

## **ALEXANDRA McCURDY: BOXED IN**

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### **Studio**

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Alexandra McCurdy's new series of porcelain Boxes are a continuation of work she showed in *The Fabric of Clay*, a 2011 touring exhibition from the Burlington Art Centre (now the Art Gallery of Burlington), in collaboration with Saint Mary's University Art Gallery.<sup>[i]</sup> As that exhibition (curated by Gloria Hickey) demonstrated, McCurdy has long produced ceramics in dialogue with textile structures, such as weaving, baskets, quillwork, beading and quilts. The present work comprises box forms with accompanying wall-hung elements, all based on the square and its three dimensional extension, the cube.

The bases or backgrounds of the wall hangings have silk-screened surface images derived from photocopies of other ceramic tiles that mimic woven structures. In one case, McCurdy prints a resist onto the surface and partially washes away the clay around it to create a textured relief. The reference to weaving in these surfaces is mediated through ceramics, photocopying and printmaking before circling around again to ceramics.

The square elements that McCurdy then attaches to this patterned surface, and from which she also constructs her freestanding boxes, are built up from slip-trailed lines applied in grids that mimic woven structures. McCurdy works by taping cheesecloth onto plaster (which absorbs moisture from the clay) and drawing onto it with coloured porcelain slip. The lines in one direction are laid down before those that run perpendicular, so there is no actual weaving, no "in and out" of warp and woof. Nevertheless, these are but one step removed from textiles, a visual pattern transposed directly from fibre to clay. A measure of true weaving enters some pieces, when the artist interweaves copper-fibre ribbon into the grid.

On the larger wall-hung squares, McCurdy stacks slip-trailed elements generally two or three high, diminishing in size from layer to layer. In one piece, five layers of a uniform size are stacked and canted 45 degrees from one layer to the next, to form an eight-pointed star with a hollow centre. In some cases, the final, or finial, piece is constructed by sandwiching together different colours of clay and cutting across or through to create herringbone patterns, checks or swirls.

For her standing forms, McCurdy binds together (with copper wire at their corners) square elements, featuring see-through grilles or lattices at their centres, into cubical boxes. At once open and closed, they lack a lid or gate to give physical access, but offer some degree of visual entry into their inaccessible interiors, as once enticing and frustrating, like the mashrabiya that guard the privacy of traditional Arab homes.

McCurdy is fully aware of the gendered associations of boxes and other such enclosed forms, since at least the legend of Pandora. Her work has been an ongoing commentary on the social status of women and women's work. Her own control compulsions - associated with both artists and housewives - are manifested in these meticulous, labour-intensive works. The daughter of a British mother and a Canadian RAF pilot, McCurdy was a young immigrant to Canada who "moved three times a year" and went to fourteen different schools. "I built a box around myself," she says.

"It is hard for ceramists to make self-portraits," she notes. "For me, these are sort of self-portraits."<sup>[ii]</sup>

**Robin Metcalfe**

[i] *The Fabric of Clay*: Alexandra McCurdy, Burlington Art Centre, Burlington and Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, Halifax, 2011, with essays by Gloria Hickey and Jonathan Smith.

[ii] All quotations from the artist from a personal interview in her studio, 16 April 2015.

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