



## **RAM Showcase: Focus on Clay**

June 14, 2023 – May 25, 2024

In an anthropological context, the history of ceramics is most often associated with function. In an art historical framework, clay underwent a revolution in the mid-twentieth century as increasing numbers of artists pushed its boundaries in theory, concept, and form. This encouraged a shift away from function and towards concept-based sculpture and explorations of material. Presently, artists flex their artistic muscle at will—using clay to create functional or sculptural work as they choose and investigating clay on historical, personal, social, and cultural terms as well as practical and material ones.

As a *RAM Showcase* exhibition, *Focus on Clay* centers on the work of artists of color, and those represented here specifically reflect a range of artistic practices and approaches. Taken collectively, these objects represent multiple decades of working with clay.

It is important to point out that while there are theoretically no limitations to the materials any artist can use, there have historically been barriers to some artists of color in the United States—indirect or otherwise—to access tools, materials, or studio spaces. In this current moment, more and more efforts are being made to not just support and encourage the work of artists of color but also to draw attention to the work that has already been created.

### **Biographies and statements from featured artists**

#### **Luis Bermudez**

b. Los Angeles, California, 1953–d. 2021

*I come to my work, impelled to give tangible presence to the episodes in my life of peculiar intensity—the ones that announce their transcendence, and touch the common core of human experience.*

#### **Education**

- 1978 MA; 1976 BA California State University, Northridge

#### **Select Solo Exhibitions**

(Bermudez has participated in numerous group exhibitions)

- 2010–11 Beatrice Wood Center for the Arts, Ojai, California
- 2009 American Museum of Ceramic Art, Pomona, California
- 2005, Charles & Dorothy Clark Gallery, The University of Texas-Pan American, Edinburg, Texas

#### **Select Public Collections**

- Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California
- Racine Art Museum, Wisconsin

Interested in the “interwovenness [sic] of the self, shared humanity, and the natural world,” Bermudez drew on his Mexican heritage and world travels to investigate mythical and ceremonial global themes in his sculptural works. Bridging the gap between what is considered ancient or contemporary, Bermudez used clay, and its “earthly qualities” to underscore connections across time and space.

Explore: <http://luisbermudez.com/>

### **Christopher Davis-Benavides**

b. Lima, Peru, 1955–

*These sculptures originate from my cross-cultural background, and I intend that they reflect worlds which exist within other complex underworlds... Architectural references have led me to deal with many personal and aesthetic concerns. The forms allude to the interposition of cultures, complexities and mysteries that are created when cultures interact...*

#### **Education**

- MA University of Wisconsin–Madison
- BFA University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

#### **Select Solo Exhibitions**

(Davis-Benavides has participated in numerous group exhibitions)

- 1994 Tory Folliard Gallery, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- 1992 RAM’s Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine, Wisconsin
- 1993 Wriston Art Center, Lawrence University, Appleton, Wisconsin

#### **Select Public Collections**

- Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock
- Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru
- Racine Art Museum, Wisconsin

Davis-Benavides utilizes his cross-cultural background—born in Peru and living and working in the United States—to feed his ceramic work. Using architectural forms to serve as a “metaphor for human activity,” he employs techniques that allow him to build up layers of color and surface texture to suggest elemental changes and shifts over time.

### **Benjie Heu**

b. Panama, 1971–

*[Working with clay] you don’t stress so much about making mistakes because you know you can just recycle it and make another one. It helps you accept fault. It helps you kind of accept that the world’s not gonna be perfect.*

#### **Education**

- MFA Ohio University in Athens
- BFA University of Montevallo, Alabama

Currently, Heu is the Professor of Ceramics in the Art and Design Department at Southwest Missouri State University, Cape Girardeau. He talks to his students about the power of ceramics beyond materiality—whether sculptural or functional, clay can be used for self-expression as well as a means to reflect culture and history and connect with others.

Watch: <https://semo.edu/stories/2022/04/benjie-heu.html>  
[https://youtu.be/\\_FiRfH7m5GU](https://youtu.be/_FiRfH7m5GU)

## **Juana Leno**

b. 1917–d. 2000

Juana Leno is one of a handful of women who helped to revive the tradition of Acoma Pueblo pottery by excavating shards from remote areas then recreating certain designs.

- Leno learned pottery traditions from her grandmother and went on to teach her children and grandchildren.
- Typically, she used a paint brush made from leaves of the Yucca plant.

Watch: <https://youtu.be/UKfUixM1gmY>

## **Louis Mendez**

b. Manhattan, New York 1929–d. 2012

### **Education**

- MFA and BFA New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University

### **Select Solo Exhibitions**

(Mendez has participated in numerous group exhibitions)

- 2012 Mikhail Zakin Gallery, The Art School at Old Church, Demarest, New Jersey
- 2011 Kaleidoscope Gallery, City Island, New York
- 2010 Puffin Room Foundation, New York

### **Select Public Collections**

- Alfred Ceramic Art Museum, Alfred University, New York
- Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York
- Racine Art Museum, Wisconsin

Mendez was an enthusiastic and engaging teacher throughout much of his career, first teaching at the Philadelphia College of Art, Pennsylvania and ultimately staying at the Ohio State University, Columbus, as an Associate Professor of Art and Chairman of the Graduate Faculty in the Ceramics Department. As well as teaching professionally, Mendez taught casually.

Explore: <https://louismendez.com/>

**Hideaki Miyamura**

b. Niigata, Japan 1955–

*I want each piece to feel balanced with the environment, to feel as it coexists naturally with its surroundings. The form directs the light and the eye, allowing the glaze, in turn, to shape the perception of form.*

**Education**

- 1981 Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo
- 1987 Completed apprenticeship with Master Potter Shurei Miura in Yamanashi, Japan

**Select Public Collections**

- German Hygiene Museum, Dresden, Germany
- Racine Art Museum, Wisconsin
- Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Balancing science and art, Miyamura is best known for iridescent glazes derived from historical sources. After initially being inspired by the glazes of ancient Chinese tea bowls no one has been able to reproduce, he tests thousands of recipes for his own work, landing on those that seem to convey “purity and peacefulness.”

**Anita Wong**

b. Surrey, British Columbia, Canada, 1965–

Similar to other contemporary clay artists who draw on the rich and international history of ceramics, Anita Wong’s bowls suggest historical Imari ware (the name applied, in the West, to Japanese export porcelain produced in the city of Arita).

- Ceramic pieces, especially porcelain, were tied into a complex, international web of trade, nation-building, luxury, and consumption.
- In addition to western Europe, China sought to replicate some of the success the Japanese had—while there are differences, both Chinese and Japanese Imari ware plates and bowls often showcased a repeating pattern on the edge with a central pattern in the middle.
- Wong has modernized a historical tradition—replacing floral and nature-based imagery and pattern with contemporary scenes.



## **Women Artists at RAM**

RAM acknowledges the efforts of self-identifying women in the art world consistently and sincerely at all times. The museum highlights how women are inextricably woven—and often the foundation—of creative endeavors and discourse. By current count, 41% of the artists in RAM’s collection are women. This percentage—which is consistently increasing—is already substantially greater than the ratios calculated at other organizations with permanent collections and active exhibition programs. At RAM, work made by different genders is considered for inclusion in the museum’s holdings on equal terms. And notably, because RAM relies on gifts of artwork to build the collection, this policy has been reinforced by open-minded donors who have collected, and then donated, quality work regardless of the gender of the artist. The following is a list of women whose works are included in this exhibition. This effort—similar to efforts to highlight artists of color at RAM—is not meant to single out artists to stigmatize them but to magnify and cast a spotlight on their significance. It reflects intention, goodwill, and an attempt to reckon with years of historical underrepresentation. RAM hopes this provides opportunities for audiences to learn more about these artists and their ideas. Visitors are encouraged to take note and research these artists via the internet to find out more about their biographies and larger bodies of work.

**Juana Leno and Anita Wong**