

ceramics

M O N T H L Y

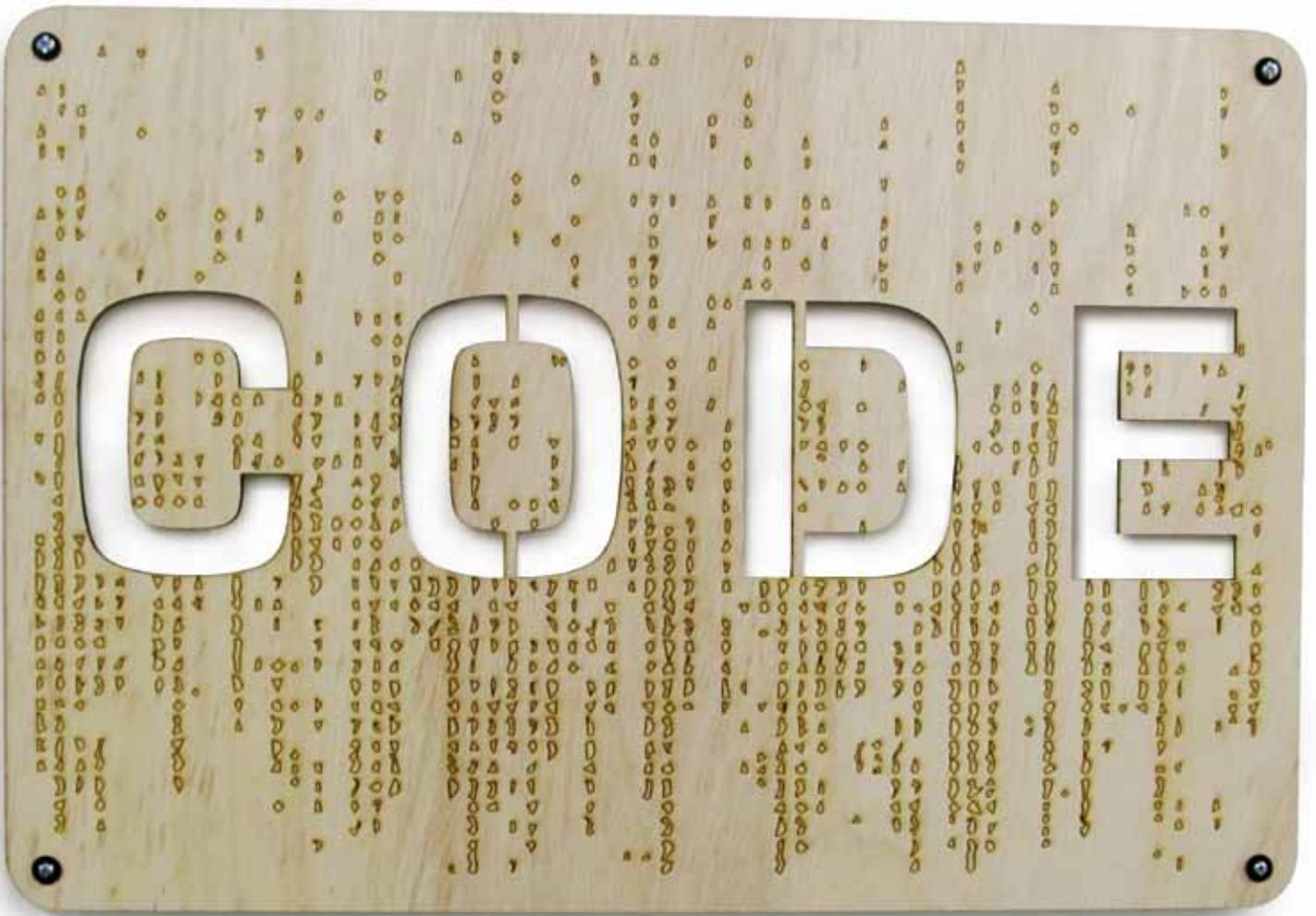


Cover: Matt Repsher

Spotlight: Michael Sherrill

Clay Culture: Kiln Gods

Technical: Dichroic Ceramics



1

BY GLEN R. BROWN

In the early 1960s, before the mistral wind of post-structuralism swept much of the humanism from the humanities, historian Lynn White, Jr. famously argued that technology opens doors, but people choose whether or not to pass through them. Such faith in human agency and its resistance to coercive factors of context ought to seem romantic today, as code-based digital technologies play a central role in forming our ideas of the code-based nature of so much of our world, even ourselves. We seem circumscribed by codification, by systems of representation of information ranging from computer binary code to the technologically discerned sequencing of nucleotides in DNA. Are our new digital technologies deterministic after all? Has experience become mere deciphering and being just an act of playing out the ramifications of codes?

If the NCECA-affiliated exhibition “CODE” (Spring Street Studios, Houston, Texas, March 20–23, 2013) did not tendentiously address these questions, it could nevertheless be said to have brought them front and center



2

1 Exhibition title wall sign, designed by Bryan Czibesz. 2 Linda Sormin's *3 Means I'm Thirsty*, to 12 in. (30 cm) in length, glazed earthenware, found shards, 2013. Photos: Bryan Czibesz.

through the irony of representing immaterial codification in a medium so sensorial as clay. The overtly material, and in some cases literally hands-on, nature of the art in CODE resisted reduction to mere representation of information and even asserted an implicitly humanistic perspective at odds with cybernetics. CODE seemed, in fact, emphatically to deny that the concept of information as ultimate constituent of reality could ever affect ordinary human experience in the ways that it has influenced inquiry in the disciplines of genetics or particle physics.

The humanistic air of CODE concentrated thickest around the works of Linda Sormin and Holly Hanessian. Sormin's *3 Means I'm Thirsty*, incorporating four vaguely visceral forms impressed by the fingers of the artist's mother, commemorated a code of hand gestures that Sormin and her mother employed after a surgical procedure left the latter temporarily unable to speak. Something poignantly human and patently irreducible to the abstract logic of the code clearly demanded embodiment in the marks of a special set of fingers. Similarly, Hanessian's *Touch in Real Time: A Project of the Senses* focused on individualized imprinting of clay and a specific incarnation of art in the artist herself. Central to *Touch in Real Time* was a social interaction in which Hanessian grasped the hand of a gallery goer for 6–10 seconds, impressing a piece of wet clay between respective palms and sending encoded neural impulses to the participants' pituitary glands to release the bonding hormone oxytocin.

The idea of natural codes has historically held fascination. To the Renaissance imagination, the exponential propagation of rabbits in a closed community, the spiral distribution of seeds in a flower head, and the shape of a nautilus shell, all expressible through the Fibonacci sequence, seemed tantalizing confirmation of a mathematical order deeply ensconced within the variety of nature. Our modern computer technologies, facilitating, for example, a description of the Mandelbrot set, have given new dimension to the concept that simple mathematical rules underlie natural complexity. Responding to this development, Patsy Cox (who is also the current NCECA board president) created *Romanesco Fractal in Logarithmic Spiral* (10–11), invoking fractal geometry in the medium of a variant form of cauliflower, Romanesco broccoli, in which self-symmetry plays itself out in the composition of each bud from identically configured smaller buds distributed in a logarithmic spiral. Significantly, however, Cox's installation of sixteen clusters of spiral-impressed porcelain nodules eschewed reduction to mathematical functions in favor of metaphorical extension into the realm of human experience: the urban landscape and its "mixtures of culture, race, and identity."

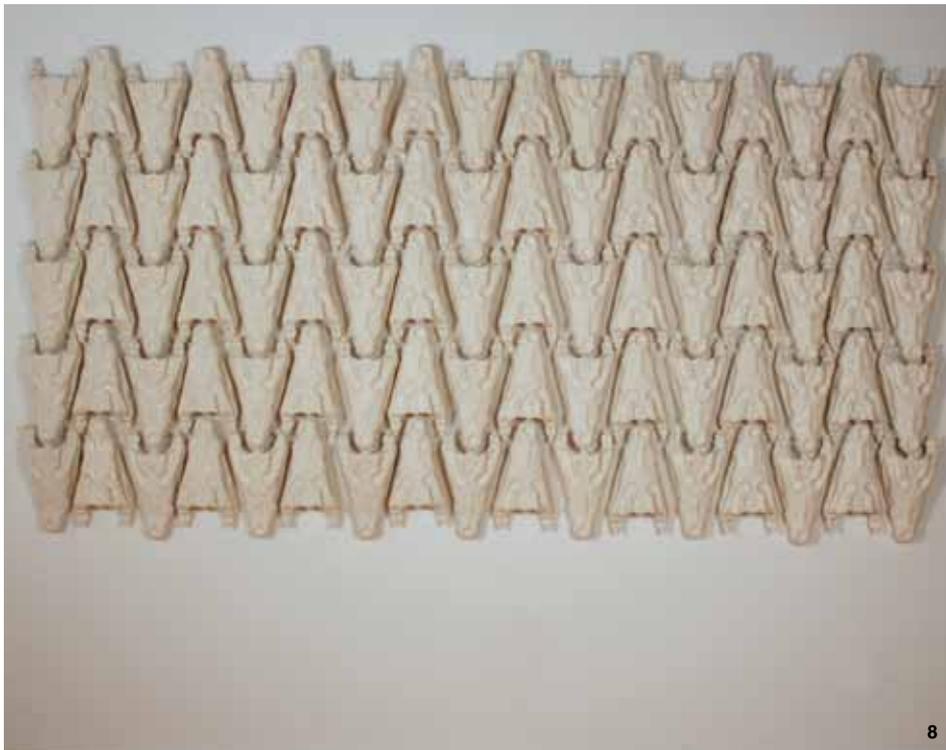
Mia Mulvey's *Crocodyllus Moreletii* seemed likewise intent upon investigating systems of digital codification



3–5 Holly Hanessian's *Touch in Real Time Project*, 2012–13.
Installation photos: Bryan Czibesz.



7



6–7 Amanda Small's *WithinYouWithoutYou. Code*, installation detail and overview, approximately 12 ft. (3.7 m) in height, porcelain slip, paper, foam, ceramic pigments, vinyl, acrylic, 2013. 8–9 Mia Mulvey's *Crocodylus Moreletii*, installation view and detail, 10 ft. (3 m) in length, porcelain, 2009. Photos 6, 7, and 9: Bryan Czibesz.



10

only to return to tangible terms of human experience: “our relationship with nature.” The wall-mounted sculpture of 85 interlocking crocodile skulls—fabricated through X-ray CT scanning of actual specimens followed by printing on a 3D printer, milling out versions in foam with CNC technology, taking molds of the models, and, finally, casting the skulls in porcelain, each with the names of extinct species etched onto its surface—incited emotions of guilt, nostalgia, and apprehension. In contrast, Amanda Small’s installation *Within You Without You*. *CODE* presented the codified aspects of “humanity’s relationship to the universe” in terms of wonder. Through a delicate semblance of membranes, cytoplasts, stellar nurseries, and constellations, Small invoked the imagination that fleshes out for experience the mere data received from realms far too small or too distant to be accessible to human contemplation except through such technologies as electron microscopes or high-energy telescopes.

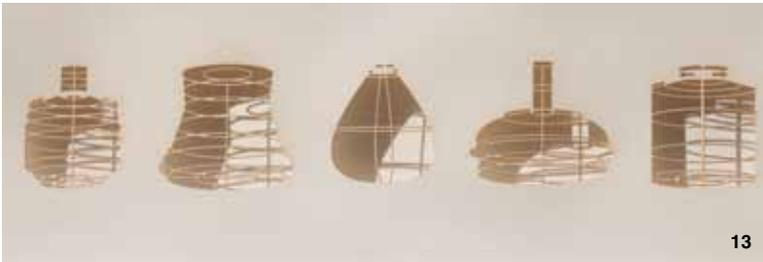


11

John Williams’ *Telescope Series: Manufactured Home*—in the guise of an ocular telescope but encapsulating a digitally produced vision that brought to mind gamma-ray telescopes—linked in irony the ability to probe deep space through high technology and the inability to see clearly into the near-term consequences of human affairs. Mounted at the end of Williams’ telescope and visible through the eyepiece was a translucent porcelain lithophane of a home: an allusion to the 2007 bursting of the American real estate bubble. Though derived from a digital image, the lithophane alluded less to codification than to concrete human experience and the emotional vestment of crisis. Like Williams’ work, Brian Gillis’ *A Prototype for an Edition of Site Specific Information Caches* seemed to skirt the emotional aspects of experience only to bring them more forcibly home. Employing digital storage media



12



13

10–11 Patsy Cox's *Romanesco Fractal in Logarithmic Spiral*, installation view and detail, variable dimensions, porcelain, 2013. Photos: Bryan Czibesz.

12 Brian Gillis' *Origin: A Prototype for an Edition of Site Specific Information Caches*, porcelain, urethane plastic, polyurethane foam, silicone, stainless steel, GPS beacon, and USB drives, 2013.

13 Julie York's *Virtual Studies*, 24 in. (61 cm) in length, cut paper, 2013.

14–15 John Williams' *Telescope Series: Manufactured Home*, 4 ft. 2 in. (1.3 m) in height, wood, glass, porcelain, acrylic, 2013. Photo: Bryan Czibesz.

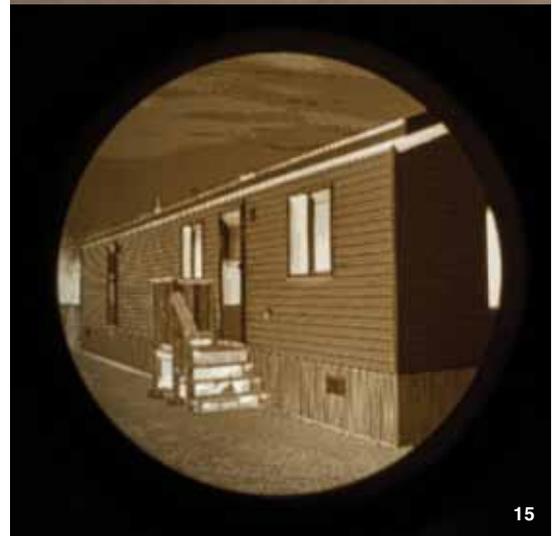


14

and a GPS beacon to “archive information about a specific site,” the work only ostensibly left humanity out of the picture. Not only did the warm pink interior seem geared to allay anxieties about cold calculation, but the work also raised the question, answerable only in the most human of terms, of why the device should be made to home in on a specific location in the first place.

Even Julie York's *Virtual Studies*, consisting of images cut into paper with the aid of digital technologies, seemed designed to frame code in distinctly human terms. The imagery—which could easily have been non-objective and cut into porcelain if the aim were merely to maintain some connection to clay—was an obvious reminder of human physicality, material experience, and needs in the tangible world: a series of silhouettes representing functional vessels.

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15