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J.J. McCracken, taking the long view with ceramics

By Kriston Capps

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PATINA OF AGE: Fuzzy mold adorns J.J. McCracken's "Libation Vessel, With Young Rhizopus Hyphae" at Civilian Art Projects. (J.j. Mccracken)

It's been clear for some time that J.J. McCracken ranks among the smartest artists in Washington. Historically grounded and conceptually rigorous, she continues to push the boundaries within the ceramic arts, typically counted as one of the most conservative art forms around. Her sculpture in "Climate, Control," a three-woman show at Civilian Art Projects, once again meets the high bar she has set for herself: the District's best political artist.

In five sculptures on display (and close-up photos of the works), McCracken references late-Bronze Age pottery from the cultures that once occupied present-day Iran and Cyprus. Her designs are modeled after Eastern pieces in the collection of the

Smithsonian's Freer and Sackler Galleries. (One exception is a reproduction of an effigy pot from late post-classic Mesoamerica.)

She sculpts the clay into vessels, but she doesn't fire them in a kiln, so they look like lumpy, earthen versions of their museum counterparts. In her faux-ancient relics, McCracken incorporates one of the most important developments of the present-day American empire: high-fructose corn syrup.

Each vase is made using a mix of clay and mashed-up Wonder Bread, whose third listed ingredient is corn syrup. So each piece is covered in fuzzy, green patches of mold, which feed on the sugars embedded in the clay.

Her sculptures are set under gorgeous glass bell jars, which give the work a clinical vibe (and keep the pieces from stinking up the gallery). The jars encasing the sculptures that she molded as recently as two weeks ago are foggy with condensation, while the ones she began three years ago have settled.

That McCracken plays a long game speaks to her educational background in anthropology, as well as her novel studio practice. Her clay is sourced locally; that's a hallmark of Red Dirt Studios, where she is a member. Founded by Margaret Boozer and an incubator for artists like Laurel Lukaszewski and Mary Coble, Red Dirt is as progressive as studios come in the District, despite the focus on a seemingly traditional medium like clay.

McCracken has pushed this medium far beyond the tedious debate over what objects constitute art and craft. She has instead investigated clay for its specific qualities, isolating the medium's defining material and contextual qualities through the use of sculpture and performance.

For one of her first projects in Washington - "Stasis," a 2007-08 performance and exhibition at the now-defunct Meat Market Gallery - McCracken and assistants set up a mobile pottery production line that quickly threw, vacuum-sealed, then hung pieces of pottery along the walls, like tagged-and-bagged cuts of meat.

Fast-forward to 2010, when the artist took on Philadelphia in a months-long piece that saw her living in Old City, growing vegetables and building an installation for the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts. For "Hunger," she and several artists covered themselves head to toe in clay - which is apparently a freezing experience - and engaged with clay casts of vegetables and fruit along a banquet table. She spent last fall repurposing the clay as dinnerware sets and a bread oven for an area homeless shelter.

As it happens, McCracken started the project on exhibit at Civilian before her more recent public performances, so in a sense, this work is from an earlier period. Her work in this exhibition doesn't have a performance element, unless you count the three years McCracken waited as the mold grew on the clay. But for McCracken, who thinks about artifacts and living conditions for empires past and present, three years

is nothing.

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J.J. McCracken's "Mold" series is on view alongside work by Jan Razauskas and Millicent Young in "Climate, Control" at Civilian Art Projects through Feb. 19. The gallery, at 1019 Seventh St. NW, is open 1-6 p.m. Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.