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The Heart of the Thing: Alexandra McCurdy's Boxes

JANUARY 20, 2016 By [intsculpturectr](#) in [MATERIALS & PROCESS](#) Tags: [GIL MCELROY](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)



True Blue (detail), 1997.

When we think of modernism and the visual arts, we're usually thinking of painting (of, say, abstraction by the likes of Jackson Pollock), or sculpture (perhaps Mark di Suvero or Richard Serra), or even architecture (Frank Lloyd Wright, Philip Johnson, etc.)

But unless we have a specific interest in the field, we rarely think of ceramics within the framework and tenets of modernism, rarely consider, say, the abstract sculptural ceramic pieces of Peter Voulkos as integral to the wider aesthetic discussion.

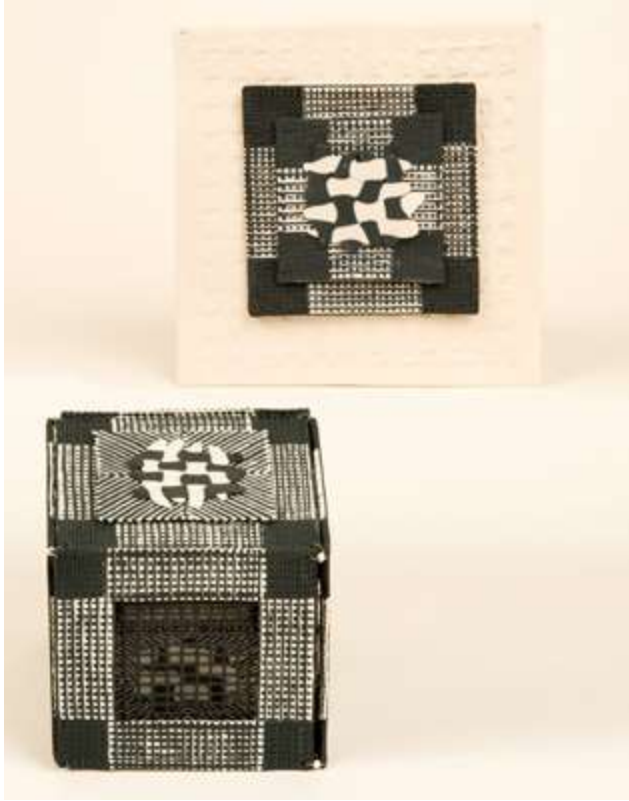


Blue Box with Garnets, 2015.

We absolutely should, of course, but I'm not here to argue the importance of Peter Voulkos in the history of modern art (it has, of course, been established, if not to the degree it should have achieved). I'm here to talk about boxes and grids. And clay. And Alexandra McCurdy

The boxes and grids are the contextualizing part of this, for both are formative elements in the development and unfolding of twentieth century modern art. There are two artists who perhaps exemplify its aesthetic employment: Joseph Cornell and Donald Judd. Cornell's boxes, of course, are more traditional sorts of containers or frames – vessels, of a kind – shaping the context of the visual elements he would arrange within them, holding and sustaining the microcosmic magic of the worlds he created within their confines. The flip side of the coin might be the clean, minimalistic boxes of Judd, spare, quietly eloquent elements telling only of themselves and of the self-referential essences of artefactual things.

And then there is the grid, the emblematic visual device that powers Agnes Martin's incredible paintings, and which has found its way into pretty much every nook and cranny of the visual arts, an absolutely fundamental element borrowed from the world of textiles though rarely credited or acknowledged for its influences.



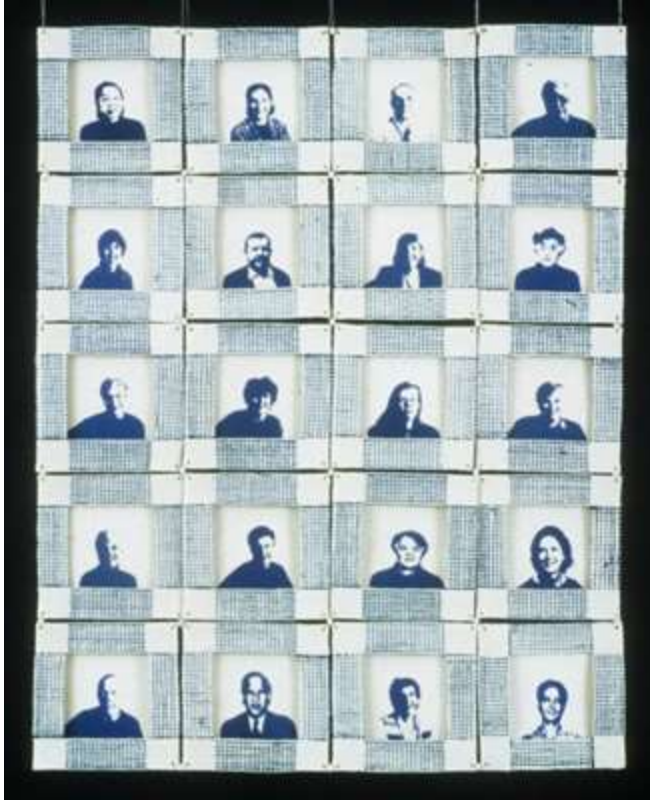
Alexandra Black Box with Weaving and Wallpiece, 2014.

Of course all proverbial roads eventually lead to Rome, and the paths I've been slowly heading down ultimately lead to clay and to the sculptural work of Nova Scotia ceramist Alexandra McCurdy. To her boxes and her grids, more specifically.

McCurdy is a graduate of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, long a strong centre of ceramics practice and teaching in North America. She obtained her Master's degree from the Cardiff Institute of Higher Education in Wales, for a long time one of the few places post-graduate work in ceramics could be had. She's been a longstanding presence in the Canadian and international ceramics community, and while she's made her share of vessels (and continues to do so), it's her porcelain boxes and wall hangings that are pertinent here.

McCurdy's work integrates textiles and ceramics, and has so for some time (an enquiry into the historical evolution of textiles and the absolutely pivotal role played in it by women formed the basis of her Master's thesis), and wonderful wall hangings of woven ceramic grids and/or flat porcelain plates with textile-based decorative elements are a not-unexpected consequence of this melding of disciplines. (see www.amcurdyceramics.ca)

But the boxes are something else entirely. For starters, like some of the wall-hangings, they're comprised of extraordinarily delicate porcelain grids (incorporating a wire underlayer) for all six sides, stitched together at the corners to hold the work in geometric shape.



True Blue, 1997.

McCurdy's are not Juddian boxes, nor are they Cornellian. They are not minimalistically clean and decoratively quiet as with the former; McCurdy employs pattern and ornament, much of it inspired by the textile work (once done using animal quills) of the indigenous Mi'kmaq people of Atlantic Canada. And they are not containers in the conventional sense of providing a frame or a context for their contents as per the latter. They are indeed a part of modernism: they are their own contents. But they are, as well, utterly post-modern: strongly decorative and ornamental. McCurdy's work comprises its own unique Boolean aesthetic encompassing aesthetic realms we otherwise so cartoonishly deem separate.

In her more recent pieces like *Black Box with Lucky Rock* or *Blue Box with Herringbone* (both 2015), McCurdy states that she "intentionally utilize[s] the feminine principal of containment and enclosure." As boxes, they are unopenable; they have no lids and are not boxes-as-containers in the conventional sense. Their interiors are intentionally locked away, made physically inaccessible, though visually available as viewed through the grids comprising their sides. We cannot touch the aesthetic heart of these things; utility has been excised from the aesthetic equation. We are intended to deal visually with the outwardness of things, with the exteriors of these artefacts – nudged toward an encounter with colour and pattern (the textile-inspired herringbone of the blue box, or ornament (a small rock attached to the top of the former, for instance), and left to ponder upon what is held within.

Yet for all of that nudging, we are still very much engaged in a dialogue with thingness, here, something that ceramics has always ably managed to support, typically when we were least aware. It's a process rooted in our experiences of everyday dealings with utile objects, a lot of them made of clay (coffee, anyone?). Fine. That works. It gives us a just a little bit of an in when we meet up with one of Alexandra McCurdy's small, enigmatic ceramic boxes and the ultimately unknowable worlds they really harbor at the heart of the thing.

By [Gil McElroy](#)
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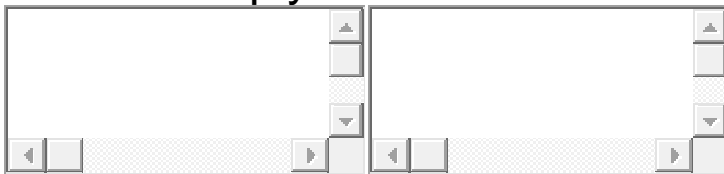
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