

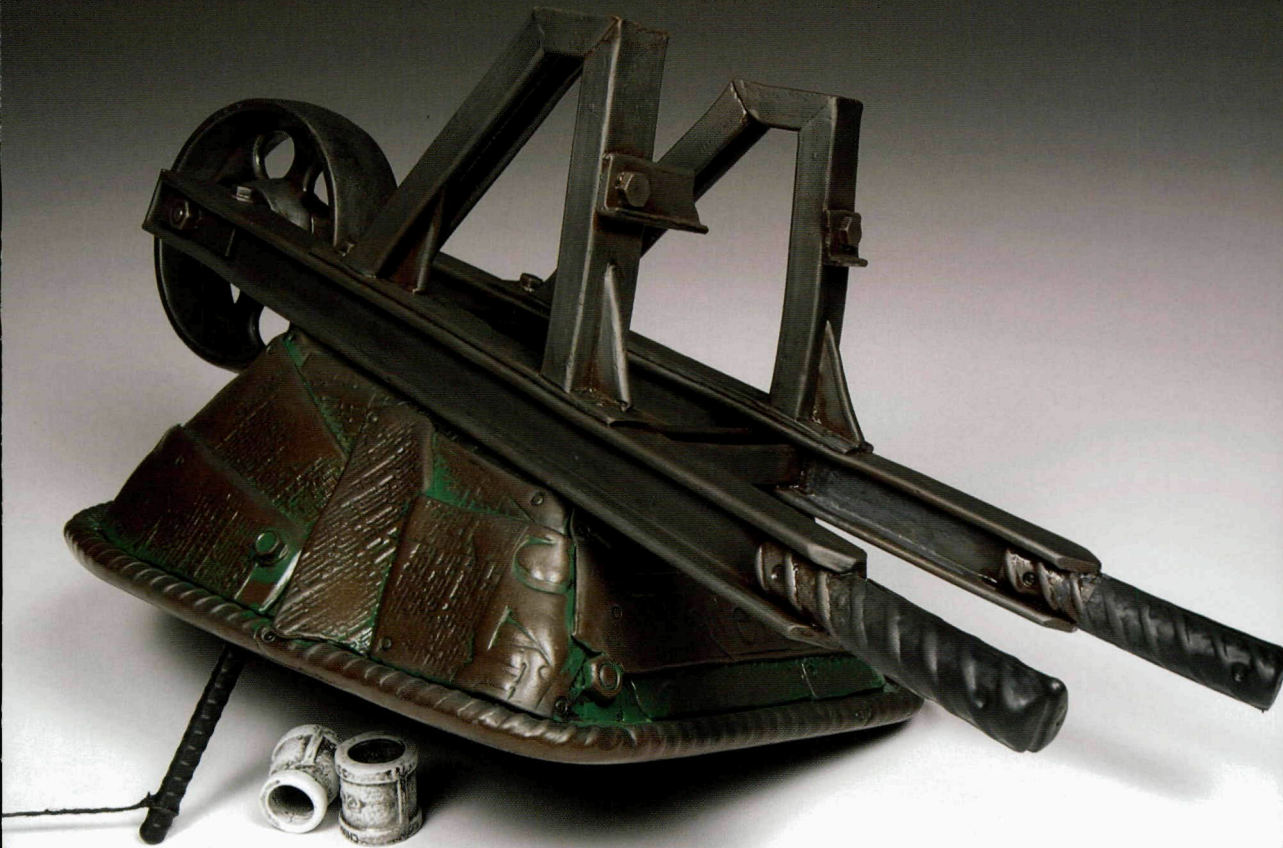
Chris Dufala

Ceramic Sculpture and Mono-prints

Review by
Sara Morris

WHEN A WORK OF ART SUCCESSFULLY fools the eye, it is a testament to the artist's skill in capturing the real. The traditional method of *trompe l'oeil* has been revisited by a variety of contemporary American ceramics artists, such as Sylvia Hyman and Richard Shaw, whose sculptures convincingly appear as everyday objects. Ceramics artist Chris Dufala is once again reviving this established approach to realism by incorporating the innovative technique of underglaze mono-printing within his *trompe l'oeil* compositions.

Chris Dufala: *Ceramic Sculpture and Mono-Prints* is the first exhibition of Dufala's work shown in concurrence with the annual conference of the 2012 NCECA, held in Seattle, US. Dufala's work, which he exhibited at the Hallway Gallery in Bellevue, Washington, struck me with its high level of sophistication, not just technically, but intellectually, as if each sculpture possessed a secret that only a careful examination of all its parts could reveal. Ceramic sculptures in the form of obsolete objects



from the past, such as a cast-iron iron, wheelbarrow and laundry press, adorned the gallery walls and pedestals. Actual objects such as these, which once assisted the average person with everyday tasks with the intent to make life easier, now, like old black and white photos, serve as ghostly reminders of a simpler time. Children's toys can also be found within Dufala's compositions, such as the wagon and unicycle, which recent technology has now replaced with the latest widget and app. For Dufala, perhaps these nostalgic devices mark the start of humanity's move toward a suburban domesticity. During an interview I had with Dufala, he termed these banal tools and toys "objects of convenience". His work seems to suggest that these objects pull humanity away from nature and toward a society that increasingly relies upon technology. Ironically, Dufala does not solely employ traditional approaches within his own work, but is constantly exploring his medium: "I am always trying to push the limits of what clay is capable of doing, what processes are new and intriguing to me and how I can continue to progress an idea or building process."

Dufala's recent work exhibits a Shawian approach to detail that is capable of baffling even the most accustomed gallery goer. Most elements in his sculptures do not appear to be ceramic at all, but real wood, steel, nails, screws, wheels and rods. Each realistic element has a compositional purpose, which at first

Facing page: Who's to Blame (Detail).

Above: Corporate Economics.

Background image: Along for the Ride (Detail).

seems to only assist the sculpture mechanically, as if the work could actually function. The sculptures' degree of verisimilitude is compromised by their non-functionality. The effect of the illusion is to create a sense of delusion – the viewer is deceived by the sculpture, as one is capable of being persuaded by the economy. For tucked within Dufala's concept are the inherent natures of *trompe l'oeil* sculpture and corporate economics, since each has the ability to persuade or, to use the more violent term, lie. A sense of economical falseness can also be seen in Dufala's free-standing sculptures, such as *Corporate Economics*, which appears to be an overturned wheel barrel that looks more like a trap than a sculpture. Within Dufala's latest wall sculptures, however, these industrial tools and parts have another purpose – they serve as a platform for the mono-prints.

In this exhibition, Dufala premieres his mono-print wall sculptures, a new series that combines an unorthodox underglaze mono-print technique with *trompe l'oeil* sculpture, which not only adds to his cannon of rich surface treatments, but also amplifies his works' meanings. To begin with, his works marry

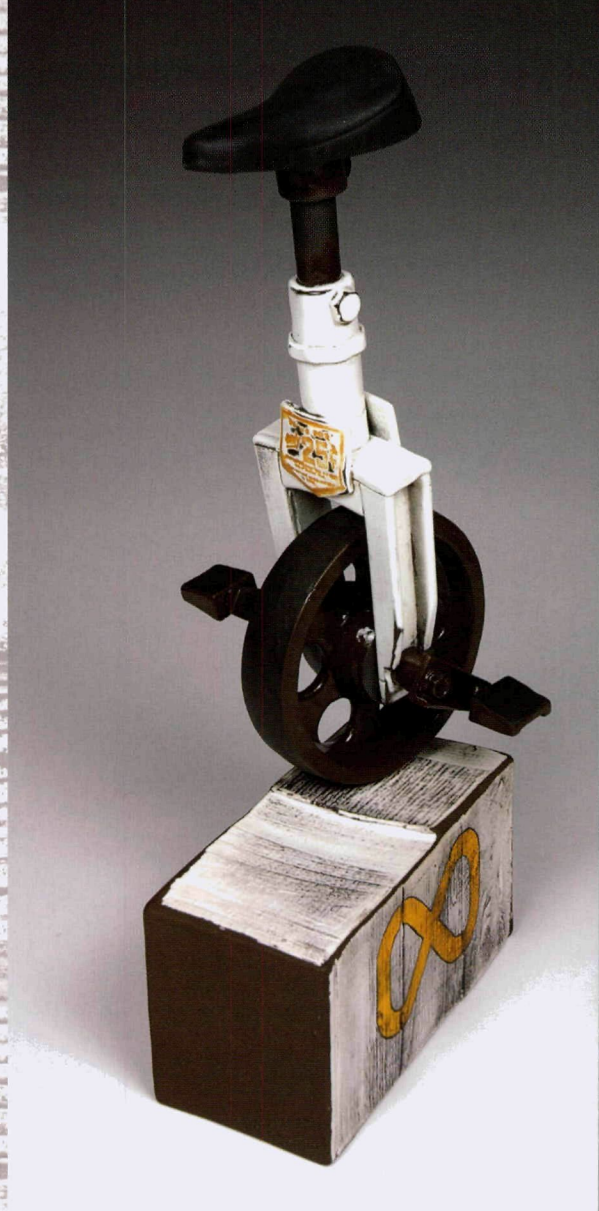


Above: *Who's to Blame?*

Right: *Faith.*

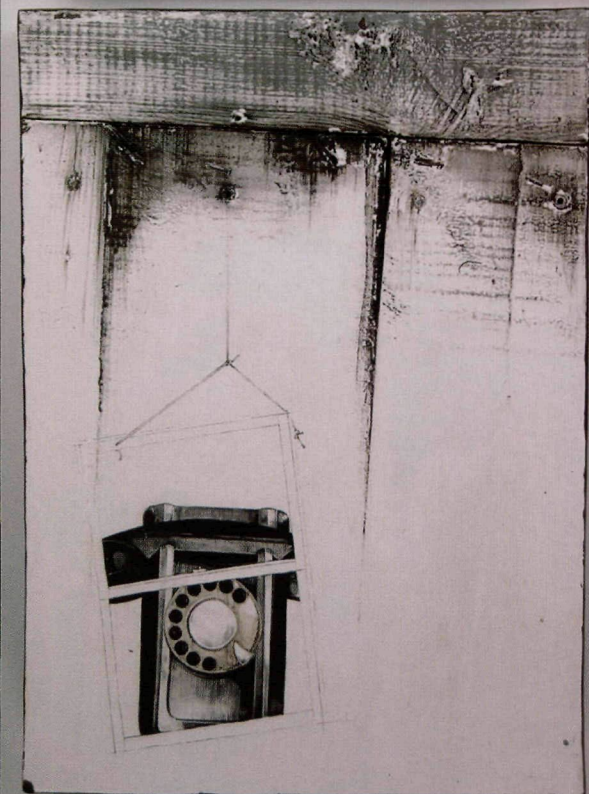
Below: *Obsolescence.*

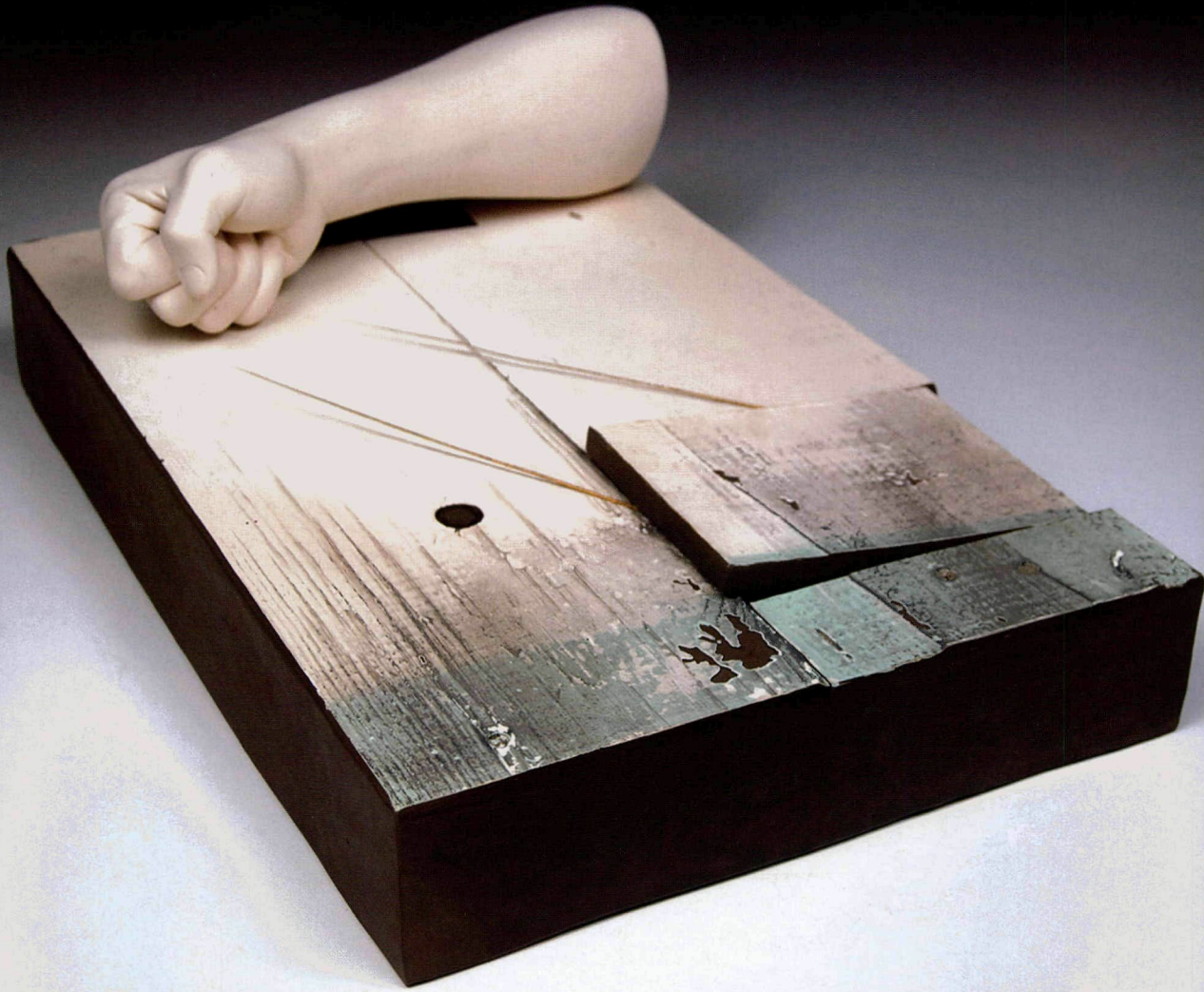
Background image: *Along for the Ride (Detail).*



two contradictory styles (*trompe l'oeil* and Surrealism) and two opposing mediums, sculpture and mono-print. Surprisingly, these different methods seamlessly work together to form a unified whole. In *The Acquisition*, the action of the sculpted hand and trap door are supported by the mono-print, a thin rope; however, we cannot trust the illusion of the rope since it disappears once it reaches the clenched fist. Next we begin to question the honesty of even the most tangible elements, such as the hand and door, or even the wood surface. Each method quietly communicates to another and together they begin to tell a story.

Dufala's illustrations, which he transfers on to the sculpture from a prepared plaster slab, consist of absurd narratives with illusionistic qualities containing anthropomorphic hands and household objects portrayed in action. They animate the otherwise dormant machines that they are printed on with their expressive gestures and bold lines;





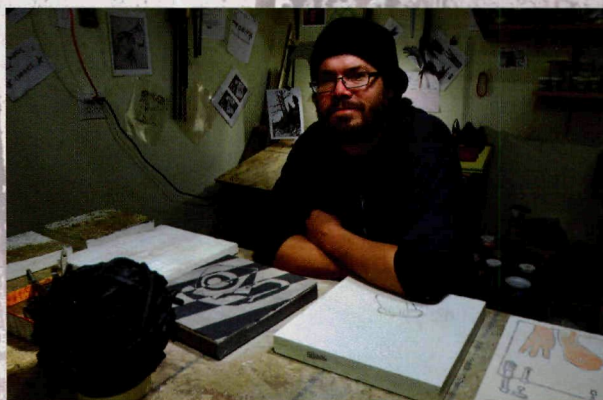
Above: *The Acquisition*.

Below: *Chris Dufala in his Studio*.
Background image: *Runner Up (Detail)*.

All photos by Chris Dufala.

however, the print's muted colours and aggressive characteristics also evince a sombre attitude. Although his sculptures may be nostalgic, his mono-prints are of the moment, dealing with current issues that "reflect reality" and expose "the successes and failures of the human condition."¹

Who's to Blame?, a wall sculpture that convincingly takes the form of an old-fashioned laundry press, appears to be functional since every nut and bolt is painstakingly rendered. Instead of a piece of linen, however, a starch white ceramic slab appears to have been pressed through the machine's pins. A crease or small series of cracks in the slab reveals the work's true medium and in a way elevates the sculpture – it is no longer imitating reality, but is admitting its failures. Dufala's investigative pursuit of ceramics is especially inscribed within his most recent works, which begin to metaphorically expose his ambitions with clay. The series of cracks in *Who's to Blame?* reveals that Dufala is beginning to answer the question of what is the point of making these objects out of clay instead of appropriating actual objects. The fragility and non-functionality of his ceramic sculpture relate to the lack of integrity within our own consumer society.



Endnotes

1. Quote taken from Chris Dufala's artist statement found at <http://www.hallwaygallery.com/gallery30.php>.

Sara Morris is a Santa Cruz-based arts writer with a particular interest in ceramics created in the Bay Area. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Art History and Visual Culture and a Minor in Studio Art at San Jose State University under the guidance of Bay Area artists Stan Welsh and Monica Van den Dool.

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