

Studies in Aluminum, Studies in Clay

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Studies in Aluminum, Studies in Clay is a series of ceramic sculptures which reproduce, in wood-fired clay, Italy's famed aluminum Bialetti coffee pot. My artistic process is inspired by the work of chemist and prize-winning writer Primo Levi and his memoir of his family's experience in the Holocaust, a tale told through the elements.

In *The Periodic Table* [1] Levi used his background as a chemist to contemplate everyday life in his Italian-Jewish family and recount his experience in Auschwitz during World War II. [2] He became a

chemist, he writes ironically, because the "nobility of Man, acquired in a hundred centuries of trial and error, lay in making himself the conqueror of matter," and he wanted to "remain faithful to this nobility." [1] He became a testimonial writer, he says, by destiny rather than choice. [3] Each of the twenty-one stories in this unconventional collection uses an element from the periodic table as a metaphor for understanding things about people and our relationship to our time and place in the world, on earth, and in the universe. He opens by describing his ancestors as having qualities of the "rare gases," like argon, "the inactive"; thinks about how his people must brace for an "iron future drawing closer month by month"; and closes on the profundity of the carbon atom as the key particle in the hundred-million-year chain of humanity's "long cosmic history"—a tale of "flesh and mind, divine inspiration and dust." [1]

Aluminum, a chemical in the Boron Group, is never found free in nature, nor is it featured in Levi's work. Still, it is the most abundant metal on earth. Alloyed, it's used in many industrial products requiring a strong but light material, from aircraft, armoured vehicles and cars, to mirrors, foil, cans, and coffee pots.



Figure 1: *Aluminum*

It's therefore a rather pedestrian element, but malleable and useful, and, as Levi archly insists, every element "says something to someone." [1]

For me, carbon and aluminum serve as elemental launching points in contemplating Levi's idea of matter in infinite transformation, the generative process at work as ideas become materialized and material embodies ideas. In spring of 2017, I exhibited "Studies in Aluminum" at the Art Gallery of Regina [4]—a series of oil portraits of an aluminum Bialetti coffee pot I've had for years. Such pots are beloved for the strong coffee they make and their whimsical sculptural qualities.



Figure 2: *Studies in Aluminum*, Art Gallery of Regina, 2017, details (Photos courtesy Trevor Hopkin)

The Bialetti, named after the Italian engineer Alfonso Bialetti, who created it in 1933, has become a global phenomenon, affectionately called "la Moka." If, as Levi suggested, every element says something to someone, the same can be said for objects. As Sherry Turkle observes in "The Things That Matter": "We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with." [5] Objects, she says, are profoundly evocative, and can "bring philosophy down to earth. When we focus on objects, physicians and philosophers, psychologists and designers, artists and engineers are able to find common ground in everyday experience." [5]

In painting the Bialetti as a series of narrative portraits, I was also inspired by Levi's compatriot Giorgio Morandi, who like Levi was imprisoned in 1943 for anti-fascist activity. Morandi is internationally known as the master of modern still life for the affection and intimacy with which he painted small everyday objects—bottles and pots, jars and vases, boxes and jugs—as if, Jerry Saltz writes, they were "sentinels." [6] For Peter Schjeldahl, too, Morandi's still-lives are strangely "corporeal" [7]; it seems that the figures

he painted are huddling together guarding each other, or quietly murmuring, like quivering but noble souls, lost, or found, or waiting for something to happen.



Figure 3: Giorgio Morandi, *Still Life*, 1943

The Bialetti, still around after eighty-odd years and fashioned, like all of us, from traces of the elements in the long and eternally recurring storm of history, offers itself as a simple and familiar, yet evocative, matter for artistic study.



Figure 4: *The Bialetti*

Since the winter of 2021, four years after “Studies in Aluminum,” I have shifted my attention from oil painting to ceramic art, and the aesthetic potential of the wood-fired soda kiln. In this transformation in material practice, I have drawn inspiration from Edmund de Waal, the

internationally renowned ceramicist, master potter, and author of another remarkable family autobiography touched by the Holocaust, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*. [8] In his lecture “Why make pots?” he describes the world as a “palimpsest of layered texts” that is “full of shards and broken objects,” and he advises artists to “adopt a vessel and make it yours.” [9] With “Studies in Aluminum, Studies in Clay,” my regard for the inimitable Bialetti remains; moreover, by staying with and further exploring this ‘adopted’ aluminum vessel in 3-dimensions in clay, I have come to a fuller appreciation of what de Waal means when he describes the at once “fugitive,” yet “immediate” [9, 10] nature of our material environment and our experience of it throughout time.

Think of the production context of the Bialetti, for example. As Jeffrey Schnapp observes, the Bialetti is an early 20th century industrial form which emerged as the “marriage” between two very distinct and different materials, “caffeine and aluminum” [11]; while Myron Joshua explains the globally ubiquitous pot as an icon of “modernity”:

“Lightness, speed and mobility, strength energy, and electricity, are terms that fit both these materials and are associated with the new lifestyle that modern man was seeking. While both caffeine and aluminum were isolated (or discovered) in the early to the mid 19th century, it was the fascist drive to make aluminum the national metal of Italy in the 1930s that brought these two materials together in a way that would affect every Italian home.” [12]



Figure 5: *Hand casting aluminum parts in the Bialetti factory, c. 1930s*

What the invention of the Bialetti enabled—perfectly steam-brewed coffee in one's own home—changed the social fabric of Italy's public coffeehouses and promoted the nation's sense of pride in its superior craftsmanship and talent in modern design. At the Milano Fair in 1956, Bialetti financed the installation of a giant Moka sculpture, pouring itself.



Figure 6: *Bialetti installation, Milano Fair, 1956*

And, Joshua continues, “In a recent survey of Italian design, the Moka

Express ranked as the fifth-best design to have come out of Italy in the 20th century. Its place of honour is alongside the likes of the 1957 Fiat 500, a 1946 Vespa, and . . . Nutella, which won first place” [12]

My own slab-built Bialettis are life-sized, sourced from H550 and H570 general purpose stoneware clays—slightly sandy, plastic, semi-vitreous, grey-buff to white—designed for the high heat of the wood-fired soda kiln, which can reach 1300 C.



Figure 7: *Alberta Plainsman stoneware clays*

In spring 2021, I participated in the construction and firing of a new kiln, a project organized by Saskatchewan-

based ceramic artists Ruth Chambers and Martin Tagseth, [13] who designed the structure and mentored students in its building and loading.



Figure 8: *Building the campus kiln, brick by brick, July 2021 (Photo courtesy Ruth Chambers)*

The refractory brick used to construct that kiln is made of clay containing high amounts of alumina and silica, elements which withstand the high firing temperatures through their reflective and insulating properties. Thus, in this project, I find myself at the very crux of the issue of ceramics as a generative process: what Jane Bennett calls the “vital materiality” of our world of “vibrant matter.” [14] Together, aluminum and

brick and clay and pot, and the ideas they stimulate (and which stimulate them), are animate, possessed of the “lively powers of material formations” that are forever interpenetrating. By “vitality,” Bennett continues,

“I mean the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories propensities, or tendencies of their own.” [14]

Indeed, in this vibrant process of material production, I have also learned that one of the key visual properties of work fired with wood and soda is its rough, raw, rustic, primal quality which, Mark Hewitt writes, some would go so far as to call “ugly.” [15]



Figure 9: *Wood-fired Bialetti #1, 2021 (Photo courtesy Ken Wilson)*

Such effects, however, like Levi’s elements, will always “say something to someone.” They are created by the kiln’s unique atmosphere, which involves the falling ash generated by the burning of the wood; the flashes of flame that hit the work within the arched ware chamber; the soda thrown in through the apertures

at strategic moments; the carbon that spots surfaces from their contact with the soot; the expertise involved in arranging the work around the chamber; the scientific pragmatics of reduction, pyrometers, and oxy-probes; and the sometimes predictable but typically serendipitous circumstances of the enterprise as it unfolds. In *New Wave Clay*, Tom Morris conjectures, apropos of the renaissance in the field of ceramics this century, that we are drawn to clay objects because they offer “a warmth, opacity, tactility and depth”—a sense of the “handmade and imperfect” [16]—that counteracts the technological modern and the ubiquitous screens of the digital age.



Figure 10: *Wood-fired Bialettis #2, 2021*
(Photo courtesy Ken Wilson)

Thus, I have begun to understand my process with the Bialetti as a comment on materiality: beyond the modern marriage between aluminum and coffee, I experience the complex elemental relationship of aluminum and clay today, in a world increasingly aware, as Bennett observes, of “the political ecology of things,” and “the vital materialities that flow through and around us” [14] as artists and agents in the Anthropocene. Indeed, as de Waal says,

“behind one pot is the shadow or echo of another.” [9]



Figure 11: *Clay and aluminum Bialettis*
(Photo courtesy Ken Wilson)

Mark Hewitt gets at the heart of the impulse to make objects with clay: “Pots,” he says, like any hand-made form, “are units of intelligence,” [15] and I can’t think of a more intelligent or stylish looking coffee pot than the Bialetti. But, he continues, the pots of those aficionados of the wood-fired soda kiln are particularly poetic:

“Our pots are landscapes; they are about particular places, particular clay deposits, particular trees and forests. They are geographically and historically specific land art. North Carolina pots are different from Shigaraki pots, which are different from those made in La Borne. Each tradition is individual and old, and each still bubbles with life.” [15]

In roughly adapting the stylishly octagonal, modern, Art Deco form of the Bialetti in Alberta Plainsman stoneware clay, I make sculptured pots that take part in that particularity of landscape, while juxtaposing the disparate origins,

contexts and traditions of my material and my object. In making the work, I can play with Bialetti's original form, try my hand at building slabs, create multiples, perfect or deconstruct a knob or hard line, tweak a stiff spout into a whimsical whistle or a bird's beak.



Figure 12: Wood-fired *Bialettis* #3, 2021
(Photo courtesy Ken Wilson)

By firing the work in the extreme heat of the wood-fired soda kiln, a form of alchemy takes place. Together, the carbon from the burning wood, falling ash, darting flame and the added sodium bicarbonate create unpredictable aesthetic effects in which, as Hewitt observes, the pots become “dusted by chance and painted by atmospheric turbulence.” [15]

In creating this work, I am casting my model back in time; refashioning a moment of the Italian industrial modern in terms of ancient Canadian prairie clay deposits and millennia-old firing techniques; and translating the sophisticated processes of aluminum smelting into organic handcrafting with the help of the dirt and salt and trees of the earth. I am attending to matter as it criss-crosses, not only the inside of the

potter's kiln, but space, time, place and cultures. As Morris writes, to take clay in this way and

“turn this tricky thing into ceramic is a process that blends all elemental life forces: earth, water, fire and air. It also takes concentration, time and mess. But, out of all this, comes something that can last forever; some of the oldest surviving human artefacts are ceramic.” [16]



Figure 13: Wood-fired *Bialettis* #4 (Photo courtesy Ken Wilson)

Who can say what will be generated in the event of firing? In the science, art and alchemy of the wood-fired soda kiln, Levi's beloved chain of carbon atoms in cosmic motion may blaze an arresting aesthetic trail, a nice bit of visual poetry, on my studies in clay; or it may burn and crumble them to dust, ruined beyond all recognition.

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