



## **Jerry Saltz: Jessica Jackson Hutchins Finds Truth in Clay**

By: Jerry Saltz  
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“Castratos of Moon-Mash” is what Wallace Stevens said we’d be “without the sexual myth, the human revery or poem of death.” Without these ravaged facts of physical life, organic depths and regrets, constant re-becomings, separation, fear, dreams, bodies, and defeats, Stevens said, we’re not human, only neutered beings — Platonic abstractions without flesh. Since her breakout show at the Ten in One Gallery in 2001, the 44-year-old Jessica Jackson Hutchins has wrestled with the sexual myth, revery, poems of life and death, human dependency, motherhood, clustered flesh, and social loci made material. In the past, she’s created couches and chairs with pulpy masses, hypersecretions of ceramic and papier-mâché spilling over like a body fermenting, rising into flesh, cratering away. There are vases and vessels resting in forms, possibly puckered openings, voodoo -protuberances, erotic shapes, shelters, micro-cosmic colosseums. She’s equally gaudy and hermetic, ragingly vulnerable but cloaked; at once abstract but always alluding to figuration. Another sculpture finds a painted ceramic shape kneeling into another and performing what looks like fellatio on another mass. She has talked about “the powerful language of objects,” and I see nonnarratives of skin, geologic and biological mergings, big things being broken down, little things becoming immense. She’s uneven and abstruse, but I think she’s among the best artists working in America today. Certainly with ceramics.

Clay reappeared in the art world about ten years ago. Long disparaged as a craft material, it was — like the demeaned paper silhouette that Kara Walker excavated in the early 1990s — something artists turned to in reaction to the processed, slick Jeff Koons–Damien Hirst movement toward jobbing art out to production teams. Clay represented a way to retake ancient territory and techniques and redefine skill with less expensive, labor-intensive, malleable material that takes on aspects of the body. Unlike the navel-gazing, marketable Zombie Formalists, who have also defined themselves by their unslickness, artists who turned to clay and papier-mâché weren’t making tame-looking art about art. Not only does worked clay show the traces of its making; it’s a tremendous support for painting, twisted, smooth, shaped, with insides and outsides, battered, eternally hard but always liquid-looking. Surprises of glazing are built in, the way surprise is built into

painting. Women instinctively understood clay as unprotected territory, as they'd seen photography in the early 1980s — something no one cared about, and thus available. Hutchins, Huma Bhabha, Sterling Ruby, Shio Kusaka, Sarah Lucas, Rachel Harrison, and others have made ceramics almost as ubiquitous in galleries as painting and sculpture. Glazed clay is so sexy that it's become a gateway material for other "lesser" processes, like weaving and embroidery.

Hutchins was a standout in Francesco Bonami's 2010 Whitney Biennial, notable in part for showcasing more women than men — hallelujah! By then, she'd shown in New York, fantastically, for a decade. Then, as she was exhibiting all over the world, even having a survey at the ICA in Boston in 2011, she went five years without showing here, and amicably left her gallery. I got lucky and ran into her work in Europe twice — and was amazed at her growth and ambition — but New York lost track of her development. Her first outing at Marianne Boesky finds her still vehemently refusing that castrato world, using warping shapes, buckling forms, sluicing fluid color, nameless things looking alive. But she's striking out in so many directions at once that it may be hard for newcomers to process it all, especially since she has jumped from mixes of ceramics and painting to more-exclusive wall-works.

Hutchins's paintings here have ceramic shapes attached — a canvas sprouts an alphabetical form, there are insinuations of punctuation marks on surfaces (she's always loved the comma, once calling it "energy without subject or object ... performative ... a half breath"), and collage elements appear. A pulpy yellow vase rests on what may be a table, windowsills, curtains. One has a pillowcase from her adolescence; the tears cried here and signs of budding sexuality can be gleaned in drawings of penises. Even when flailing or falling short, this is an artist always striving for radical vulnerability. I love that Hutchins isn't checking herself. These paintings give us a view of the world from the interior studio of someone's dreaming mind. But the paintings aren't resolved; they manage to ornament and aerate but not increase the psychic density of the show.

Best, though, are the sculptures. Beautifully glazed, gnarly three-legged ceramic stools rest atop similarly hobbled tables. "Hobbled like us," you think — by life, indignities, awakenings, fear, joy. All have stupendous presence. *Acid Blotter* is a chair with a glacial shape embedded with painted paper cups. It oozes off the chair. A large blue-glazed disk is on the ooze — a pill to make us smaller, hallucinate, wanting to expand proportions, states of being? I thought the chair was a conjuring of what it's like to sit in one's studio and try to dream and then fashion worlds. I remembered the great picture of Willem de Kooning, sitting, looking at an unfinished painting, sizing up his next move. Hutchins removes any proscenium from sculpture, making mass seem cinematic, more like music, something that occupies time, getting around sculptural tendencies to stand still in space. It's painting if painting were amorphous, less bounded by edges, in states of becoming.

My favorite sculpture here is *Ultrasuede Wave*, an old fleshy sofa topped with a bulbous white shape that in turn supports a fabulous ceramic vessel with brilliant dark glazing. Another sofa, *Book of Acts*, has a rectangular slab of plaster, painted with a windowlike grid, and another incredible -ceramic vessel in what might be a window. I thought of the beautiful awkwardness of ancient Greek kraters, the way they come to life as we follow erotically intertwined figures all around the surfaces. In these two great works Hutchins reconciles and fuses the physical, painterly, sculptural, social, and sexual. It's a collapsing of Lucian and Sigmund Freud by way of de Kooning, Franz West, early Oldenburg, and the pregnant figures of Alice Neel. I thought of de Kooning's great quote "Flesh is the reason oil paint was invented" and heard myself say, "Flesh is the reason ceramics and sculpture were invented, too."

*"Jessica Jackson Hutchins: I Do Choose" is at Marianne Boesky Gallery through June 13.*

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