

GALLERY SPACE

AT WAGNER



FALL/
WINTER
2015



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

EARTH

SOUL

FIRE

the ceramics of **DAVID ELCOTT**

Curated by
Frankie Crescioni-Santoni

**GALLERY
SPACE** | 10
AT WAGNER

Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service | New York University | The Puck Building
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Cover: Detail from *Cauldrons* installation (2014)

Opposite: *The Earth Wild & Waste 1* (2015)

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The Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University is home to the Gallery Space at Wagner. This collaborative endeavor with NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study and the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development brings artwork into a public work space in an effort to further engage the NYU community and external audiences in dialogues on contemporary art and culture.

Since its debut in November 2005, the Gallery Space has hosted a variety of exciting and innovative exhibits featuring both established and emerging artists. Painting, drawing, photography, wall sculpture, collage, print-making, digital video, and mixed-media installations are among the multifarious and dynamic disciplines showcased in this space within a work environment. The three to four annual exhibits held at the gallery are alternately curated by NYU Gallatin's inter-disciplinary arts adviser Ann Chwatsky and NYU Wagner's resident curator Frankie Crescioni-Santoni.

Located on the second floor of the historic Puck Building, the Gallery Space is comprised of two main display areas measuring 10 feet wide by 6 feet tall and 29 feet wide by 6 feet tall, in addition to two auxiliary walls. These spaces are primarily reserved for the exhibition of artwork by NYU-affiliated artists with a focus on fostering partnership among the diverse University constituents. We have also hosted a number of special exhibits by guest artists and practitioners whose projects align thematically with the school's academic mission and curricula.

For more information about the Gallery Space, including exhibition schedules and proposal submissions, please call us at 212.998.7400 or e-mail wagner.gallery@nyu.edu. □



Detail from *Breast & Womb* installation (2012)

The Gallery Space at Wagner could not be more pleased to celebrate the opening of our tenth season by showcasing the talent and artistry of David Elcott, an esteemed and beloved member of the NYU Wagner family. The pieces selected for this exhibit represent a prolific ceramic practice deeply influenced by the artist's lifelong professional and personal commitment to issues of faith, ethnicity, human rights, and Middle Eastern history and culture. The result of this marriage of artistic and academic passions is a provocative collection of ceramics and sculptural works on clay that is as much an intriguing and evocative study in form, texture, and pigmentation as it is a daring and intimate exploration of spirituality, transcendence, and social justice.

For Elcott, the ceramic making process has always been a meditative and spiritually enriching experience—an organic extension of a dedicated and multifaceted garden-to-table repertoire. Within this context, function and decorative aesthetics had arguably been the driving forces behind his creations. Yet, evidence of deeper and more meaningful queries are still present in his early work. With *Earth, Soul, Fire*, these preoccupations are purposefully brought to the forefront, propelling Elcott's practice from a primarily utilitarian exercise to thought provoking art making. As curator, it has been a privilege to witness this courageous leap and the possibilities it presents for new and exciting forms of creative expression.

We thank David Elcott for his generosity in choosing our venue for the first public viewing of his remarkable work. We are deeply grateful to Professor Noam M. Elcott for his insightful and superb analysis of his father's art, as well as Dean Sherry Glied and Assistant Dean Trena Drayton for their continuing support of the Gallery Space. We must also acknowledge gallery co-curator and co-founder Ann Chwatsky for her mentorship and expert council and the rest of the Gallery Space committee, whose reliable and sustained contributions make it all possible. □

— Frankie Crescioni-Santoni
Co-Curator, Gallery Space at Wagner



Japan (2001)

EARTH, HANDS, SHARDS

Painters—not least Albrecht Dürer in his famous self-portrait as Jesus from the year 1500—were quick to note that God created Adam in the divine image. Wiser and less self-important, potters have always known that Adam (the earthling) was formed from *adamah* (the earth). This is the first great and unmistakable lesson in the earthen bowls, clay pots, ceramic tiles, and multimedia installations of David Elcott. At their most elemental, humans are nothing but earth. At its most elemental, earthenware is the truest and most direct expression of our humanity.

For many years, Elcott maintained a practice of functional pottery whose basic procedures reached back to before the bible. His personal marks were three-fold. First, unlike the highly ornamental or ostentatiously refined ceramics prized by many cultures, his works looked and felt like they had been taken directly from the earth. Second, where other artists and artisans erased all traces of their handiwork, Elcott took to heart the teachings of Kasho Morioka, a master ceramicist in Kyoto, that clay vessels should bear the traces of their maker. Elcott's works are manufactured—in the most literal sense of the term: they preserve the workmanship (*facture*) of the hands (*manus*). Kasho and Elcott pretended not to know that *facture*—truth to materials and traces of production—was evangelized by countless modern art movements under the banner of *factura* and *Faktur*. The ancient was once again modern. Third, unlike production potters who aim to produce a consistent product—each bowl indistinguishable from the last—Elcott embraces the aleatory and even destructive power of fire. In the heat of his kiln, formed clay, broken glass, and metallic glazes undergo alchemical reactions often unforeseen and unrepeatable. In Elcott's practice, chance is not a disorder to remedy but a creative force of its own.

And yet for years, Elcott asserted that his practice was a craft, his ambitions banal. (No one who ever saw, let alone held, a piece by Elcott put much credence in these assertions.) For Elcott, the finished bowl was

the functional vessel in which to serve vegetables from his garden, which, like his clay, were transformed by fire into something nourishing if not quite cultivated. But what is culture? Etymologically speaking, culture begins with the cultivation of the land (agriculture, horticulture, and so forth). Begins, you say, but hardly culminates. True enough. One's path is dictated not only by its origin, but also its destination. And herein lies the impetus for Elcott's recent explicit striving beyond craft and toward art.

“A man's origin is from dust and his destiny is back to dust.” The Medieval Jewish liturgists codified the potter's wisdom. “He is like a broken shard, withering grass, a fading flower, a passing shade, a dissipating cloud, a blowing wind, flying dust, and a fleeting dream.” Generations of artists have ventured to capture the fading flower, the passing shadow, the dissipating cloud, the fleeting dream. Snuffed out



Sarajevo (1996)



Ruth (2004)

candles populate medieval panels as *memento mori*, reminders of death inscribed in the wisps of paint-cum-smoke at the threshold of oblivion. Elcott's breakthrough is more literal and visceral than any allegory proffered by painting. Two of the earliest works in this exhibition, *Sarajevo* (1996) and *Ruth* (2004), bear not only the traces of their *manu-facture* but also of their *manu-fracture*. *Sarajevo*, like the later *Ruth*, is stoneware thrown on a wheel, torn, fired at twenty-two hundred degrees, glazed, and fired again. The tear, the rupture, at once consummates and breaks the work, which emerges from the kiln with jagged rims like a volcano in the hours after an eruption. Now cool, hard, and presumably dormant, these volcanic craters bear quiet, private testimony to genocide a world away (*Sarajevo*), death around the corner (*Ruth*). These two pieces blazed the path for Elcott's signature technique: the tear.

Our origin is dust and our destiny is back to dust. We are like broken shards. To see or touch a work by Elcott is not only to come in contact with the earth and the human hands that formed it, but also to grasp a brokenness more profound than chance, an essential, even integral brokenness. For the ancient Greeks, the name of an enemy was inscribed onto a broken ceramic shard, a potsherd or *ostrakon*, to effectuate the enemy's eventual ostracism. No shortage of shards inscribed DME have been banished to Elcott's garden. But the most profound ruptures are not extrinsic to the work. Quite the contrary. It is as if the works are built around an intrinsic brokenness. And only through this brokenness can Elcott once again discover life.

Our destiny is dust but our origin is also dust. Disfigured and rent, the cavities and orifices that are the very substance of Elcott's work are yet redolent with sex and birth, creation and creating. "Living substance," the German Jewish critic Walter Benjamin once wrote, "conquers the frenzy of destruction only in the ecstasy of procreation." The deep beauty and pathos of Elcott's works lie in their fusion of destruction and procreation, manufracture and manufacture, and in the glimpses they provide of that integral brokenness that is our origin and destination. □

— Noam M. Elcott is associate professor of art history at Columbia University, editor of the journal *Grey Room*, and the son of David Elcott.



David Elcott

with different hands. Fifty years later, Elcott continues to put his hands and soul into organic creations that never lose their connection to the soil from which they emerge.

Brought up in semi-rural California playing guitar and banjo, the idea of artistic expression was as much at his core as the political psychology and Middle East affairs he studied at Columbia University and Judaic studies at the American Jewish University. He is the Taub Professor of Practice in Public Service and Leadership at NYU Wagner, where he has worked to build a robust training program of commu-



David Elcott in his studio, White Plains, New York, 2015

At age fourteen, **DAVID ELCOTT** entered a stone opening in an ancient wall in Nazareth and watched an Arab potter sitting at his kick-wheel, magically pulling up a huge water vessel from mud. He could feel his hands move with those of the artisan and knew then and there that this craft would become his. Over the years, he sat at the feet of great artists Kasho Morioka in Japan and David MacDonald from Syracuse, learning to see with different eyes and touch



David MacDonald, Syracuse, New York

nity organizing and advocacy campaigns attended by students from across the university. In 2013, he received NYU's Martin Luther King Faculty Award.

There is a deep connection between Elcott's art and his passion for inter-faith and interethnic coalition building. These correlated and mutually enriching pursuits have led him to cross cultural boundaries, explore and enter other worlds from Africa to the Middle East, Asia to South America. He has engaged in efforts to find paths to peace in the Middle East, immigration reform, civil liberties and workers' rights in America, as well as conflict mediations between and among religious communities in the US and around the world.

Earth, Soul, Fire marks David Elcott's gallery debut. □



Kasho Morioka, Shigaraki, Japan



Arab potter in Nazareth, Israel, 1964



Broken Tablets (2015)

BROKEN TABLETS

What became of the broken tablet, the word of the Holy One, that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai and then smashed? “The broken tablets were placed in the Holy Ark along with the second, intact set” (*Talmud Bava Batra 14b*) and then carried through the desert to the center of the camp.

The 16th century Kabbalistic work, *Reshit Chochmah*, teaches that the Ark is a symbol of the human heart and, as Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, an eighteenth-century Hasidic master, once said,

“There is nothing as whole
as a broken heart.”

Next page: Details from *Carving Under the Influence* installation (2012)





Cauldrons (2014)

CAULDRONS

The earth wild and waste
Rushing God-spirit hovering
Let there be.

—*Genesis 1*

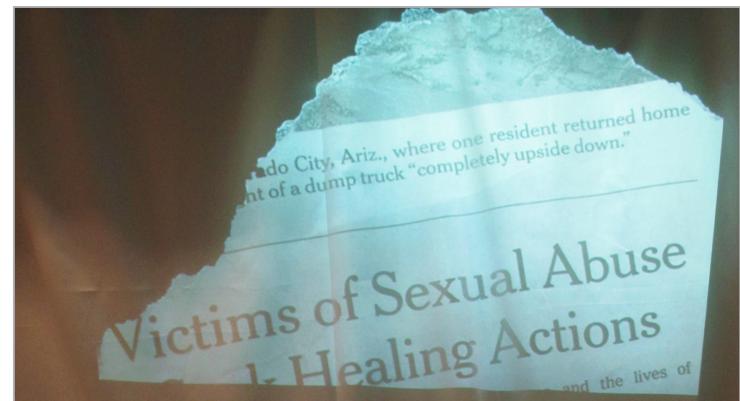
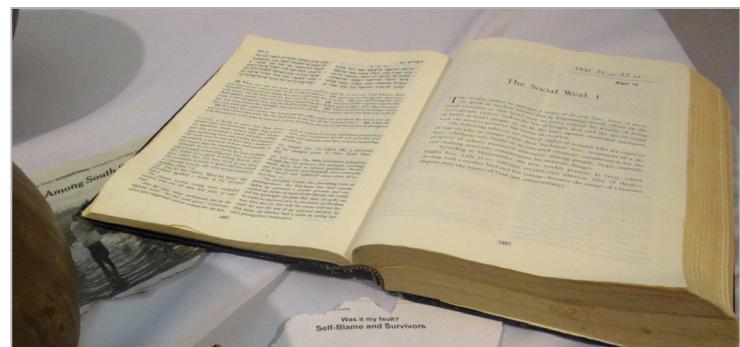


ובעלתת (2014)

ובעלתת

If you see among the captives a beautiful woman you desire, take her, shave her hair and nails, let her mourn for a month and then you may go into her... and if after that you do not want her, send her away.

—*Deuteronomy 21*



וּבְעָלָתָה (installation views)

SEED OF HOLINESS

A blinding light flashed
From the mystery of the Infinite
It yielded radiant colors.
Deep within the spark gushed a flow
Imbuing colors below
Concealed within the concealed
 mystery of the Infinite.
One high and hidden point shone.
So it is called Beginning
Then this Beginning emanated
And sowed the seed of holiness

—The Zohar



Seed of Holiness (2013)



Breast & Womb (2012)

BREAST & WOMB

May Shaddai give you blessings
Blessings of the heavens, from above,
Blessings of the deepest maternal
waters crouching below
Blessings of breast and womb

—*Genesis 49*



Detail from *Breast & Womb* installation (2012)



The Earth Wild & Waste 2 (2015)



The Earth Wild & Waste 3 (2015)



The Earth Wild & Waste 4 (2015)



Carved Vessel 1 (2002)



Untitled 1 (2002)



Carved Vessel 2 (2002)



Untitled 2 (1999)



Dragon (2003)



Untitled 4 (1999)



Untitled 3 (2003)



Untitled 5 (1999)



Hidden Scrolls (2001)



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All artwork courtesy of the artist.

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