



JEANNE QUINN  
CERAMIC IN(TER)VENTIONS

October 7, 2011–January 7, 2012

**kemper** at the **crossroads**

33 W. 19th Street, Kansas City, MO  
Fridays noon–8:00 p.m. (until 10:00 p.m. on First Fridays)  
Saturdays noon–6:00 p.m.



*Everything Is Not As It Seems* (2009)

## The Question of *Touch*

The relationship between the functional and the sensual reflects one of the central tensions in the sculptural installations of artist Jeanne Quinn. “When you are trained as a ceramicist, one of the things that you always think about is the relationship of the object to the body, because everybody, myself included, starts off making things for use. You start off making cups and bowls and plates, and so you’re asked to think about the handle and the lip, and how it is going to feel when you put this lip up to your lips, and you have this very intimate experience with the object.”\*

It was the field of architecture, particularly the work of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, that introduced the vocabulary (visual and theoretical) of postmodernism to the visual arts. In short, they declared that symbols and iconography from the everyday vernacular could coexist with the historic monumental in the aesthetic realm. A signature element of postmodernism is the addition of a decorative element from one time period to a functional element from another: a self-conscious hybridizing of ideas, historic time frames, and an upending of the primacy of a discrete style. In *Entrances* (1977), Venturi sketches a baker’s dozen façades featuring styles borrowed from Egyptian temples, tidy Craftsman-style eaves, and the drawbridge gate from a medieval castle, often combined with tongue-in-cheek aplomb. In a column detail of the Allen Memorial Art Museum building at Oberlin College in Ohio, Robert Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown (currently known as Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates) transforms the scroll-shape ornaments on the capital of an Ionic column into a double round, almost Pop art caricature of a thought balloon.

*A Thousand Tiny Deaths* (2009) by Jeanne Quinn adopts the insouciant hybridity of postmodernism. Red, orange, and pink balloons, in every state of buoyancy and flaccidness, emerge from

the lips of black porcelain vessels, some classically shaped with handles and base; others with sleek modern profiles, elegant in their lack of ornamentation. The forms with handles seem to reference Roman amphorae, functional pots used to store and ship goods of all sorts.

The title *A Thousand Tiny Deaths* has several compelling implications. In French, *la petite mort* is an idiom for orgasm, and the connection to waiting for a moment of release offers a plausible understanding of the work's physical presence: the porcelain vessels appear to be suspended from a ceiling support using simple, black string. But a closer look reveals that it is the balloons, not the objects, that are held aloft. As the air (once the breath of the artist) slowly leaves the balloon, the vessel falls to the ground, crashing into countless small parts. Longevity, codependency, and the physics of gravity are all at play.

Another possible implication of the title has a literary reference and offers a complicated metaphor, to be sure. In common parlance one might say, "A coward dies a thousand deaths, a hero but one." In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Act 2, Scene 2, Caesar tries, as he wakes, to determine the meaning of signs offered by the celestial world the night prior. Calpurnia, the last of Caesar's wives, grapples with the events, as she states,

*When beggars die, there are no comets seen;  
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.*

To which Caesar, in convincing himself not to go to the Senate that day, says:

*Cowards die many times before their deaths;  
The valiant never taste of death but once.  
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,  
It seems to me most strange that men should fear;  
Seeing that death, a necessary end,  
Will come when it will come.*

Caesar is, of course, persuaded by his colleague Brutus (yes, of "Et tu, Brute?") to ignore his instincts and attend the Senate that fateful ides of March. How might Caesar's belief in "death, a necessary end" impact our metaphoric reading of the beauty, worth, and value of the vessels about to crash to earth in *A Thousand Tiny Deaths*?

The intimacy of cup to lips is translated into an extravagant, immersive experience in *Everything Is Not As It Seems* (2009). In this full gallery installation the Baroque meets the Now in a glowing field—garlands of white porcelain pearls draped from just skimming the floor to many feet above our heads, and bare light bulbs in a gallery painted red; the color of hearts, of flowers, of the



*A Thousand Tiny Deaths* (detail), (2009)



*Ironic Column*, courtesy of Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc., Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, 1976

inner workings of the human body. The idea of a chandelier is very much present and was one of the artist's inspirations. The structure of this work is deceptive, and what appears upon first approach to be a random composition is revealed as one walks between its two "halves" to be a bilateral symmetry based upon the skeletal form of the human body. One must enter the work to have this understanding.

Quinn's formal and conceptual conversation always circles back to the human body. In *Rorschach Curtain* (2006), each of the more-than-one-hundred tiny porcelain elements is held a few inches from the wall with straight pins. The pins are from two traditions—those of the jeweler and the dressmaker: adornment and function again in conversation. The gallery lighting creates shadowy doppelgänger forms that in their deep gray have as much formal weight as the objects themselves.

Unlike the other works on view, this one takes the scale and implications of a painting. The wall is painted three colors using a template, so as to be replicable. Because of the scale, it is possible to perceive the work at once. It operates differently from the installations, whose readings benefit from the viewer moving around or through the work. Tiny ceramic moments, the gesture of the hand forming the shape of an active memory, are impaled by dressmaker pins through small Nichrome wire rings—a wire that can take the high heat of a kiln—and held to the wall in a complicated but ultimately symmetrical composition. The overall pattern, by virtue of its title, references the famous psychological barometer, where patients are shown inkblot patterns and asked to tell the psychiatrist what they "see." The overall composition might remind one of a skeletal structure. The forms I see are direct references to bones of the body: long, slender femurs; the female pelvis; the hyoid (lingual) bone—that unique bone in the throat that allows for complex and varied speech in humans. Some of the objects take on an ominous tone: a pair of limbs spread in a position of vulnerability; long bones with connecting cartilage exposed.

In *Jeanne Quinn: Ceramic In(ter)ventions*, the works of art may take center stage, but the viewer becomes the central protagonist. A postmodern narrative arc allows for the juxtaposition of diverse elements; art history meets memory; the ephemeral meets the (seemingly) permanent; intimacy meets immersive experience. These dialogues, activated by the works of art, lead to new cultural meaning and individual understanding. The afterglow of looking at the bare light bulbs in *Everything Is Not As It Seems* is an apt metaphor for the way in which the experience of Jeanne Quinn's art continues as part of our memories, both physical and experiential.

—Barbara O'Brien, Chief Curator, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art



*Everything Is Not As It Seems* (detail), (2009)

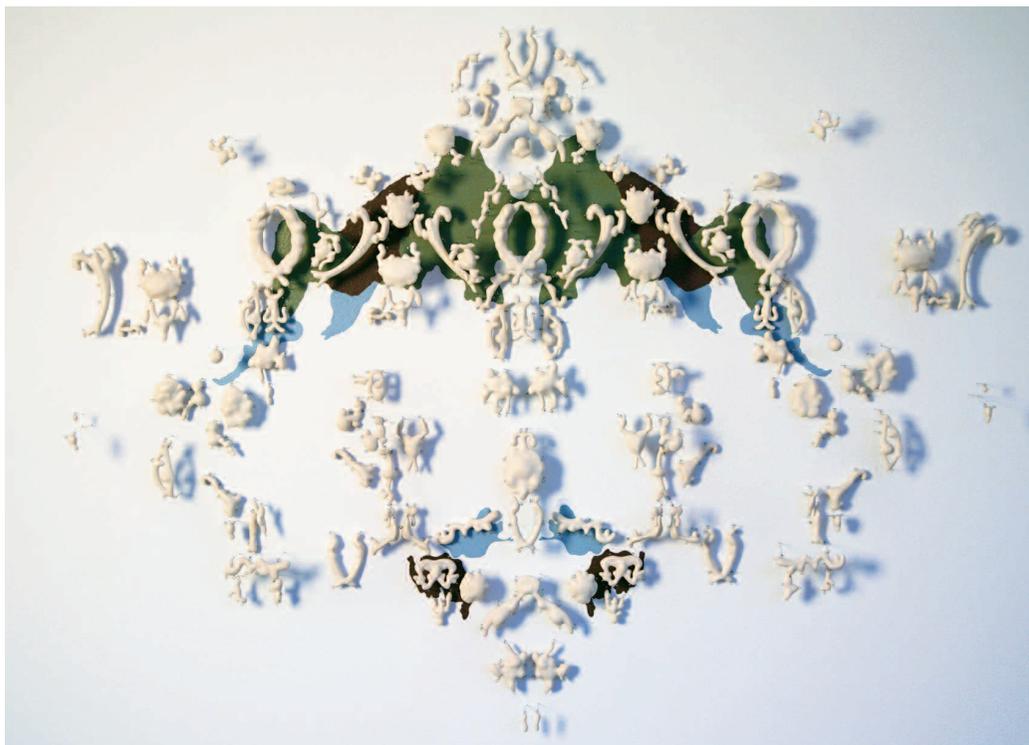
## Jeane Quinn Biography

The surprising, hybrid installations created by ceramic artist Jeane Quinn engage the senses in a multitude of ways, as the artist explores the history of decorative objects and their relationship to the human body.

Over the past 15 years, Quinn has exhibited extensively throughout the United States and Europe. She has had solo exhibitions at Jane Hartsook Gallery at Greenwich House, New York, New York; LUX Center for the Arts in Lincoln, Nebraska; John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin; and Formargruppen Gallery, Malmö, Sweden. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at the Denver Art Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver; the Museum of International Ceramic Art—Grimmerhus, Denmark; Skulpturens Hus, Stockholm, Sweden; and the Yingge Ceramics Museum, Taipei, Taiwan. Quinn has been awarded numerous residencies, most recently by the European Ceramic Work Center in s’Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands.

Jeane Quinn was born in Lemoore, California, and received her BA *cum laude* in art history from Oberlin College in Ohio in 1988, and her MFA from the University of Washington in Seattle in 1995. Quinn currently resides in Boulder, Colorado, where she is Associate Professor and Associate Chair for Graduate Studies in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Colorado.





Above and detail below: *Rorschach Curtain* (2006)

### Works in the Exhibition

Height precedes width precedes depth.

*Rorschach Curtain*, 2006  
porcelain, wire, pins, paint  
38 1/2 x 51 1/2 x 3 inches  
Collection of Patricia Ammann,  
Boulder, Colorado

*Everything Is Not As It Seems*, 2009  
porcelain, wire, paint, electrical hardware  
site-dependent installation,  
138 x 204 x 288 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

*A Thousand Tiny Deaths*, 2009  
black porcelain, balloons, string  
site-dependent installation,  
129 x 72 x 144 inches  
Courtesy of the artist



### Thank you

Generous support for Kemper Museum exhibitions is provided by Museum members; Missouri Arts Council, a state agency; Arvin Gottlieb Charitable Foundation, UMB Bank, n.a., Trustee; Francis Family Foundation; Richard J. Stern Foundation for the Arts, Commerce Bank, Trustee; David Woods Kemper Memorial Foundation; ArtsKC Fund—Arts Council of Metropolitan Kansas City; DST Systems, Inc.; Sosland Foundation; and Frontier Airlines.



**kemperMUSEUM**  
of contemporary art

4420 Warwick Boulevard, Kansas City, MO 64111  
www.kemperart.org 816-753-5784