

## Robert Archambeau: Across Time

*If you love the intense cloud pour every effort into its warm summer blood.*

Washed in stillness and beauty, this gathering of Robert Archambeau's work from the past ten years speaks to an intensely lived life. Having celebrated his eightieth birthday in the spring of 2013, this unretired artist spends endless hours in his clay studios at the University of Manitoba or up-country in northern Bissett, Manitoba, followed by long stints back home making small gems on paper. It might be 3:00, 4:00, or 5:00 in the morning before he crawls under the covers for a truncated sleep. Driven by a passion to create, Mr. Archambeau's daily life illustrates the New Mexican critic Gus Blaisdell's proposition that "passion is a kind of suffering that few of us can bear." Across time, this artist has refined his art by repeating the same forms thousands of times over, by firing and refiring until the surfaces satisfies him in new ways.

The pots accumulate in every storage space he can claim as his own. Much like squatters who move onto land owned by others, his stoneware is scattered across several States and Canada. Endlessly working, he threw two hundred pots in the six weeks before this exhibition. Once bisque fired in his Winnipeg studio, he completes the final firings in the nearby wood-fired kilns of friends, or in Iowa City, Moorhead, Minnesota, or Edwardsville, Illinois, where colleagues and former students own or run large wood-fired kilns. Sometimes Archambeau throws and fires new work in those same across-the-border studios for direct shipment to exhibitions in the United States. Occasionally he diverts his travels to Kalona, Iowa, to cast lids for his covered jars at the Max-Cast Foundry.

The forms of Mr. Archambeau's ceramics are timeless, stretching across eons and cultures. The finished pieces are strong and sturdy, projecting great stature. They have both heft and mass, and, like the architect Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum, demand to be reckoned with. The outside of each pot is varied by repetitive sculptural markings made during the throwing process with any number conventional and unconventional tools such as combs, saw blades, a Norwegian leather worker's knife.

His glazes of grays, whites, greens, and blues, and the pinks and golds of sunset are transformed as the wood ash shifts onto and around the pots during firing, or as the fire itself dances about and across the pots. If the artist throws common salt into the kiln during the highest temperatures of the firing process, the stoneware takes on a translucent and slightly orange-peel-like texture—sometimes even that is sand-blasted away.

And always, when back home in Winnipeg, the drawing continues, stacking up in cigar boxes that dictate their size. The artist's stash of beautiful papers—handmade, precious, and exotic—accrued over many years and wide-ranging travels. His materials and methods are complex and varied, the surfaces thickened with collaged gossamery bits of silk, or paper on top of paper. He builds his surfaces and defines his images with acrylic,

pastel, graphite, charcoal, and picture framer's gilt, plus colored inks. He abrades and scrapes back into the thickened drawing while the scratched-in lines might subsequently be inlaid with more ink. For example, the pinks emerge from brown ink as it fuses with washes of acrylic paint. And sometimes, the final, rigorously reworked surfaces are melded together with a top coating of clear matte acrylic or furniture polish. These drawings are the antithesis of Mr. Archambeau's stoneware, illusive, delicate, intuiting only the suggestion of a vessel. It is as though the insubstantial works on paper and the utterly tangible works in clay have begun a long conversation about the trueness of art.

Mr. Archambeau's processes are multifaceted, his wood firings and his works on paper labor intensive. Most importantly, this master craftsman possesses an extraordinary and highly developed aesthetic sensibility. Thus the exhibition gifts the viewer with art of rare and subtle splendor awash with stillness and beauty. No wonder Robert Archambeau is the only artist from Manitoba, and only one of two Canadian artists working in ceramics to ever have won the Nation's greatest artistic prize, the 2003 Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in Canada.

Laurel Reuter, Director and Chief Curator  
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Robert Archambeau was born and raised in Toledo, Ohio. Following four years in the Marines, he attended undergraduate school at Toledo University, the Toledo Museum of Art School, and Bowling Green State University, Ohio, graduating with a BFA. He received his MFA degree from Alfred University in 1964. Mr. Archambeau taught four years at the Rhode Island School of Design before accepting a teaching position at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg where he headed the ceramic program until his retirement in 1991 and holds professor emeritus status. A frequent guest artist at colleges and institutions, he has traveled extensively throughout the world. He exhibits internationally and his work is in several notable public and private collections.