MALCOLM MOBUTU SMITH
rigmarole
rigmarole (ˈrɪɡ(ə)məˌrŏl) noun
1: confused or meaningless talk;
2: a complex and ritualistic procedure

“Rigmarole: Object/Image” represents a complex dialogue between those things in the world to which I am drawn intellectually and the inner world of my personal identity and experience and fancies. The inextricable connection of these influences, inspirations and improvisations are the driving force behind this body of work.

Much of my working mode involves loosely harnessing the plastic potential of clay and its anachronistic capacity to encode moments of touch and circumstance. Like an open sketchbook, the confluence of forms and images compressing into or extending out from these vessels are a collage of ideas – some filtered from varying ceramic traditions, theoretical concepts of abstraction, the art of drawing, and still others from the velocity of popular culture and societal encounters. As a form, the pot itself throughout time has been used as a carrier of not only vital sustenance, or prestige, refinement and edification, but also as a carrier of marks – marks of the moments, of the artist. Marks of thoughts are caught in the wetness of mud – languages, images and histories.

My rigmarole (my complex and ritualistic procedure of making), speaks of my own creative experiences and heritage; bridging my various identities – graffiti artist, potter, musician and teacher; and employing motifs connected to these identities. Sources of inspiration are sponged together ranging from graffiti and comic book art to modern art and the study of ceramics.

In this body of work, there are influences in form from Moche pottery, from Chinese aesthetics (particularly in the use of a porcelaneous claybody and stylized cloud imagery), and from my distinctly contemporary, Western attitude toward surface. In the work, at times an object occurs; the image of a cloud becomes a happenstance vessel. At others, the object of a cup becomes a collage, abstracted and overtaken into a realm of image.
Graffiti begins with empire. Our earliest concept of monumental edifice will always be inseparable from the rude, invasive lines scratched in at street level. It is important to remember that in this dialectic between high and low, the two always appear together. One of the first things to notice in the ceramic work of Malcolm Mobutu Smith (in a recent show called *Rigmarole: Object/Image*) is that stray elements grow and reach off the main body of a classical vessel. Arrows, lightning bolts, thought balloons or smoke make incursions into the surrounding space the way handles and lids once did on a traditional pot. The artist is fascinated by graphic conventions from comic strips and graffiti, and by their power to invoke familiar objects with a brilliant economy of line. By exploring these idioms, Smith enlivens his own work, but he also dignifies the vernacular of popular forms by reminding us of their distinguished lineage.

In this exhibit, the black *Linear C*,

"linear c" cloud cup
2005
thrown & altered porcelaineous stoneware & glaze
7"(h) x 9"(l) x 7"(w)
with a slanting tablet full of angular marks, is a central piece. With this title, Smith reminds us that the earliest forms of human writing, Sumerian cuneiform, were wedge-shaped dents in damp clay. The seminal concept embodied in this piece countenances all the other dialects of signs in the room and honors the essential mystery of communication that lies coiled in such signs. Smith gravitates toward the glyph, toward rounded, bumptious forms like Mayan script, so similar in form to modern-day graffiti lettering. Mayan glyphs even make their own frames like a modern comic strip. Arguably, the first comic books were the pleated Mayan codices, which arriving Europeans treated with the same disrespect shown until recently to modern comic art.

Sometimes, signs that resist interpretation gain in stature through mystery: Egyptian hieroglyphs appeared so grand until they were translated. Mormon founder Joseph Smith once fancifully “translated” a papyrus as the history of ancient tribes. Unfortunately, his followers faithfully saved the papyrus that was eventually shown to be inventories of beer and bushels of wheat. Generations of scholars, dreaming before their glyphs, guessed at Mayan
nobility, wisdom and peacefulness. When finally translated, the glyphs told instead a tale of Aristocratic folly, petty vengefulness and a stubborn habit of war that dragged down an entire civilization. Perhaps such wishful thinking forms the background in the life history of every sign, even after a new disillusioned meaning is painted over it.

Smith employs that aesthetic of layers to explore ideas of defacement and finish. In rotation, a lovely small piece like Burner appears at first to be a traditional rounded, light green vessel, until it’s seen to split and peel open and finally end with a lyrical passage of black and red, strong and structurally rhythmic like the grids in Picasso’s *Girl Before a Mirror*. We remember that when Picasso gave birth to modernity, his Demoiselles d’Avignon was seen as a defacement, a disfigurement, because of the incursion of African signs for the face and the figure.

Mobutu Smith countenances his African heritage with the black and white stripes of Zairian costume (*Mystic Cloud #3*) that may reference Tim Burton to a contemporary audience. Here too, the high-low dialectic of reference continues, the
meaning of visual tropes inflating and deflating by turns, like the respiration of a sleeping giant. In the long history of Pop art, its energy seemed vulgar only in the midst of its making. With historical distance, perhaps the mercurial, quotidian references to comic strips and advertising jingles will harden back into the dignity of the glyph. Who now remembers the lyrics of Ma Jolie, the pop ditty stuck in Picasso’s head, as he glued scraps of the daily paper onto his canvas in 1915?

One secret to the energy of comics (and by extension, graffiti) lies in their reach toward motion. Their innate intention is toward animation, like Pinocchio’s dream of becoming “real.” In comics and graffiti, success is measured by how strongly the design lifts off from the flat page. Smith finds ways to tease his pieces into motion, sometimes with the bursting motion mentioned above (Burner), or with the small peaks of clay (on the sides of Mystic Cloud #6 and #7) that look like the shock droplets that form when a water surface undergoes impact. The addition of a blue “puddle” beneath The Thunderer playfully suggests a cloudburst or a leak in his vessel.
Smith’s pieces give the sense of other strange gestures, too, of having been conjured out of thin air or sprayed like foam from a can. The clay takes a sudden change of direction, or it tapers to a thin airborne tail. The tailpiece on Technoarachnicangular, seen from one side, looks like a shard. From the opposite side, looping through space, it forms a precise black arrow that is then echoed and rhymed into the curves of the vessel’s main body.

As a classroom exercise, Smith sometimes has his students build a clay form, then draw it, and then build another form from the drawing. This back-and-forth process between the vessel and the page resonates powerfully throughout his own work. In Rigmarole, no flat lines are worthwhile unless they suggest volume and no curving, built-out shape is worthwhile unless it reads graphically as a powerful contour or silhouette. The history of ceramics has long chronicled the marriage of pattern to volume. The work of Malcolm Mobutu Smith introduces some of the offspring, and the raucous extended family, of this union.

Tom Rhea is currently Executive Director of Friends of Art, a non-profit group benefiting students in fine arts in Bloomington, IN.
mystic cloud #8 “woodgod”
2005
handbuilt stoneware slip & glaze
26”(h) x 19”(l) x 14”(w)
“Both Mobutu and his works sit between cultures, artistic and aesthetic paradigms, and between visual and spoken languages.”

“I wanted to be able to do this stuff [graffiti]. It was huge. It was amazing—thick lines and forms and colors. It was always about this fine, crisp edge—that final tight ‘outline.’ Smith feels graffiti carries the same energy, the same magical understanding of forms and their relationships, and the same quality of exaggeration, as African sculpture, to which he feels a kinship.”

—Dr. Luoana M. Lackey, Ceramics Monthly, June/July/August 2004
“Malcolm Mobutu Smith’s references to ancient African art are quirky but graceful.”

“This artistic dialogue, where one element of a pot is in counterpoint to another, is characteristic of Smith’s work. Piece after piece sets up opposing elements—high and low art, past and present, function and decoration, China and Africa, two dimensions and three—and brings them into relation with each other.”

—Leora Baude, Indiana University Research and Creative Activity, *Volume XXVII No. 2 (Spring 2005)*

“plasmatoctic” cloud cup

2004

thrown & altered porcelaineous stoneware & glaze

6.5”(h) x 11”(l) x 6.5”(w)
Malcolm Mobutu Smith
3075 N Prow Rd., Bloomington, IN, 47404  h: 812.335.0191  o: 812.855.6470  malmsmit@indiana.edu

Education
1994–1996  New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, Alfred, NY, Masters of Fine Arts (Ceramics)
1991–1994  Penn State University, State College, PA, Bachelors of Fine Arts (Ceramics)
1988–1990  Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, MO

Teaching Experience
2001–  Assistant Professor of Ceramic Art, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN
1996–2001  Assistant Professor of Ceramic Art, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY

Selected Exhibitions
One Person
2005  Rigmarole: Object/Image, SoFA Gallery, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN
2002  Recent Works, Tuska Gallery, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY
1998  New Works, The Capitol Arts Center, Bowling Green, KY
1997  Recent Works in Clay, Pipedreams Gallery, Chicago, IL

Two Person
1999  No Problems No Solutions, Two person show, Slippery Rock University, PA
1998  Expression and Interpretation, Two person show, Manchester Craftsman Guild, PA
1997  (re)search(re)vision(re)construct, Old Dominion University Gallery, Norfolk, VA

Invitational
2005  13+1: Penn State Alumni Show with Chris Staley, The Works Gallery, Philadelphia, PA

Juried
2005  In Our Cups: A National Ceramic Exhibition Celebrating the Drinking Vessel, Lockhart Gallery, SUNY Geneseo, NY

Contact Information
MA lCol M M oBU tU SM ith
3075 N Prow Rd., Bloomington, IN, 47404  h: 812.335.0191  o: 812.855.6470  malmsmit@indiana.edu

© Tyagan Miller
2004  X in Clay, Contemporary Ceramics, Ruschman Gallery, Indianapolis, IN
Indiana University Ceramic Faculty, SoFA Gallery, Bloomington, IN

1999  Kentucky Made, Three person show, The Carnegie, Covington, KY

1996  Masters Thesis Exhibition, Fosdick Nelson Gallery, Alfred, NY

awards

2005  First Place Gallery International Ceramic Art Competition, Baltimore, MD
2003  Trustees Teaching Award for Sustained Excellence in Teaching, Indiana University
2000  Professional Development Grant, Kentucky Arts Council
Purchase Award, Owensboro Art Guild
1997  Merit Award, Mid States Crafts Exhibition, Evansville Museum, IN
1996  Alexander Yeats Award, Chester Springs Studio Days ’96, Chester Springs, PA

collections

Fuled International Ceramic Art Museum, Beijing, China
Baker University Collection, Baldwin City, KS
The Gloryhole Collection, The International Museum of Ceramics, Alfred, NY
Grace Hampton, American Crafts, Private Collection, Exton, PA
Helm–Craven Library, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY
Stephen Hootkin, American Ceramics, Private Collection, New York, NY
Jingdezhen Institute of Fine Art, Jingdezhen, China
Owensboro Art Guild, KY
Robert Pfannabecker, American Ceramics, Private Collection, Lancaster, PA
The Rhontemeade Sculpture Garden, Pine Grove, PA
Trans Financial Bank, Bowling Green, KY

galleries

Cerlan Gallery, Lexington, KY
The Prima Gallery, Bloomington, IN

publications

Baude, L. "Voices of Clay." Indiana University Research and Creative Activity (Spring 2005)
Fuled International Ceramics Museum, 1st International Ceramic Journal of Editors Exhibition, (journal), Beijing, China, 2005
Lackey, M. L. “Indiana University Ceramic Faculty.” Ceramics Monthly (June/July/August, 2004).


