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The Purpose of Labor

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The Purpose of Labor



An Exhibition of New Work by Gail Kendall

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For Gail Kendall, in decoration there is delight. No subscriber to the modernist dogma expressed by the architect Alfred Loos—that “ornament is crime”—Kendall covers surfaces with eye-opening designs. Instead of the streamlined forms and unadorned austerity of high modernism, Kendall complements subtle washes or spots of color and delicate linear tracings with an unrelenting dot mania and frequent use of gold. The dots, sometimes only tiny specks, enliven the surfaces while demonstrating the expressive possibilities of even the simplest mark. The gold, far from indicating kitsch luxury, offers a reminder of the unique visual quality of gold’s magical, glowing luster. Then there is Kendall’s use of red, which manages to conjure up both exotic opulence and punk impudence, adding spice to the mix.

Just as Wayne Thiebaud uses paint to create delectable images of cakes and ice cream,

Kendall can make glaze and clay look downright tasty, as in the serpentine ribbons of color that encircle her tureens and platters. The lovely botanical motifs and interlace patterns reveal Kendall’s admiration for traditional English ware and Islamic ceramics. Yet Kendall always manages to translate historical influences into her own personal and unmistakably contemporary idiom. Kendall redeems decoration from appearing superficial or “merely” decorative. But her lively surface treatments should not overshadow the strength and assurance of the physical forms. When Kendall makes a tureen, each individual element—from the base through the body of the vessel to the shoulder and the lid—has its own distinct character while contributing to the overall effect.

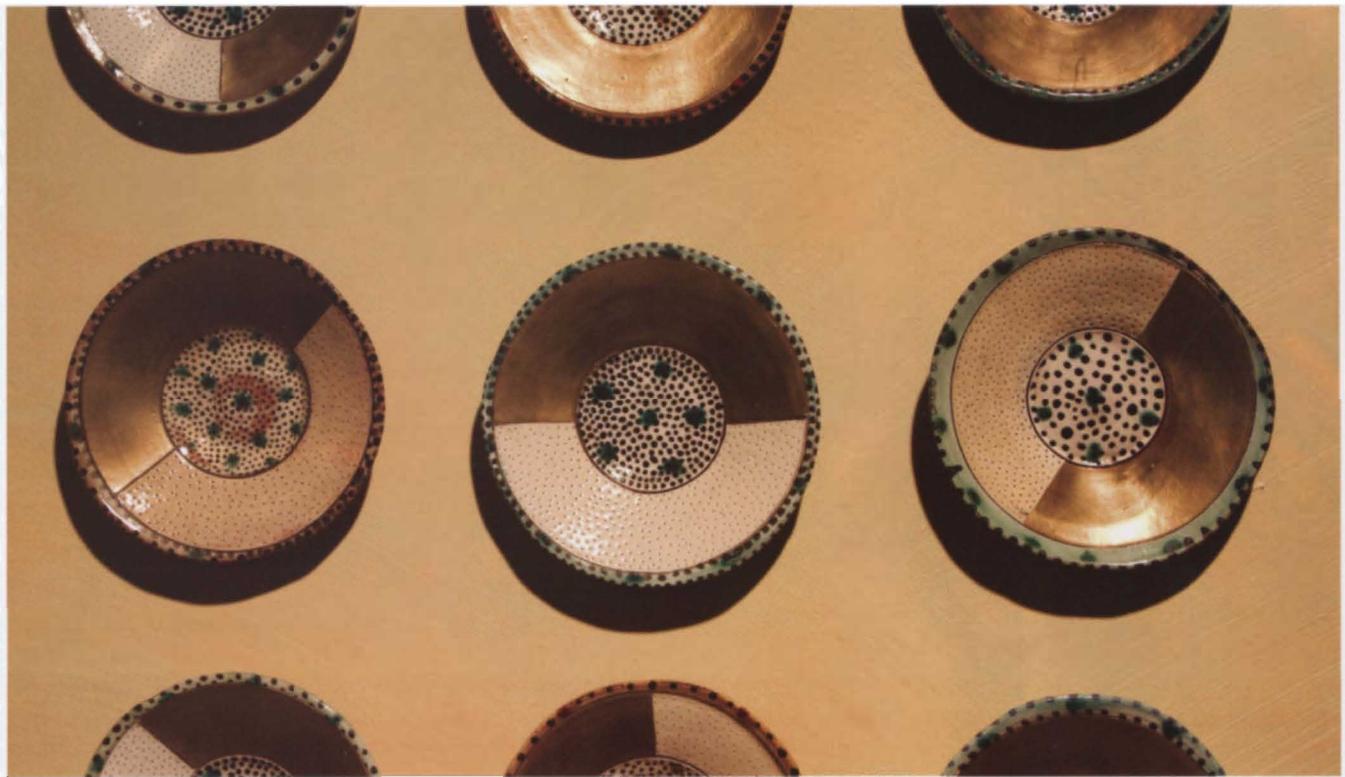
Kendall likes to say that she is drawn to both simple peasant ware and elaborate palace ceramics. In an age of oversized McMansions furnished with equally grandiose decor, tureens and chargers might appear as faux aristocratic fantasy showpieces, missing only family crests à la Ralph Lauren. But with Kendall they testify to an essentially democratic approach, strange as that might sound, similar in principle if radically different in style compared to Bauhaus-inspired designs or functional pottery in the Anglo-Asian country tradition. Ceramics for Kendall brings a special holiday-like beauty into the home, ideally on an everyday basis, and represent not wealth and vanity but family and community. In the world of tableware, a tureen is a monumental work, a technical challenge that, as Kendall shows so well, can be a tour de force. More important, however, a tureen, like a charger, is designed for serving a group. The festive quality of the ceramics contributes to the sensuous quality of the food. Culinary pleasures and ceramic pleasures are, above all, pleasures of the senses. Kendall’s ceramics always seem to ask a basic question: Why not enjoy life?

It is telling that Kendall’s most ambi-

tious work to date is a composite fashioned out of small, relatively simple forms. In Kendall's hands, even a small dish can offer an intense experience. In a plate, circular forms testify to an origin on the rotating potter's wheel, incorporating a sense of the process into the final product. A plate is not a painting. Yet like Jasper Johns with targets or Kenneth Noland with concentric circles, Kendall is adept at exploiting the tension between center and periphery, juxtaposing the different areas of color and pattern to create

drama to go with the play between the central dotted area and the dotted border. Presenting the plates with the dividing lines in different positions, as if rotating, creates an illusion of movement, especially when set against the sweeping gestures incorporated into the paint on the wall. It is an exhilarating visual spectacle, with a dynamic sense of counterpoint and harmony.

The title of the exhibition, from a poem by Kabir, is about work. Kendall, a self-described workaholic, is interested in the subject



designs that are full of energy.

As elements in an exhibition wall installation, the individual dishes take on an entirely new appearance. The grid is a major form in modern art, as in Mondrian, Agnes Martin, and Sol Lewitt. It provides a mathematical rigor and order and can suggest both a bounded set and the possibility of boundless extension. In Kendall's array of plates, however, the dominant elements are circular, except for the straight line between the gold and the white areas. That division gives each plate a fundamental visual

as part of an ongoing internal dialogue revolving around those fundamental, nagging questions, "Why am I doing this?" and "Is it worth it?" The title also refers to the collaborative nature of the central work, created with the aid of assistants. A line in the poem completes the title phrase by proclaiming that the purpose of labor is to learn, an idea that seems appropriate given Kendall's exemplary teaching career. The full line suggests the reciprocal relationship between making and learning, and, to take one more step, the learning that occurs when a work

of art is viewed.

Kendall says that the poem is not invoked as a sign of belief in Sufism. But Kabir's poetry is, as she has observed, "full of amazing visual imagery." Kabir repeatedly introduces the relationship between the outer world and the body and the inner, spiritual world, with the divine spirit permeating being. That emphasis on "outer" and "inner" must resonate with any potter, especially when expressed in lines like these (as rendered by Robert Bly): "Inside this clay jug there are canyons and pine mountains, and



the maker of canyons and pine mountains! All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds of millions of stars." But the vibrant, ecstatic spirit of such poems must resonate with any human. One wants to savor each, yet move on to the next to see what new wonder awaits. As this exhibition so beautifully demonstrates, the same is true of Kendall's ceramics.

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About the artist

Gail Kendall, Hixson-Lied Professor of Art at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, was raised in a small lumber town on Sturgeon Bay in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Following her formal education at the University of Michigan (BSD) and Eastern Michigan University (MFA), she spent 10 years working as an independent studio artist in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1987 she accepted a position in the Department of Art and Art History at UNL.

Kendall's research interests include Mediterranean Basin earthenware ceramics, Christian and Islamic illuminated manuscripts and English pottery and porcelain. She has been a resident artist at Spode Fine China Works in Stoke-On-Trent, England, the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana, and Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts in Newcastle, Maine. In 2003 Kendall was a participant in the Attingham Trust Summer Program in the United Kingdom.

Kendall's work has been shown in countless exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad and has been the subject of articles in periodicals and books including *Ceramics: Art and Perception* (Australia) and *Neue Keramik* (Germany). Her pottery will be featured in Emmanuel Cooper's new book, *International Ceramics*, to be published in London at the end of 2008.



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