

A row of approximately 15 small, shallow ceramic bowls is displayed on a white surface. Each bowl is uniquely decorated with vibrant, abstract patterns and colors, including red, blue, yellow, black, and white. The designs vary from simple geometric shapes to complex, expressive figures and faces. The bowls are arranged in a slightly curved line, receding into the background.

Kirk Mangus and Sebastian Moh

at Greenwich House Pottery

by Anthony Merino



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1–2 Installation view of “Kirk Mangus and Sebastian Moh,” Jane Hartsook Gallery at Greenwich House Pottery, New York, New York, 2013.

When life throws something at you, do you react with emotion or try to reason it out? We all combine the two to some degree, but culturally, this initial choice is closely aligned with how much control a person has over his or her life. On the simplest level—it is believed that people are controlled by emotion, but they control their intellect. The exhibition “Kirk Mangus and Sebastian Moh” at Jane Hartsook Gallery, Greenwich House Pottery (www.greenwichhouse.org/gh_pottery), New York, New York, questions the absoluteness of this conceptual linkage.

Mangus and Moh contributed works that epitomize two extremes of the expressionist spectrum of

ceramics. Mangus presented garish, even bombastic, pieces. All of his tea bowls are asymmetric, wobbly, and rough. The artist decorated these forms with slashes, smears, and globs of stains. Reflective of the work of artists like Peter Voulkos and Philip Guston—Mangus’ work displays a violent, visceral grace, like a ballet based on the tumbling action of bingo balls in a hopper. This primitive quality contrasts with Moh’s very precise pieces. Uniform, balanced, and exact—Moh’s work reads as highly controlled. The pairing of such different artists would seem to highlight the differences between the two, and yet because of two distinct qualities of the exhibition, the opposite dynamic played out.



A narrow range of work by both Mangus and Moh were presented in a highly structured display. The exhibition was comprised almost entirely of small to moderately sized tea bowls. This uniformity resulted in drawing out the similarities of the artists' works while they remained physically segregated. Mangus' works were set up on the east side of the gallery, and Moh's works were set up on pedestals on the west wall of the gallery. Separating the works created a more contemplative atmosphere in two ways. First, the alternative, having the pieces sitting next to each other, would have magnified their differences. Second, this display created a feeling of abstraction. Calculated placement of the works in the display deliberately forced the viewer to see the exhibition as an abstract statement.

There is an additional factor outside of the selection and layout of the exhibition that undermined the idea of the two artists as being in opposition. Each artist's work contained elements of

the other. This is where the exhibition subverted the idea that emotional people lack control and intellectual people are fully in control. Set next to Moh's works, the consciousness of Mangus' surface decorations came through. Mangus created each brush stroke of stain. He left no room for chance. The marks he put on the surface were the same marks that showed on the surface after the firing. In a sense, the primitive appearance that Mangus employed to create his images highlighted how much control he asserted. Every mark that Mangus made came from two reservoirs: his considerable talent, and his knowledge of contemporary art and ceramics. Ultimately, his drawings and pots looked primitive and automatic because Mangus chose for them to look that way.

The forms Moh displayed shared this deliberateness. Highly symmetric, the pieces appeared more like they were cut on a lathe rather than thrown. However, Moh abandoned control with his glazes. He exhibited works with three different glaze surfaces; each

3 Sebastian Moh's tea bowl, 4½ in. (11 cm) in diameter. 4 Sebastian Moh's yunomi, 3¾ in. (10 cm) in height. 5 Sebastian Moh's tea bowl, porcelain, nebula tenmoku glaze, electric fired, 5 in. (13 cm) in diameter, 2013. 6 Sebastian Moh's yunomi, 3½ in. (9 cm) in diameter. 7 Kirk Mangus' tea bowl, 5¼ in. (13 cm) in length, porcelain, various underglazes, fired to cone 6, 2013. 8 Kirk Mangus' bowl, 7¼ in. (18 cm) in length, porcelain, various underglazes, fired to cone 6, 2013.

had qualities that the artist could direct, but not completely control. One group of pieces was glazed with a transparent, celadon green glaze. During the firing, the glaze melted and pooled on the cup's ridges. The pooled area of glaze remained translucent, creating sensuous areas of depth on each cup. Moh also showed pieces finished with a fluid black glaze. The movement of the glaze created elongated gold and blue streaks, and also created a drip line along the bottom of the work. Both of these effects congealed into a restrained elegance that arrested the viewer. The pieces in the last collection were finished with a blue glaze that ran over and around a row of small reddish dots placed on the sides of the cups. Without these effects, Moh's work would have seemed almost machined. The addition of a slight bit of chaos on such a tight armature bewildered through its resonance.

Ultimately, the pieces by each artist accentuated the other's work. Moh's pieces highlighted the deliberateness of Mangus' work. Mangus' pieces forced the viewer to see the ways in which Moh abandoned control in his work. Displaying only a single kind of object, the tea bowl, contributed considerably to this dynamic. The exhibition worked as an abstract and esoteric thesis on how we look at ceramics. On the other hand, it constrained both artists to subjugate their work to this thesis.

Kirk Mangus passed away suddenly on November 24, 2013, just a few weeks before his exhibition with Sebastian Moh opened at Greenwich House Pottery. His creative spirit and generosity will be missed.

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KRISTEN MORGIN

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ADAM SHIVERDECKER

JULY 10 - AUGUST 7, 2014

KENYON HANSON

SEPTEMBER 12 - OCTOBER 10, 2014

THADDEUS ERDAHL

OCTOBER 24 - NOVEMBER 22, 2014

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2014-15 Exhibition Series

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