

this became that

by Lauren Karle

Separately they are skilled ceramic artists each with a desire to make great work, show more often, and gather with fellow makers. Together they are the Romantic Robots.

When a meeting of the collaborative artists' group the Romantic Robots began with a member describing a piece she received in the mail as "encrusted by all these balls," I knew one reason why ceramic artists are drawn to work together—it's simply fun. Under that layer of fun, however, collaboration involves struggles and breakthroughs, results in the unexpected, and requires us to set aside our individual egos. Ceramic artists have shared recipes and techniques, helped each other in firings, and created workshops together for centuries, but as new ceramic technologies have developed so, too, have new ways to collaborate. United by an interest in multiples, the Romantic Robots is a contemporary group of six artists: Frederick Bartolovic, Lauren Herzak-Bauman, Kimberly Greene, Casey McDonough, Robin Strangfeld, and Blake Williams. The group started as a collective to keep members informed of shows. Eventually the artists began holding group shows, though each exhibited work made individually. In 2012, however, Williams had a residency at Red Lodge Clay Center in Red Lodge, Montana, and invited the others, who were living all around the country, to work alongside each other for the first time. During that residency the idea of collaboration was born.

Permission To Be Inspired

The artists returned home with the plan of making five of what they called gifts and sending one to each of the others. The gifts were not the objects themselves but rather the permission to be inspired by one another. The requirements were that the sculptures had to fit safely in a 12-inch square box to ensure a reasonable shipping budget. The objects became idea generators for the next pieces. Each artist had about four months to create his or her own sculpture in response to the piece received and then send the new sculpture to a third artist. The third artist never saw the initial gift, creating something in response only to the second person's piece. A chart was created to organize the sculptures that were soon flying around the country. In essence, the project became a visual dialog, with one person initiating a statement and another responding to that statement through his or her own piece within the parameters of his or her own style. The whole could be likened to a chain letter or the childhood game of telephone. The artist who created the initial gift made the final response in each line. In the end, each collaborator



created 35 sculptures, for a total of 210 objects that comprised 30 lines of visual conversation.

The pieces were then shown in a traveling exhibition. The show came full circle when it opened in September 2014 at the Red Lodge Clay Center. It was shown a final time at the Pawtucket Armory during the 2015 NCECA conference in Providence, Rhode Island, where the artists were able to see it together for the first time and reflect on their collaborative experience.

Action and Reaction

The first and most obvious impact was the conceptual stretch that the collaboration demanded. Since a response to each piece was required, the artists were challenged to take inspiration from each piece, whether they liked it or not. Robin Strangfeld described how responding to something she would not have otherwise considered forced her to “think about things differently and not stay in a routine. Frustration drives you to work harder and learn new things about yourself.” Some responses were easy; some sat on the shelf for months when one of the artists was stumped. Other pieces were spontaneous, while others were laboriously sketched and thought out. Rarely, pieces seemed like periods at the end of a sentence, so the artist felt that he or she simply had to start the line over. Through this process the artists learned to trust themselves and sometimes rely on reactions. “Time kept you honest,” one member said. Each was responsible to the whole group for making the next response in a timely manner and sending it on in order to keep the two-year project going. When under pressure to make four or five pieces, the artists didn’t have time to think about who had made the piece they received as inspiration or where the new response would be going. Sometimes they had an aesthetic response; sometimes the response was conceptual. Having to respond on the fly prompted automatic responses—with the artists holding true to themselves as individuals, and going with their gut interpretations of other work.

Within these reactions new ideas emerged. For example, Williams described how she started with no boundaries. Through the process of responding and making, however, she found two new series that she titled *Sunset Lane* and *Farming Community*. These themes have been important in her life and in the back of her mind, but they finally surfaced in a physical manifestation through the collaboration. One of her lines finished with a piece in this new vein, propelling the collaboration to inspire her future work.

By granting permission to the others to be inspired by their work and imposing different parameters on themselves, the artists found that their use of materials and techniques grew. They each made their own sculptures, but responding to someone else’s work gave them permission to employ different styles of working. This included reaching for techniques they hadn’t used in their individual practice or emulating the work of their peers to use their style for a slightly different meaning. Greene was compelled to use new materials in her responses, combining found objects with handmade objects. Bartolovic noted that “this was a freeing experience, which I feel has helped diversify my own practice.”

Scale was the parameter that challenged the artists the most. Since all were accustomed to making large-scale, repetitive sculptures or installations, these small sculptures forced them to look at detail in a different way. McDonough developed a real love for working small, and his final



1 Overview showing the entire collection of 230 art objects constructed over a two year period by the Romantic Robots, 2015. 2 Multiple lines of work by the Romantic Robots on display at the Pawtucket Armory in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, during the annual NCECA conference, 2015. 3 Section of line 2, showing progression of works from Kimberly Greene's *Composite II*, to Frederick Bartolovic's *Composite*, 2015. 4 Progression of works from Casey McDonough's *Untitled*, to Kimberly Greene's *Sea Foam Wrap*, to Frederick Bartolovic's *Rural*, to Blake Williams' *Way Up in the Mountains*, to Lauren Herzak- Bauman's *Mountains*, to Robin Strangfeld's *Wood*, to Casey McDonough's *Stone*, 2015.

CLAY CULTURE



5 Progression of works from Robin Strangfeld's *Cluster*, to Frederick Bartolovic's *Cliché Dreams*, to Casey McDonough's *Dreaming of Clichés*, 2015. Photo: Frederick Bartolovic. **6** Multiple lines of work by the Romantic Robots on display at the Pawtucket Armory in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, during the annual NCECA conference, 2015. **7** Progression of works from Blake Williams' *Farming Community: Hatch* (foreground right), to Casey McDonough's *Farming Community: Retribution*, to Frederick Bartolovic's *Dante's House* (background left), 2015.

pieces are tiny, refined, and fantastically complex and complete. Looking at the finished pieces Herzak-Bauman realized that they could serve as inspiration for future large-scale installations.

Whether looking at the works as sketches or finished pieces, all participants found that the process encouraged experimentation and play. Essential to this was the foundation of trust and confidence they began with. McDonough described how he felt that strange and wacky contributions were acceptable, and that a sense of experimentation would be appreciated. It became clear, and essential to the success of the project, that each artist felt freedom and energy from the unspoken dialog.

Experimenting with the sculptures they received and not knowing what other members were going to create, the artists had to willingly relinquish control. When a box arrived in the mail, they did not know how they were going to respond. Facing the unknown forced them to trust themselves and set aside their individual ego.

Setting Ego Aside

Rather than the usual way of working, which promotes the signature style of an individual artist, each piece is the result of multiple artists' visions coming together. The process elevates the value of the expressed idea instead of the object and artist's signature. This challenges the traditional art market by de-commodifying the object and its artist as the idea-owner. While each piece was for sale, the price was the same no matter the status of the individual hands that

made it. The value of each piece was in the experience and expression, not individual reputation. Each artist willingly gave up their identity for that of the whole.

McDonough argued, "The ultimate results of this collaboration can't be measured in terms of successes or failures; rather the value lies in massive experimentation, negotiation with the self and others both conceptually and physically, as well as a constant re-evaluation of aesthetic parameters." Invoking those criteria, the collaboration was a major success. While the artists admitted that not every sculpture was a masterpiece, the project was about continuity. Regarding a piece that McDonough made in response to one of her sculptures Herzak-Bauman remarked, "It was like you breathed life into it." For viewers, the most rewarding part of the exhibition perhaps came from taking the time to follow each conversation down the line, watching how messages evolved as each person contributed his or her own sense of meaning and purpose. Looking from one sculpture to the next made me wonder what each artist had responded to and how he or she had interpreted the previous piece. The opportunity to imagine is a gift an artist offers the world, and the Romantic Robots' first collaboration provided that opportunity to the utmost.

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