

An Open Letter to CFile

The list you published titled “Top 15 Male Artists: Ceramics in Fine Arts” is mind blowing for its shortsightedness and very revealing in terms of the state of gender dynamics within our field. Until recently, I have not publicly spoken up about these types of issues within the relatively small ceramics world, believing instead that I should spend my time addressing wider audiences and larger issues. In a sense, I gave up and accepted that the ceramic world will always be closed minded and predominately value white male artists and educators. But that is bullshit. I call bullshit on myself for my silence, and I call bullshit on you for this kind of journalism. We must all do better.

First, I'd like to know your sources from which you base this list. Who are you referring to when you say “the fine arts”? It seems to me that you and ‘they’ are one and the same, with your collective exclusionary visions of the medium, ignoring women, POC, and non-binary artists. If anything, the prevalence of ceramics into the fine arts world has opened it up to a wider spectrum of individuals, rather than the small audience that attends NCECA every year and enrolls in traditional models of ceramic education.

I understand that you think this method of gender separation is helpful. I want to explain that it is not. You are essentially saying: “This is the way things are, but we don't want to leave women out completely.” You say you will create a women's list, but I say don't bother. We don't need your help now, we have never gotten it before. Historically, you have favored male artists. You have written more about men, you collect more men--specifically white men. For example, the email I received advertising this list also mentioned articles on Tony Marsh, George Orr, Takuro Kuwata and Edmund de Waal (the latter two are, of course, also mentioned in your list).

This list simply reiterates the status quo. There is no need for a list when we are already familiar with these widely known artists, about whom we regularly hear, whether within ceramics or outside of it. These fifteen artists (two of whom are knights of the British order) have no problem reaching a wide audience, as they hold privilege of being men in a patriarchal art world. As men, they are already taken seriously, legitimized by their gender, not questioned, not burdened with sexual harassment, not faced with questions of how to juggle motherhood with their practice, and paid more for what they do. Their status as male artists already makes them a “safe” investments for collectors and dealers. Because of privileges they've had in the patriarchal art and academic worlds, these men already have a platform to stand on.

You have the power to create a more inclusive selection of artists that can help expand the art market, not just accept it as is. People look to CFile as a leading resource on

ceramics. By seeing this list of male artists, it confirms the lore, the legend, the assumption that men are more successful, and thus reinforces a cycle where men strive towards the idea of attainable careers in the arts, but women assume (or are told) success is unlikely, and often out of necessity lean towards fields with more guaranteed financial security and social acceptability. It is a problem for students and young people looking to your publication for information. If they are women, POC or genderqueer, they must sift through most mainstream publications to find artists that are relatable, reflecting their backgrounds, genders and identities. Why not help these students—the future of the field of ceramics—by offering a wider view rather than reproduce the exclusions that are and have historically been made in the art market?

Perhaps most significant, to create a binary list of men and women is old fashioned, outdated and not helpful. It excludes any notion that a nonbinary artist, any artist who does not identify as male or female, could be featured on such a list.

I also take issue with the way you create a binary between ceramics and “fine arts.” If ceramics as a genre wants to be accepted into this so-called art world (which I would argue has already happened, and has been happening for over a decade now), we need to realize that the future of art is not defined by medium. Making statements like “[fine arts] owns ceramics as art” is arbitrary and misleading. It is true that the fine art market is monetizing ceramics in a new way. However, you are equating financial success and sales to “owning” ceramics as a medium. I would argue that accessibility, exposure, concept, market appeal and an artist’s persona are the underlying factors of most commercial success in art, whether or not it’s ceramics.

Lists such as these reinforce the notion that success is male gendered. We need to shift the power dynamics by hiring, showing, investing in and publishing more women, POC and non-binary folks. I have seen exciting things happening at the student level--groups like The Clay Siblings Project, and the 2019 NCECA panel “Talk Less, Listen More.” But we need to take more responsibility to make change at the top, in the positions of power. C-File and Garth Clark need to take responsibility for the gender disconnect, admit their own bias, and try harder to represent a wider group of artists.

Signed,
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