

ceramics

M O N T H L Y



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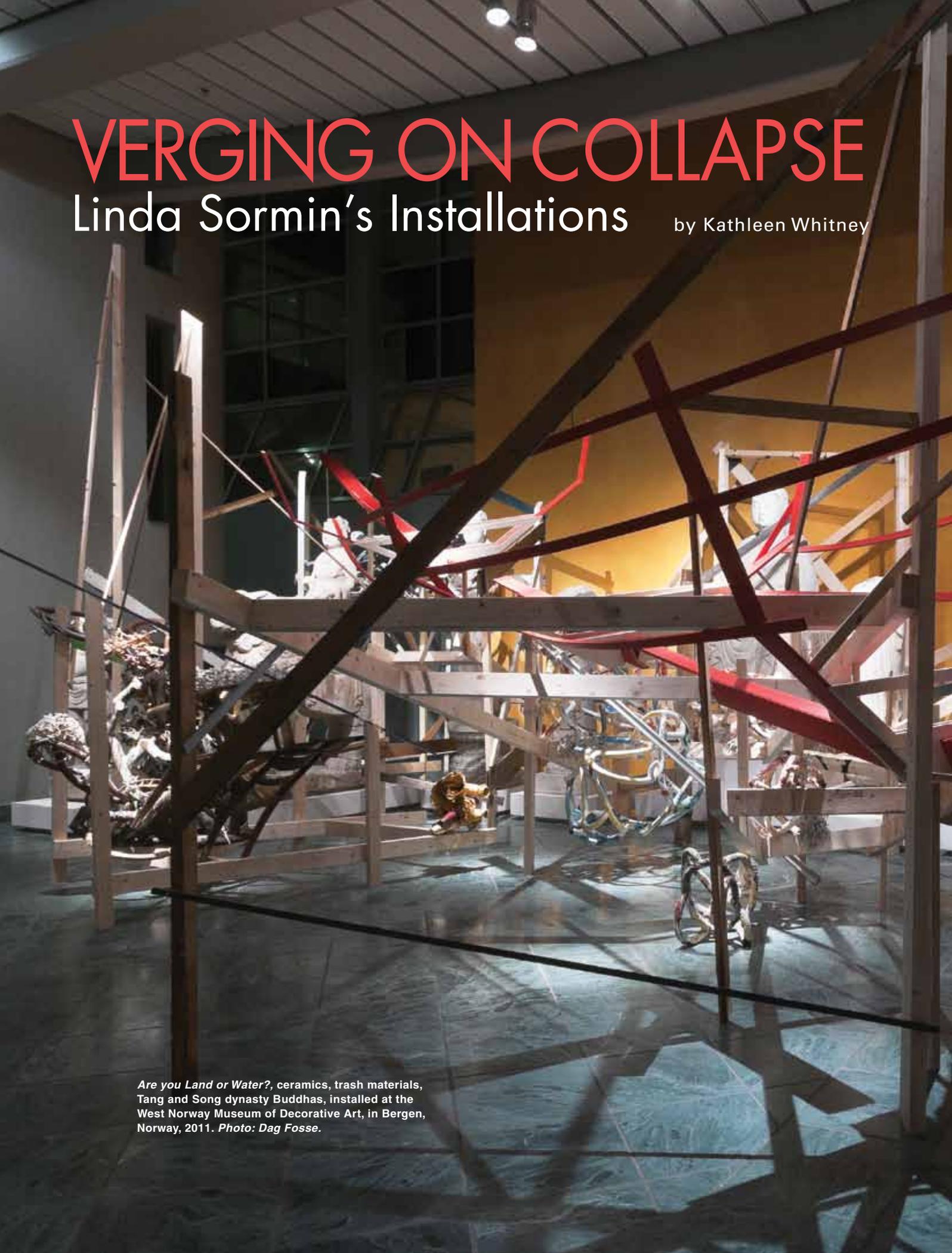
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VERGING ON COLLAPSE

Linda Sormin's Installations

by Kathleen Whitney



Are you Land or Water?, ceramics, trash materials, Tang and Song dynasty Buddhas, installed at the West Norway Museum of Decorative Art, in Bergen, Norway, 2011. *Photo: Dag Fosse.*



Linda Sormin's work is agile and gymnastic; it vaults from floor to ceiling grasping space and defying gravity. The quantity of parts and pieces is overwhelming, there's enough detail to produce information overload. Heraclitus said "you can't wade in the same river twice;" in Sormin's installations everything changes with every shift in viewpoint, you never see the same thing twice. The work is a myriad of streams rather than a single current; it's borderless and incorporates many sources. The work is complex and layered, messy and contradictory, embracing the grotesque and incongruous. Although Sormin's materials represent an inventory of the cast-off, useless, unwanted, and unstable, she fuses these disparate elements into entities that are coherent and beautiful. Her installations are architectural interventions made up of multi-layered intertwined objects; the deluge of fragments surround islands of specificity. Despite the fact that everything seems generated from a centrifugally spinning center, the core of her visual irrationality is structured by a logic that binds the bit-torrent together. Every element evokes different responses and remembered experiences; the sculptures are a repository of histories and associations. The installations masquerade as abstractions but are fully engaged with social functions and concerns, particularly in the way they address consumer culture.

Sormin does little advance planning; she says her research "includes scavenging, collecting, disassembling, and rebuilding fragments." Her work is performative, situational, and intuitive, created on-site using an extensive assortment of ceramic elements and found objects. The aggregation of materials creates a chute of pieces that resemble the spiraling action of clouds. She pushes the weight-bearing capability of ceramics to their edge, reaching for the instant just before the next addition destroys what's been assembled. If any section breaks, she proceeds with the new situation. Her installations structure the viewer's attention; you have to walk around to see all sides and tread carefully as the work often pools onto the floor. The circuitous viewing produces an intense involvement with parts as well as wholes, the elements conceal as well as reveal.

Sormin's preoccupation with found materials reflects her interest in the concepts



of migration and identity. Her engagement with ideas regarding migration originates in her experience as a young immigrant relocating with her family from Bangkok to Canada. She has a migratory lifestyle and is frequently involved in international projects. After teaching for five years at the Rhode Island School of Design, she returned to Canada and is currently based in Toronto. Her work translates and reconfigures ideas, materials, and objects as they move through space, time, and culture. The issue of identity has to do with fluidity and transformation; the appearance of her work with its multiplicity of viewpoints resembles an identity-in-progress, an illustration of continuous change.

Although Sormin's installations undermine the architecture of their environment, they also provide context and meaning, determining her visual strategies. In 2011, the West Norway Museum of Decorative Art in Bergen, Norway commissioned her to create an installation in a space housing part of the Chinese Collection. This exhibition, "Are you land or water?" incorporated Song and Tang Dynasty Buddhas and various objects she found in the area including construction scrap and ceramic collectibles. As one looked through the porous, reef-like structures of her work, the ancient Chinese artifacts seemed to flicker, vanish, and reappear.

Sormin uses a range of objects and techniques including fired and unfired clay combined with shards, test tiles, and found ceramic objects. The fired work is handbuilt from porcelain, stoneware, and earthenware, and resembles honeycombed grids. Ceramic elements are combined with pipe, plywood, old floorboards, wiring and cloth, plastic items, and scavenged finds from dumpsters, often partly hidden but recognizable. The work is assembled on and around non-ceramic supports and put together so it's both below and above eye-level, creating an over-scale presence. It's the little pieces of content, broken bits of pottery, chairs, and wood structures, that keep her work from falling into abstraction or mere collage.

"Neverhole," at the Gardiner Museum (www.gardinermuseum.on.ca) in Toronto (Sept.–Oct. 2013), is one of Sormin's recent works. Sormin describes it as "part 'Neverland' (as in *Peter Pan*) where you don't have to be a grown-up and part 'rabbit hole' (as in *Alice In Wonderland*) where adventures can happen."

The title is also a pun: never whole. The installation was inspired by Sormin's conversations with the philosopher Dr. Keota Fields regarding



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1 *mine (i hear him unclip me)* (detail), ceramics, trash materials, miner's hard hat, installed at the Denver Art Museum, in Denver, Colorado, 2011. 2 *mine (i hear him unclip me)*, ceramics, mixed media, installed at the Denver Art Museum, in Denver, Colorado, 2011. 1–2 Photos: Jeff Wells. 3 *My voice changes when I speak your language*, ceramics, trash materials, installed at the Jane Hartsook Gallery, in New York, New York, 2012. Photo: Clarence Sormin. 4 *Neverhole*, ceramics, trash materials, installed at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, Canada, 2013. 5 *Neverhole* (detail), porcelain-skinned piece cracked open by the artist's mother, trash materials from Leslie Spit, installed at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, Canada, 2013. 4–5 Photos: Frances Juriansz. *The Neverhole* exhibition was created with support from Sheridan College.

Mereological Nihilism. As Sormin defines it in her video of “Neverhole” (www.lindasormin.com/news), Mereology proposes that “there is no existence of objects with proper parts. Instead of parts there are simples—things that can never be whole.”

The punning title is also a description of what happens during the show. Twice a week, one visitor to the exhibition was selected to break open one of twelve porcelain-skinned pieces in the space. This person was given a hammer and chisel that was carried by the artist to and from the museum in a red, patent-leather hatbox. Sormin wasn't so much interested in the action of smashing as in the idea of opening up or excavating. This engagement invites the public to play with the ritual of openings in museums and galleries. What's central to the work's meaning is that the action of cracking open examines the way this work conceals and discloses meaning and process. Broken pieces were left on the floor creating new permutations, exposing the once hidden interior and contents of the work. The piece carries within itself 30 or so objects, including kitschy ceramics, porcelain teacups, little plastic birds, and a blue willow plate. The assembly is extremely colorful; many of the ceramic pieces are glazed with multi-colored stripes and polka dots.

Neverhole consists of a waterfall of parts skewered and supported by a long vertical tension pole that reaches from floor and ceiling. Circular sections of plywood twirl around the cascade of objects; every angle is subsumed in twist and skew. All materials that comprise Neverhole function as supports as well as elements of the geography and architecture of the unit. Each grouping is held together by root-like adhesions of pinched-out, unfired clay used like putty or glue; the spaces between the elements are as important as the components.

Sormin focuses on issues of belief or disbelief and the maintenance or alteration of traditions; her work combines destruction with construction. Her incorporation of altered ceramic kitsch, recognizable fragments and familiar objects is a critique of consumer culture and the way it configures reality and personal relationships. Sormin collects the detritus of culture and changes their meaning as she pieces together new aggregations. The power of her work is based on its interaction and collaboration with the viewer who finds, identifies and reacts to the objects within their chaotic environment. Sormin's accumulations point to their key proposal: the world is not minimal and reality is in flux. Her work deals in dichotomies and ambiguities, permanence versus impermanence, observer versus participant—it repurposes the nature of art and social arrangements and pushes the use of clay to its furthest possible edge. The reality of Sormin's work lies in its uncertainty; you discover that you prefer her modified view of reality, where, like Alice in Wonderland, you encounter something fantastical, not quite knowing what it is.

Linda Sormin is a professor at Sheridan College in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. To see more of her work, visit www.lindasormin.com.

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Linda Sormin shares her process and ideas for her installations, including *Neverhole*, in a video included in this issue's digital edition at www.ceramicsmonthly.org

