

Clint Neufeld: *Pipe Dreams of Madame Récamier*

Clint Neufeld: Pipe Dreams of Madame Récamier, Koffler
Gallery Off-Site at General Hardware Contemporary, Toronto,
January 10 – March 2, 2013

Gil McElroy

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Clint NEUFELD: *Pipe Dreams of Madame Récamier*

Gil McELROY

We rarely pay much attention to ceramics as the tough, durable industrial medium that it is, preferring, rather, to aesthetically foreground the narrow “craft” end of the spectrum and notions of material fragility and delicacy as somehow being central to ceramics as a whole. And even if we permit the occasional ceramist to escape the constraints of craft and create a show that explores a wider aesthetic field, like Léopold L. Foulem or Greg Payce, we’re often still far too caught up in antiquated, medium-specific notions of clay to afford the work its full due.

Here’s where Clint Neufeld could be important. Saskatchewan born and bred, he utilizes the medium of ceramics to create 1:1 scale sculptural works that draw on his background as a farm kid. More specifically he makes full-scale automotive parts such as truck engines, transmissions, carburetors, axles and the like, using clay slip poured into moulds in a process decidedly similar to metal casting.

It’s important to note that these are period pieces Neufeld is creating, objects based on older technologies (like the carburetor) that were still within the realm of the “hands-on,” that is, with a few tools and a bit of skill, someone could repair an engine

or a carburetor at home. On a farm like the one Neufeld grew up on, this would have been (and still is) a vitally important factor when machinery would be constantly breaking down and in need of repair, sometimes in situ such as out in the middle of a muddy farm field.

Case in point: *One Yellow Rose* (2012). It’s a 1:1 scale sculpture of an automotive engine, complete with transmission, reposing on an antique loveseat recast as a plinth. An odd, unlikely pairing to be sure, one richly generative of the conceptual clash that creates metaphor, and one heightened by the fact that the engine—an object epitomizing the toughness and durability of the

industrial—is a pale shade of green and decoratively ornamented all over with images of white roses. Hardly the image of a dirty, greasy working engine, to be sure.

So our reading of this piece right away involves an obviously technological object, an artefact strongly associative of the realms of the industrial and mass production yet utterly stripped of those normal contexts to become a sleekly clean, showy sculpture decoratively ornamented and leisurely reclining on a sofa à la Madame Récamier of the exhibition title depicted just like Jacques Louis David’s famous early 19th century portrait of her.

Cream Before Tea (2012) follows

Clint NEUFELD, *One Yellow Rose*, 2012.
Ceramic, wood and cloth.
163 x 147 x 61 cm. Photo:
Toni HAFKENSCHIED.



Clint NEUFELD, *Cream Before Tea*, 2012. Ceramic. 38 x 38 x 20,3 cm. Photo: Toni HAFKENSCHIED.



just such an aesthetic structure. In this case, it involves an automotive carburetor—a Holly carburetor, to be exact, the kind that a high-powered engine might be equipped with and has much favour with car enthusiasts—that rests on a pillow on top of a small, low, cloverleaf-shaped antique end table. Here, the supportive (white) pillow on which Neufeld's sculptural (white) carburetor lies is also ceramic. And *Valve Grinding and other Sunday Activities* (2012) pairs a pristine white

sculpture—a complex piece of machinery vital to engine repairs, its wing nuts, levers and manufacturer's labels in contrasting copper—with a delicate antique tea cart. For Neufeld, the blurring of distinctions between otherwise entirely separate and culturally distinct realms—essentially, between the brute and the gentle—ensures his work inhabits a zone of indeterminacy, and so taps into a richly fecund source of possible aesthetic meanings. It's a blurring he ensures

continues in the way his work is exhibited at the gallery level.

Trailer Queen (2010) and *Pink 350* (n.d.) are situated in the gallery space as a pairing: the former comprises another automotive engine (sans transmission), this one a shade of pale blue, rests on the white fabric seat of an arm chair, while the latter nestles nearby, a transmission made of soft pink clay decoratively adorned with delicate floral motifs, which rise up, almost lamp-like, from the top of a circular end table.

Neufeld stirs the aesthetic pot via the installation his works are given in the gallery space that, even empty, strongly suggests the personalized setting of someone's home. Neufeld nicely settles right in, here. Installing sculptures of a transmission on an end table, a carburetor on a (ceramic) pillow and entire engine blocks on the seats of actual chairs: this cannot help but more fully personalize the gallery environment and the objects that fill it, lending his work uniquely special identities typically denied



Clint NEUFELD, *Left for George*, 2011. Ceramic and wood. 122 x 76 x 40,6 cm. Photo: Toni HAFKENSCHIED.



produced characteristics of car parts and ensure that something “other” comes of it all, something aesthetically new and meaningfully fecund. In another gallery, Neufeld exhibited an older, non-ceramic piece: *Are You My Mother* (2006), a 1:1 scale wax sculpture of the bucket from an industrial excavator. A pristine white sculptural artefact that Neufeld has resting—perhaps not surprisingly—on a tiny antique chaise longue. In an earlier incarnation, he had exhibited it on the floor, lying atop a very large lace doily. Aesthetically effective, to be sure, but Neufeld has since learned that interpretively tinkering with the sculptural plinth can do wonders for the work. ←

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Clint NEUFELD, left: *Trailer Queen*, 2010. Ceramic, wood, vinyl. 81,3 x 76 x 111,7 cm; Right: *Pink 350*, n.d. Ceramic, variable dimensions. Photo: Toni HAFKENSCHIED.

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Clint NEUFELD, *Valve Grinding and other Sunday Activities*, 2012. Ceramic and found tea cart. 102 x 41,5 x 74 cm. Photo: Toni HAFKENSCHIED.

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Clint NEUFELD, *Bucket Teeth on Shelves*, 2006. Porcelain and wood, variable dimensions. Photo: Toni HAFKENSCHIED.

their manufactured and hard-working technological cousins. The larger aesthetic field Neufeld shapes in this space is that of an intimate salon setting (à la Madame Récamier's, to which the famous and talented were drawn) that reeks of certain privilege. Against a wall off to one side and held aloft by a pair of ornate wooden posts, the car or truck axle that is *Left for George* (2011) comprises the gallery space's focal arrangement. All of Neufeld's pieces are oriented toward it, as if it were some odd sculptural ornament sitting, trophy-like, atop something akin to a fireplace mantelshelf to be admired by all.

At the particular, “molecular” level of the individual pieces, much of what Neufeld accomplishes in *Pipe Dreams of Madame Récamier* involves a cognition of the human element in technology, an awareness that many hands, over the course of the lifespan of each of the originals on which his sculptures are based, would have been all over the technologies he's aesthetically focused on. That's critically important, for in doing so, he also speaks to the aesthetic of ceramics in which “hands-on” has been absolutely central as a medium-specific factor. Neufeld's origination carburetors, transmissions and engine blocks would have begun their existence as mass-produced, industrially manufac-



tured products straight off an assembly line, but over time have evolved into hand-made things, objects tinkered with, reworked, rebuilt, changed ever so much through countless home repairs that, on a working farm, are the normal state of affairs. Each mass-produced, industrial thing would have become a one-of-a-kind, a

unique thing, under the hand of the person trying to keep this artefact utile.

So in Neufeld's sculptural world, medium and message achieve a kind of critical mass, the overarching medium of ceramics with all its baggage—especially the central craft concept of the “handmade”—perfectly overlap the industrial, mass-