

# Ceramics

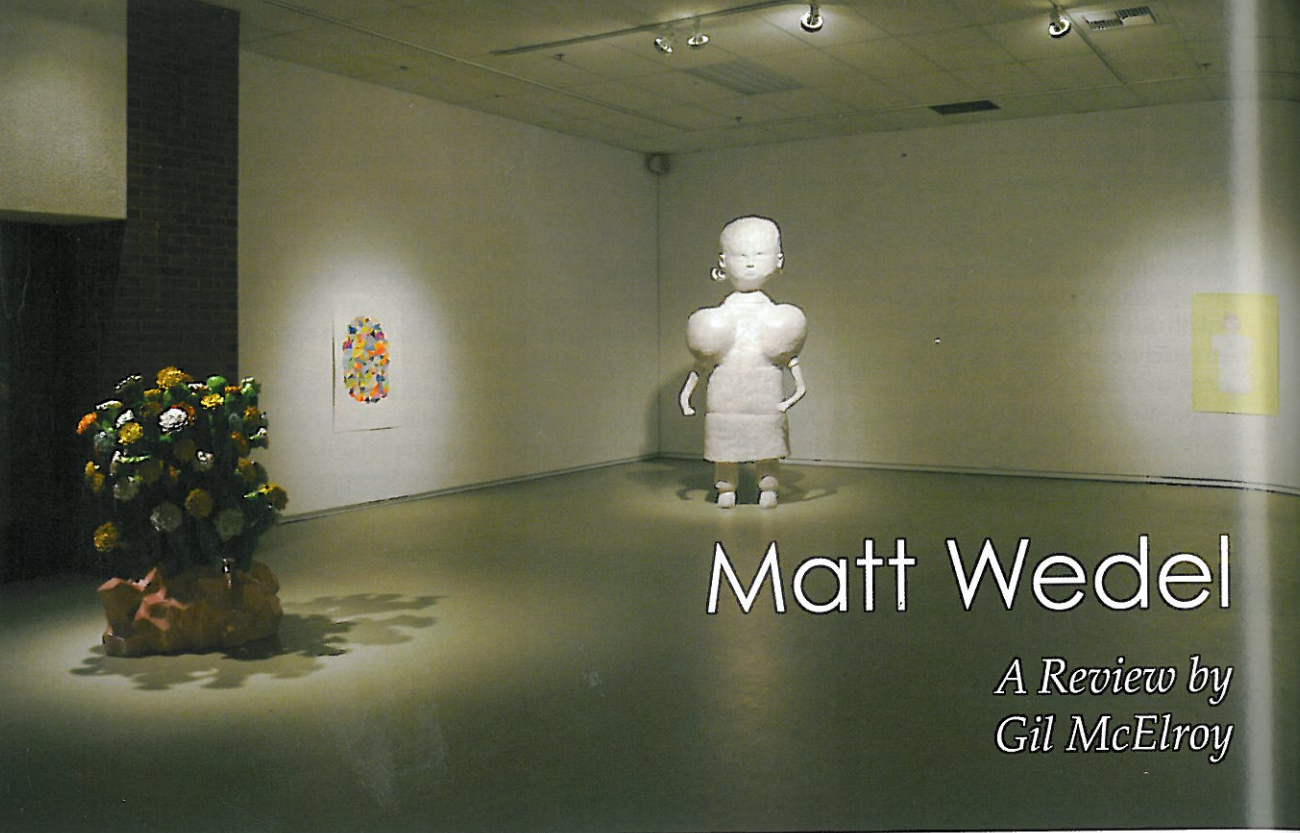
Art and Perception

2010  
ISSUE 82

INTERNATIONAL  
US\$20 UK £9 CANS\$22 €15







# Matt Wedel

*A Review by  
Gil McElroy*

*Installation View with White Boy in the Centre and Flower Tree on Pink to the Left.*

CALIFORNIA-BASED CERAMIST MATT WEDEL SPENT THE 2008-2009 academic year teaching at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The institution has recently opened a satellite branch (the Port Campus) just south of its main locale in the heart of the city's historic downtown and which is immediately adjacent to a busy container port. The NSCAD Ceramics Department has relocated into this new facility, which afforded them the opportunity to acquire larger, state-of-the-art kilns (the biggest of which has a capacity of over 4,000 litres) than could be housed in their cramped former quarters. It has been a long trip to this state of affairs from the Conceptual Art heyday of the 1960s and 1970s that made NSCAD famous and which led, at the ceramics end of things, to the radical step of removing the wheels – all of them – from studios.

Enter Matt Wedel. During his year at NSCAD, he took full advantage of the school's new facilities, utilizing the large kilns to create the work for this exhibition mounted at the Saint Mary's University Art Gallery in Halifax. To start with, there was nary a plinth to be seen here. Wedel installed everything (save for a handful of drawings) directly on the gallery's polished concrete floor. So the scale of things came to be consequential in addressing pieces that loosely aligned themselves in to two distinct bodies of work: figurative ceramic sculptures and a series of pieces seemingly inspired by the landscape of Southern California.

Of the former: Wedel ranged widely across the

figurative scale in proffering both the largest and smallest works of the exhibition. Tucked into a corner near the gallery entrance was by far the single largest piece of the show, the monumental *White Child* (all works are 2009), a glazed clay figure that, assembled in three stacked sections, towered over eight feet in height. The scale of the work hearkened back to a piece Wedel completed while a graduate student in California: *Child*, a 16-foot high figurative sculpture that he installed in the fall of 2007 outdoors in the garden of the Museum of Art in Long Beach and which, according to media reports of the time, greatly upset the neighbours who, for six months, encountered its bright yellow form looming imposingly into their sightlines.

Beyond the issue of its size, *White Child* explores issues of sexual identity common to the other figurative works Wedel exhibited as part of this exhibition. We presume this sculpture to represent a young girl because of a set of visual cues we are given: courtesy representational elements like a couple of girly curls of hair poking up behind the figure's ears and, more importantly, the elaborately puffy sleeves cladding its stick-like arms. The rest of the figure's apparel, however, is somewhat indeterminant: is it clad in a skirt or might it be wearing a very long top over a pair of pants? Such blurring of gender identity also occurs in the paired figures *Pink Boy* and *Gold Girl*, two much smaller, virtually life-sized pieces (the former four feet in height, the latter a few inches shorter) glazed in the titular colours and each clad in the same clothing with the same outlandishly puffed-up sleeves as the giant in the room's corner.





*Gold Girl.* 2009. Fired clay, glaze and gold lustre.  
45 x 23 x 12 in.



*Pink Boy.* 2009. Fired clay and glaze. 48 x 26 x 12 in.

Wedel's figurative works here deliberately tend toward the caricaturish, excepting one piece: *White Boy*. At just over three feet, it is the smallest of the figures (also perhaps life-sized) and the only nude. With genitalia, toes and an oversized head that relatively accurately correspond to the size and proportions of young children, it is the only work that closely cleaves to figurative reality.

This makes *White Boy* stick out like the proverbial sore thumb in this large, open gallery space where Wedel's work can pretty much be all taken in all at once (and which might account for the fact that he situated *White Boy* smack up against the side of a freestanding pillar that blocks a possible sightline). It is the exception that proves the rule of Wedel's apparent argument that gender identity is a social construct.

That seems to go for the non-figurative works here as well, for Wedel's interpretation of landscape seems to cleave closer to something straight out of the cartoon world of *The Flintstones* as opposed to any attempt at what might be considered straight representation. I do not mean that at all disparagingly; Wedel's non-figurative works seem very much a part of some kind of social construct thesis: that Nature might be as we subjectively deem it.

This body of non-figurative works coalesced into two separate but interrelated groupings: gem pieces and

flower tree works. *Red Gem* typifies the former series, a small lump of brightly glazed clay that presents its surface as a series of angular facets, as if made up of elemental and basic chunks of stuff that had been smushed together prior to firing so as to comprise a single mass. I am going to risk pushing this analogy to an extreme and say that it was as if Wedel conceptually played around with philosophical thinking of the ancient Greeks and made clay versions of the forms of the Platonic solids that they believed to be the elemental shapes that comprised the stuff of the world (especially those highly complex shapes like multi-faceted dodecahedrons and icosahedrons) that he then threw together willy-nilly to create the ceramic objects that become his gems.

Maybe that is a bit of a stretch but the point is that, in his work, Wedel recomposes the objects of the world and (with certain critical exceptions) does not merely ape them. Whether it is the inspiration of ancient Greek thinking or the pop culture of *The Flintstones*, Wedel has a unique phenomenological take on the nature of things.

His flower tree works comprise variations on the gem pieces, with sculptural flowers sprouting like ornament upon them. *Blue Flower Tree on Orange* has a small, blue bulbous object sprouting several circular blue brushy lumps protruding from the top of a larger orange gem-like object; *Green Flower Tree on Yellow* has a large bushy





Top left: *Red Gem*. 2009. Fire clay and glaze. 22 x 15 x 14 in.

Top centre: *Flower Tree on Lavender*. 2009. Fired clay and glaze. 26 x 14 x 15 in.

Above: *Green Flower Tree on Yellow*. 2009. Fired clay and glaze. 54 x 40 x 25 in.

Left: *Flower Tree on Pink*. 2009. Fired clay and glaze. 54 x 41 x 34 in.

*Flower Tree on Pink* also excludes itself from the rule of monochrome, though in a more overt and calculated way. The gem rock of the work's base is the titular monochromatic pink but the cluster of growths that emanate from it comprise a veritable explosion of colour. The tops and arms of the long, thick green cactus-like stems that rise from the gem are covered with a profusion of individually coloured yellow, blue and orange flowers.

With *Flower Tree on Pink*, Matt Wedel cleaves closely to the ho-hum of things, opting less for the freedom of phenomenological expressiveness and more for straightforward likeness and the exactness of representational accuracy. Like his figurative piece *White Boy*, it makes for an exception to the rule. It also makes for a narrower

and far less interesting direction in which his work might evolve. It is his other stuff – the work that confronts and challenges the paradigmatic shape we have conferred upon the world – that holds promise.

green growth, studded with white cactus-like flowers, that has an unshakable resemblance to a dog's head emanating from the top of a yellow gem; and *Flower Tree on Lavender* sprouts a brown trunk with numerous cactus-like appendages from which a green glaze has trickled down, beautifully striating the mottled colour of the gem stone beneath. The latter consequently comprises one of the few works in which Wedel excises himself from his relentlessly monochromatic palate.

Gil McElroy is an independent curator, freelance critic and poet living just outside of Toronto, Ontario. *Matt Wedel* ran from 7 March to 11 April 2009.