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'PAUL CLAY'

By **ROBERTA SMITH**

Salon 94 Bowery

234 Bowery, near Stanton Street, Lower East Side

Through July 30

Is ceramics the new video? The most ancient, widespread and versatile of all art mediums has become increasingly fashionable over the past few years. While artists committed fully to its traditions, rigors and potential are enjoying increasing visibility, scores more seem to be either converting to it or dipping in and out as the mood strikes.

This cacophonous exhibition of ceramic vessels, sculptures and objects by some 45 artists spanning several generations makes no distinctions, although it concentrates fairly firmly on what I would call art world, as opposed to ceramics world, ceramics. Its almost absurdly crowded installation ricochets from good-sized sculptures — the largest is Jessica Jackson Hutchins's "Symposion," a triple-tiered orgy on a couch — to small, thick dishes that suggest gaudy bent bricks by Matthias Merkel Hess, who recently earned an M.F.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles. Mr. Hess is also represented by a full-scale stoneware cast of a large trash can, an immovable object if ever there was one.

The show includes numerous artists who work almost exclusively in fired clay, including eminences grises like Ken Price, Ron Nagle and Betty Woodman, and younger colleagues like Andrew Lord, Arlene Shechet and Shio Kusaka. Others, like Rosemarie Trockel, Jonathan Meese, Liz Larner and Daniel Buren, are well-established visitors from other mediums. And still others, among them Steve Keister, Hope Atherton and Tam Van Tran, may be switching allegiances to ceramics.

In contrast, Sterling Ruby, Anna Sew Hoy and Ms. Hutchins combine fired ceramics with other sculptural mediums, while Huma Bhabha, for one, simply employs clay as one material among

several in her particular brand of sculptural assemblage.

Ceramics deserve more orderly and respectful attention than this jam-packed show and its punning title provide. (Paul Clay? All Klee?) Still, it restlessly roots around in too many different areas not to expand your horizons.

Brie Ruais, a recent graduate of Columbia's M.F.A. program in sculpture, uses thin, irregular, hand-built vessels as occasions for writing and also contributes a muscular Process-Art work that literally climbs the wall. Takuro Kuwata, already considered something of a ceramics master in Japan, despite being barely 30, makes his New York gallery debut here, alternating between spare white porcelain plates, bowls and teacups, ringed in bands of saturated color, à la Kenneth Noland, and tea bowls, jars and spheres whose aggressive craquelure suggests more glaze than clay.

Also not to be missed are the fanciful ceramic vessels made by Zulu artists of Ardmore, a South African collective established in 1985. Mixing animals, plant forms and vivid patterns into profoundly hybrid objects that seem both Neo-African and Neo-Victorian, they go a long way toward explaining the enduring, alluring, polymorphous vitality of ceramics.