fifty installations embedded in the displays of decorative arts and furniture from the Medieval to Art Deco periods. Jazzy green diagonal lines highlight each ceramic intervention, but some are still hard to find and others are actually hard to see; the glint of a glazed surface in a darkened eighteenth-century chamber just catches the eye at times. Many of these installations were

made by more recognized artists, but it is fair to say that some of the best-known names of French ceramics were to be found in the parallel exhibition at Sèvres.

Bodet has championed “the shock of the new” in his curatorial projects of the past decade, welcoming experimental ideas that enlarge the conceptual territory. In 2005 he guest-curated “Le Corps, L’Atelier, Le Paysage: Céramique dans l’Art Contemporain” for the Biennial ceramics exhibition at Châteauroux. The thirty artists included were largely French but also from Europe and Japan, and their work was selected to emphasize new modes of practice in ceramics. The themes in this smaller exhibition were announced in the title, with the section devoted to the studio further divided into two parts: one called “Between Experience and Disorder” and the other “The Design Studio.” For “Circuit Céramique” Bodet has expanded these themes and incorporated the work of a number of the same artists. He has also used this occasion, the coordination of an unprecedented array of international exhibitions for an influx of the international ceramic audience centered around the IAC conference, to introduce new French work. (As in any contemporary European culture, residency in France defines the French ceramic scene and some of the memorable exhibitors were born elsewhere; Kirstin McCurdy and Xue Sun, for instance.)

Bodet describes the exhibition as “an itinerary.” It is both a physical and conceptual journey through diversity, from the raw to the polished. The three themes, mainly evident on the fifth floor, are: “The Body and its Metaphors,” “Imaginary Landscapes,” and “The Object and Décor: a New Angle” (Figure 1). There is very little wall text, simply

an introductory paragraph that declares that contemporary ceramics, having abolished the borders between art, craft, and design and moved beyond the traditional confines of use and decoration, produces work that is relevant to the wider contemporary art world.

One of Bodet’s strategies in the exhibition is the juxtaposition of very different works. For instance, an allusive sculptural installation such as Carole Chabron’s *Avec le Temps*, composed of white porcelain turtles and skeletal trails of powdered alumina, is in the Landscape section. So too are works by architects and designers, such as Mostapha El Oulhani’s *Fossile*, built of extruded brickclay “cells” that can be casually combined to make a bookcase. There are also striking contrasts in the Body section. Elsa Sahal’s black foot sculpture *Jambe/Pied* is massive and powerful seen next to the delicate, fetishistic riding crops and hand-held sculptures in porcelain and gold leaf by Jeffrey Haines. Also included is *Corps au Travail*, a work in video by Valerie Delarue that documents the artist flailing around in a cave of wet porcelain, a project made in collaboration with Sèvres. In the Object section we see the dark humor of the illustrated ceramic surface in vases and plates scraffitoed by Florent Le Men in his *Mon Bel Opossum*, next to Atelier Polyhedre’s play with the vase form contoured by a thigh bone, as in *Vase Fémur*, or a giant key in *Vase Clef Ancienne*.

In a show of this size and experimental range it is impossible to point to dominant modes. Graphically, a startling choice was made for the detail image used on the poster, catalog, and map. It is the head of an outlandish figure made by Michel Gouéry,



**Fig 1** View of fifth-floor installation, “The Object and Décor: A New Angle.” Left: Atelier Polyhedre, vases, 2008; Center: Laurent Dufour, *Parallélépipèdes*, 2010; Right: Emmanuel Boos, *Bordell*, 2009. “Circuit Céramique aux Arts Décoratifs: La Scène Française Contemporaine,” Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

a human/sci-fi hybrid freak with reptilian surface spotted with glaze and repellent wrinkled red sockets as protruding eyes and mouth. Four of these figures are located, with maximum incongruity, in the Medieval gallery on the third floor:

Shock value does not represent the exhibition as a whole. Although the variability of the work is challenging and there is arguably too much to take in at once, a degree of confusion may energize the audience’s imagination and stimulate questions. What does it mean to an artist to place work in an historic setting? “Fitting in” or “sticking out” of the museum context are two clear choices and both were well

explored in “Circuit Céramique.” Gouéry’s figures confront our separation from the Medieval past, and in the same vein Sylvain Thirouin describes the “improbable union” of his manhole cover spheres lying in an eighteenth-century salon, calling them *Intrusions*. As for “fitting in,” Ruth Gurrich’s painted paper and porcelain pots sit in perfect but surreal alignment with the aesthetic of the Chinoiserie room, and Johan Creten’s flower petal torso sculpture *Odore de Femmina* illuminates and pays homage to the room of Rococo furniture. Likewise, Clémence van Lunen’s abstract dark blue sculpture *Un dragon dans les Nuages* invigorates the furniture, especially the



**Fig 2** Clémence van Lunen, *Un Dragon dans les Nuages*, 2007 (left). Glazed porcelain, metal, height 105cm. Work achieved at Sèvres Factory. "Circuit Céramique aux Arts Décoratifs: La Scène Française Contemporaine," Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

carved dragon cupboard and mirror beside it (Figure 2).

Much of this work is self-made but some ceramic artists, architects, fine artists, and fashion designers have had the support of craftsmanship at Sèvres, Limoges, or Nymphenburg factories, or of potters' studios around France. Regardless, this is an exhibition of concept-led work, as you would expect in the cerebral capital of Europe. The generation of ideas is a good way for artists and designers from a broad field to

reach new propositions for ceramics; heads leading hands. But there are moments in this gargantuan and impressively risk-taking exhibition when one wishes that those parts—heads and hands—had worked together more, and the act of making had fed more closely into thought.

### Catalog

Exhibition Catalog: Bodet, Frédéric. 2010. *Circuit Céramique aux Arts Décoratifs: La Scène Française Contemporaine*. Paris: Les Arts Décoratifs.