

ARTS/INDUSTRY: COLLABORATION AND REVELATION

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I don't see how a man could compete with the factory as a teacher ... not only the technical knowledge, but also the pace, the life, the energy.—Jack Earl

This sweeping exhibition surveys almost 350 works of art created in the world-renowned Arts/Industry residency program. Founded by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in 1974 to spark collaborations between artists and industrial artisans, Arts/Industry is coordinated by the Arts Center and supported and hosted by Kohler Co. The exhibition primarily features works of art that artists-in-residence have donated to the collections of the Arts Center and Kohler Co.

For four decades, artists from all over the world have used the Pottery, Foundry, and Enamel Shop of America's leading plumbingware manufacturer to create bodies of work that would have been impossible to make in their studios. More than four hundred artists have spent two to six months on the production floor of Kohler Co., alongside the men and women who cast and finish the company's products. The exchange that takes place between factory artisans and artists is central to the program's success. Artists-in-residence often use the word "transformative" to describe the effect of the experience on their careers and ways of thinking. While industry seeks efficiency and consistency, artists continually introduce the unexpected, asking "What if?" and "Why not?"

Arts Center Director Ruth DeYoung Kohler, granddaughter of Kohler Co.'s founder, conceived this most unusual collaboration in 1973. An exhibition of contemporary ceramics titled *The Plastic Earth* brought thirty ceramists to Sheboygan, and prompted DeYoung Kohler to set up a day of workshops and discussions in the factory. Inspired by fond childhood memories of the factory and its people, and encouraged by a series of conversations with Ohio artist Jack Earl, she was intrigued by the prospect of giving artists access to the resources of industry. In 1974, she invited two artists to spend four weeks in a pilot residency in the Kohler Co. Pottery.

The works on view are widely diverse in terms of medium, style, and scale. Nonetheless, certain themes weave throughout the work produced over the course of more than five hundred residencies—concepts such as the multiplicity of industrial production, the adaptive potential of plumbingware, and the massive scale made possible by the factory's equipment and copious materials. In addition, the experience connects the artists with the rich history of material culture and the social context of the factory setting. Some artists have used their residencies to experiment with media outside their usual studio practice, while others increased the scale of their work, created new series, fabricated components for installations, or realized major public commissions.

The entry way and atrium showcase a few seminal works of art from the early years of the program. *The Factory as a Toilet* by Jack Earl (OH) and the untitled executive urinal by Tom LaDousa (LA) were made during the first two residencies in 1974. These works exemplify the playful irreverence with which the two artists altered stock plumbingware. As Earl later recalled, the residency was "a mad dash at something...a search for our place in a new environment—an environment of time, space, noise, heat, men, movement, materials, and equipment." Created just two years later, *Saturday Night in Ohio* and *Ohio Boy* are very different in character and demonstrate Earl's ability to adapt the factory's casting methods to his oeuvre. Earl balances nostalgia, carefully observed detail, and sardonic wit in narrative depictions of rural Ohio. Joe Distefano's (CA) *Toilet on Fire at Cone 10* demonstrates how this artist transformed the industrial enameling processes to create a cast-iron and enamel painting with all the subtlety of watercolor.

The exhibition continues in the Small Works Gallery with more experimental work from the program's first decade. Although many residents made their own original molds, some continued to find inspiration in and to pay homage to the simple beauty of the factory's repeated forms. Karen Massaro (Ca) saw the factory's glaze flow blocks as ready-made minimal sculptures and used them as vehicles for her marbled glazes. LaDousa transformed a urinal into a fanciful *Good Toothfairy Wagon*, Clayton Bailey (CA) added handles and a spout to two toilets to create his tongue-in-cheek *Toilet that Flushes Up and Cup*, and Distefano let softened Kohler Co. lavatories slip out of his hands onto the factory floor to form the smashed sinks of his *Soap Opera* series.

Artists-in-residence are invariably influenced by the constant flow of products moving through the factory. The Projects Gallery introduces works that mirror the multiplicity of industrial fabrication. While variation may be the enemy of perfection in the factory, artists adapt Kohler Co.'s mold-making processes to create original works of art. They subvert the homogeneity of mass production in a variety of ways; for example, they might combine multiple cast components into a singular work, retain the marks of the mold, or carve and paint each element by hand. Artist Denise Pelletier recalled being struck by the extent of the human touch in the production of the factory-made goods, "watching the guys out there making something that the public believes is machine-made because they're so perfect looking." While embracing the repetition of multiples in her work *On Coming to Be and Passing Away*, Pelletier finished each of the five hundred cast vessels by hand.

Many of the contemplative works that are featured in this gallery relate to complex repeated structures that can be found in nature. Carol Prusa modeled *Sol Niger* by arranging repeated anatomical motifs into radial symmetry, and added silverpoint drawings and fiber optic lights to refer to cosmic patterns. Giselle Hicks carved floral designs into undulating tiles to create a three-dimensional wall covering that could be extended indefinitely. Kim Dickey and Susan Beiner used repeating plant motifs to build sculptures that incorporate natural forms as well as stylized motifs drawn from the traditional decorative arts.

The theme of multiplicity continues in the Arts/Industry Gallery with *Babel*, one of the most ambitious works of art to come from the residency program. Jim Neel (AL) spent just eleven weeks in the Pottery casting and firing components to create a timeless image of war that combines the features of Egyptian figures, Qin warriors, and chimpanzees. The soldiers emerge from sand as if revealed by an archeological dig. Their weapons span the history of warfare, from sticks to swords to fighter jets. Neel uses apes to portray humankind's propensity for violence and hubris, reviving the medieval tradition of representing the base qualities of man with the animal he most resembles. Neel recalls that creating this work was "always a team effort. The folks just on the other side of the wall from me were doing what I was doing, but for a living, casting sinks and toilets." The factory associates facilitated the project by supplying a holding tank for slip so Neel could cast on weekends, sharing technical advice, and notifying him when there was space on the kiln cars

Arts/Industry offers artists the opportunity to create works of massive volume as well as vast quantities of components. The immensity of the space encourages artists to work large. As Rod Bamford (Australia) noted, "The scale is awesome: instead of materials delivered in boxes and bags, they are conveyed in boxcars and Bobcats." The residency provides access to production tools, almost unlimited materials, professional photography services, studio space, housing, shipping of completed work, and uninterrupted time. It is possible for artists to make literally tons of sculptural components in a few months. Emerging artists in particular benefit from the opportunity to prepare a body of work for gallery representation or to expand into materials that are suitable for outdoor public art projects.

The Main Gallery features weighty singular works along with sculptures assembled from multiple elements. Although some of the forms derive from natural forms or from pure abstraction, architectural themes prevail. Christopher Davis-Benevides (WI) and Ernest Aryee (IL) used vitreous china to recall the architecture of their childhood homes in Peru and Ghana. Michael Bishop (CA) combined furniture and sculptural elements into a meditative space. Others changed the context of everyday objects by increasing the scale to absurd proportions. Monuments to the quotidian take form in Paul Sacaridiz's (WI) massive Jell-O mold and Steve Kelly's (MT) enormous fishing lure. Tom Spleth (NC) transcends the boundaries of the traditional vase form by pushing its dimensions beyond functional scale. Working in the Foundry, Michael Sherrill (NC) expanded the simplified form of a seed pod to create a pair of totemic works. Barbara Cooper (IL) layered sheets of cast iron to allude to the endless horizontal lines of the Midwestern landscape.

Not all of the work made in Arts/Industry is massive in size. The works in the House Galleries are characterized by their modest scale, intimate subject matter, and detailed execution. Many are inspired by the domestic realm or decorative arts. Using a cobalt blue and white palette, Ann Agee (WI) transferred her sketches of a farm-league baseball game in the Cato, WI, onto the elaborate roundels of a formal tureen. Chris Antemann (OR) slip cast sculptural components to create narrative sculptures, finished with lustrous glazes and enamel transfers. She continues to explore the history and manufacture of porcelain figurines while in residence at Meissen, Europe's oldest porcelain manufactory and the birthplace of the genre. Giselle Hicks (CA) made a series of ceramic pillows that evoke the intimacy of private domestic space. She worked in the Kohler Co. glaze lab to develop finishes that subtly blur the floral patterns she incised into the clay using the Asian technique of mishima. In addition to being relevant to contemporary art at large, these explorations are especially appropriate for artists working in a factory where the primary products produced are destined for the most private areas within homes and institutions.

Finally, this exhibition extends outside the galleries to the Arts Center's washrooms and even to the outdoors, where works of art are installed in the Arts Center gardens and throughout the Village of Kohler.

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