

# Maxwell Mustardo

## Artist Statement

I approach making as a vital opportunity to examine perception and signification. My work engages with ceramics as a polyphonic medium: one that speaks in multiple registers simultaneously. By working within simple constraints, such as the format of the mug, vase, or torus, I explore orchestrating elements of surface, form, materiality, and function. Many projects revolve around broad, reverential notions of the vessel, the body, and language. Attempts are made to continually dissect processes, revisit forms, and reframe themes to agitate evolution and antagonize static thinking. Objects are focused upon as vital witnesses and participants, reflections and poems, animate and imagined.

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*From Maxwell Mustardo website for 2018-2020*

I approach making as a vital opportunity to examine perception and signification. From utilitarian design to more eccentric sculptural investigations, I toy with meandering identities, imbricated indexicality, ambiguous materiality, and provisional functionality.

My objects play with comprehension and abstraction. Many projects revolve around broad, reverential notions of the vessel, the body, and language. They rely upon implicit content from the accompanying histories of ceramic objects and materials; volume and mass, moisture and dryness, surface and form, etc. Attempts are made to continually dissect processes, revisit forms, and reframe themes to agitate evolution, antagonize static thinking, and convolute opposing notions. Objects are focused upon as vital witnesses and participants, reflections and poems, animate and imagined.

## **Maxwell Mustardo**

Maxwell Mustardo was born in 1993 in rural New Jersey. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a Bachelor of Science in Art History and Theory from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in 2017. Parts of Max's education occurred abroad- including studying industrial design at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, China in 2015. His dual theses focused on issues of materiality in ceramics.

Max has earned multiple awards for his work including an Award of Excellence from the James Renwick Alliance, an ARGUS grant for materials research, a Levine Endowment grant to study material culture in Japan & South Korea, and as the SUNY finalist in the visual arts category for the Thayer Fellowship in the Arts as an undergraduate student. His current practice encompasses scholarly writing, curation, teaching, design, and sculpture. He has been a resident artist at the Takaazu Studio, the Mendocino Art Center, the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, the Sonoma Community Center, & the New Harmony Clay Project.

## The Center for Contemporary Art Q&A with Maxwell Mustardo

### **If you had to describe your work to someone who has never seen it before, how would you describe it?**

My pottery digs into ceramic history with an interest in the re-design of traditional forms, such as the amphora or the mug, with variations on surface & form. Often, I follow whimsical impulses that violate and play with some essential design feature. What would a mug look like if its walls and handle were inflated like a balloon—its interior space consumed by itself? What might a vase look like if it had no edges—totally round & all contour, but still open? Could a shot glass embody the overabundance and intoxication it is intended to provide the user?

Surfaces become opportunities for subversion as well – pots become metallic, dermatological, or fuzzy—deflecting their own material constitution and entering into fantasy. In these ways I try to place one foot firmly in the domain of pottery, and leave the other just outside...

### **Tell us about the exhibition name “Deform Follows \*Defunction” and what you hoped the visitor would learn about you and your work from this exhibition?**

The title ‘Deform Follows Defunction’ sets up a quasi-nonsensical play on the Modernist dictate ‘Form Follows Function’. In original usage this meant that purpose was prioritized in design, necessitating the purging of extraneous elements, like decoration, representation, or even color, from the form of useful things. Here, the negation of function, defunction, opens form to free deformation. In a sense, this is an anarchic gesture for pottery—without function to anchor a form, any form is valid. However, the exhibited works stay lingering around functional forms, exploring what relevance a mug, pitcher, or amphora might still have when severed from immediate use.

My perspective emphasizes the primordial proximity of the body to craft objects - and much of the exhibited work is indeed bodily, figurative, reflective. The crafts are synonymous with the emergence of culture, from bowls to quilts, wrestling a modicum of security, comfort, and continuity from our struggles with nature. Despite radical evolution via technological developments, the crafts’ link to fulfilling the physiological needs of the body persists. Today, however, hand-made ceramics’ traditional role of function has been displaced by design and mass production and now must continually re-examine its own imperatives. Its function shifts to less necessary, more symbolic spheres of representing values or titillating the senses. This is where the show takes place: upon an unstable dictum to investigate what functions and forms ceramic objects might assume today, with historical reverence butting against irreverent reimagining.

### **Who or what has been an influence(s) on your work?**

This list is potentially endless, but chief among my influences are:

- Toshiko Takaezu, Don Fletcher, & the entire Takaezu studio cohort, who brought me in during high school and showed me that working with ceramics was a realistic avenue, if idealistic!

- Ken Price & Yagi Kazuo, two ceramists whose lives and work have been consistent inspirations for material explorations, formal innovation, and honing craftsmanship.
- My professors from Alfred, as much life coaches as art instructors, Linda Sikora, Diane Cox and David Crenshaw, among many others.
- Art history-- thanks to my parentage (two fine art conservators) I've been in and out of museums my entire life. This has made me irredeemably mired in the history of art from my earliest memories & led directly to my bachelor's degree in art history. Travelling and studying the history of ceramics continues to drive new directions in my practice.

**Tell us something that inspires you that might surprise us?**

I have been engrossed by the physical mechanics of wrinkling for the past two years. Wrinkling points to complex interactions of different layers of one or more materials. In one instance, a fluid-filled grape will dry and collapse, with its elastic skin tightening on itself and creating the raisin's characteristic wrinkled surface. It occurs at vastly different scales and employs staggeringly different materials -- from our crumpled-up brains to the tectonic squeeze forming mountain ranges. Wrinkles evince movement, decay, growth. For us, they are an index of time—gradually etching age upon the face & over the body. A wrinkle transforms a two-dimensional plane into a three-dimensional form. It is complex, chaotic, organic origami. I have been very excitedly developing glazes that wrinkle & hope to continue honing these for future work.