“Don’t Learn Anything More!”

Virginia Leonard’s Fugly Ceramics

by Connie Brown

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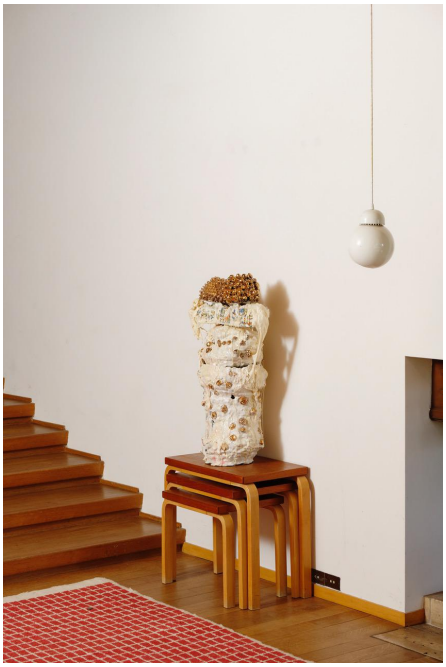
Virginia Leonard, *Pus and Scabs*, 2021, clay, lustre and resin, 46 x 40 x 40 cm. Photo: Oliver King. Image courtesy of the artist and Officine Saffi, Milan (Premier award winner).



Virginia Leonard, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2021. Image courtesy of the artist.



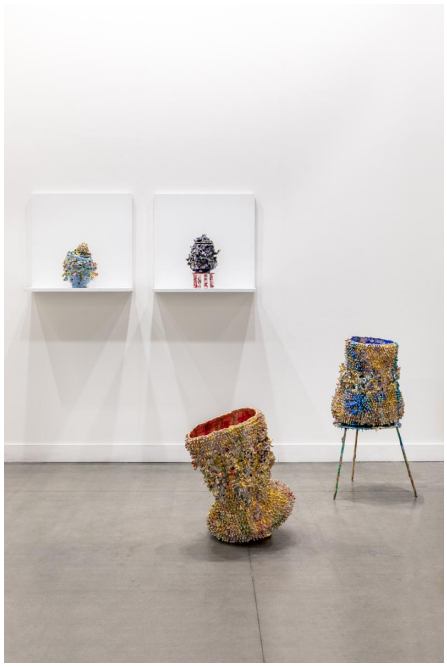
Virginia Leonard, *Room with a View* (detail), 2019, clay, lustre and resin,
90 × 53 × 53 cm | 35.4 × 20.9 × 20.9 in.
Installation view, *Odd and Even - a Collection*, Maison Louis Carré, Bazoches-sur-Guyonne, France, 5 September - 28 November 2021. Photo: Aurélien Mole. Image courtesy of the artist.



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Inside the artist's kiln, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2021. Photo: Virginia Leonard.



Virginia Leonard, *MIART 2021* installation view, Milan, Italy, 17 - 19 September 2021. Photo: Maki Ochoa. Image courtesy of the artist.

Virginia Leonard lives and works in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland where she makes ceramic sculptures about her experience of chronic pain. Connie Brown spoke to her about her making process, the language it offers her and maintaining this practice while meeting demand for her work internationally.

Virginia Leonard makes unsightly ceramics. She uses the word "fugly". When I went to meet the artist at her studio on Auckland's North Shore—a corner in a warehouse on an industrial lot, mechanics and fabricators to all sides—the small space was packed full of the uncouth forms, awaiting shipment to a series of overseas projects then-forthcoming. Leonard's ceramics have often struck me as resembling gargoyles—in a technicolour, mashed-up, Moschino kind of way—and, entering a room filled with so many of them, severe but sprightly upon their perches, I felt their presence as might an eighteenth-century worshipper passing by a cathedral, with an appropriate mixture of fear and reverence. Surrounded by the works, I became immediately aware of my every step, and immensely thankful that I had not worn any loose clothing that day that might have put me at greater risk of snagging one of them, or of creating a slight gust of air causing one, followed by the rest, to topple. A brief, terrifying, mesmerising vision came to mind of the shards spread about the floor, like a lolly scramble of gemstones and animal viscera.

Any stiffness on my part was countered by Leonard's own ease among the imposing fragility of her works. She's not a placid person, but offhand and generous and, despite the clamour of works currently occupying it, surprisingly methodical about her workspace. When I expressed this surprise, she said with a shrug, "I'm a Virgo. I never let my kids play with Lego when they were little. It's too untidy". Her manner is what you might expect of someone who makes ceramics, which demands repetitive labour and precise timing, but one who does so with a mind to unmaking them, or to making them fugly.

Leonard told me a story of when she made her first bowl-like bowl. She had only recently begun to work with clay. "It was perfect", she said, meaning appropriately round, even and concave in form. She showed it proudly to the friend in whose Matakana studio she'd

been working. “That’s terrible”, he responded, “don’t learn anything more!” The bowl was Leonard’s first and only excursion into symmetry and functional objects, or into what Howard Risatti calls “handsome” objects, things that “give themselves over to the body”, sitting snug in the various nooks of the human form: in the palm, under foot, over the shoulder, perched on a hip.[01] But if symmetry and functionality signify an object’s complement to the body—a body that must also, by this logic, be presumed symmetrical and functional—then they are, as her friend intuited, useless to Leonard.



Virginia Leonard, *Urns For Unwanted Limbs #5*, 2021, clay, resin, lustre & pure gold, 35 x 25 x 25cm. Private Collection, Auckland NZ. Photo: Oliver King. Image courtesy of the artist and PAULNACHE, Gisborne.



Virginia Leonard, *Won't You Please Please Please Give Me Love*, 2022, clay, lustre and resin, 94 x 49 x 49 cm. Photo: Oliver King. Image courtesy of the artist and Taste Contemporary, MIART Milan.



Virginia Leonard, *Side Tied Undies #2*, 2021, clay, lustre and resin, 52 x 45 x 45 cm. Photo: Oliver King. Image courtesy of the artist and Taste Contemporary, Geneva.

In the 1980s, Leonard was seriously injured in a motorcycle accident, and as a result of this she still experiences chronic pain. The body, as such, rarely offers itself up to her as a succession of soft curvatures or as a well-designed armature. Instead, its irrationality and indomitability are what impose themselves most forcefully. Clay, by contrast, constantly offers itself up to Leonard as a substance through which she can express her experience of chronic pain. Her vessels slump to the side, they leak, bulge and seem always about to topple over. Lately, it’s this latter quality Leonard has been most excited about, as demonstrated with *Side*

Tide Undies 2 (2021), where it seems she has sourced the spindliest plinth she could find for this fat, globular form. *Urns for unwanted limbs* (2021) is a series of smaller vessels that stand on squat handmade stools. The lids don't really fit and the urns are pocked all over with holes through which any ashes placed in them would inevitably fall. The handle of one, *#5*, is spikey, looking a little too much like a skeletal hand emerging from a grave, which Leonard, sardonically, has painted with gold lustre. The stools have chubby sausage legs that are not quite the same length, so that they stand with equal parts hesitancy and joy, like toddlers learning to walk. "I don't know how to get them even", she said, "they always shrink". She showed me one that she had made recently that was too lopsided to stand when it came out of the kiln. She had fixed it by gluing gold buttons from Spotlight to the base of the legs.

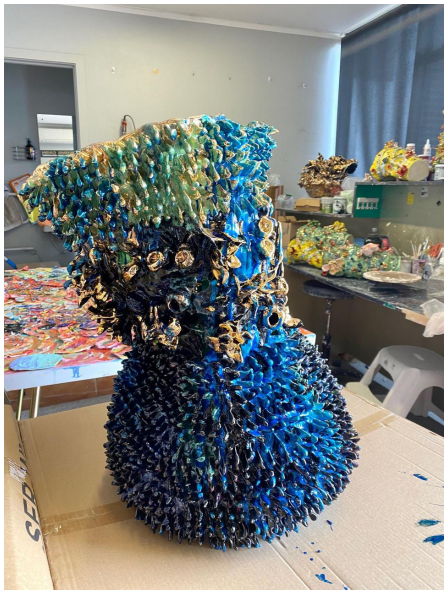
Leonard subjects her clay to a kind of makerly hazing-ritual. She delights in setting kilns too hot and affixing spikes and other protrusions to walls that are already sagging under their own weight. Things resembling oyster mushrooms and cauliflower ears – things, that is, that seem at once to be growing and squashed. Her methods reminded me of something Louise Bourgeois said of sculpture being "about what went wrong". "When you go from painting to sculpture", Bourgeois said, "it's because you had an aggressive thought".[02] Leonard liked this comparison, having practiced as a painter for several decades, earning Bachelors and Masters degrees in the medium, before moving to clay in 2013. Nonetheless, her paintings seemed equally as preoccupied with disfigurement as her ceramics. Her canvasses from the 2000s tended to be abstract and large and the colours of exposed flesh or a spreading bruise. Later works, however, show a dissatisfaction with the two-dimensional surface emerging. Paint is layered thick onto the canvases, but it has nothing to cling to, nothing that snags or resists the mounting aggression.



An exploded work inside the artist's kiln, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2021. Photo: Virginia Leonard.



Inside the artist's kiln, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2021. Photo: Virginia Leonard.



The artist's studio, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 2021. Photo: Virginia Leonard.

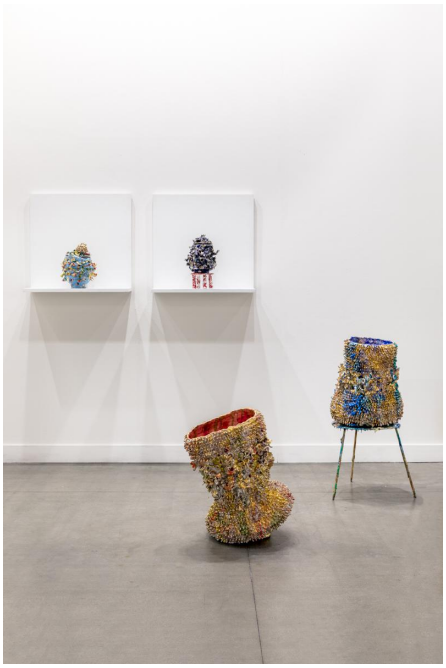
“You’re in control when you’re painting”, she said during our visit. “I’d bored myself into a corner where I started to feel like a factory”. With ceramics, she said, “I’m never bored because they never work. There are always problems as soon as they come out and the problems are the best part”. Avoiding control seems high among Leonard’s concerns. She is, to some degree, precious about her lack of technical knowledge in ceramics, partly to avoid boredom, but also because a lack of control, and learning to deal with it, is crucial to the experience of chronic pain that she is trying to articulate. A resolved work for Leonard is a piece that is suspended in the slim interstice between her will and the clay’s refusal of it. A work might crack in the kiln, requiring a surgical procedure of resins, glazes and lustre, the application of which – as thick and as craggy as possible – provides another opportunity for Leonard to approach the form’s limits, the point at which it seems to be heaving under its own extravagance. Clay, as Leonard describes it, is a proxy for her body, but it is also the adversary that paint never was, something resilient and unpredictably responsive to her aggressive thoughts and gestures.

But as well as the aggression, there is the compulsion. Despite the decades spent working out her chronic pain in her artistic practice, it hasn’t done anything to alleviate the physical trauma. If anything, the intensity of Leonard’s methods actually puts an additional strain on her body, requiring her to lift the heavy works

in and out of kilns, or sit slightly hunched over a banding wheel all day. It distinguishes the visual language Leonard has found from the deficient words those with chronic pain currently have to make do with: that of the healing-obsessed wellness industry, voiced by figures like Deepak Chopra and his promise of the place in every person "that is free from disease, that never feels pain, that cannot age or die […] the place called perfect health", that "*anything in your body* can be changed with the flick of an intention".[03] Or there is that of Western medicine, equally fixated on healing and on prescribing opioids, sheepishly, which amounts to muting chronic pain, leaving it outside of language altogether. Both of these positions grasp desperately for control and in the process bolster the idea of cure as the end-goal. "Cure," according to the writer Eli Clare, "rides on the back of *normal* and *natural*".[04] It reinforces those categories, he says, and reinforces an idea of incurable bodies as wrong in the world, in need of fixing, rather than looking at ways that the world could accommodate 'incurable' bodies. The point of Leonard's compulsive making is not to cure or to find a way to get better. It is to find a language, a way to express what it is to live with chronic pain.



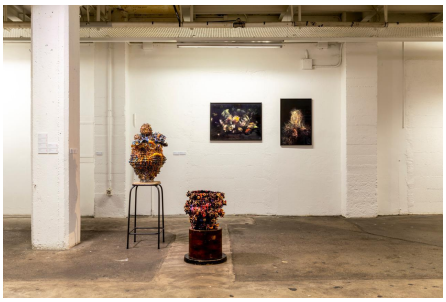
Virginia Leonard, *MIART 2021* installation view, Milan, Italy, 17 - 19 September 2021. Photo: Maki Ochoa. Image courtesy of the artist.



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Virginia Leonard, *Distorted Duets* installation view, La Fonderie Kugler, Geneva, Switzerland, 7 - 17 October 2021. Photo: Maki Ochoa. Image courtesy of the artist.



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Chopra's idea of 'perfect health' mirrors, in an improbable way, Howard Rissati's idea of the 'handsome object', which entails 'perfect form'—yet another image of the masterable, fully-accommodated body. When surrounded by Leonard's work in her studio, my every movement felt slightly more difficult if not

potentially disastrous. The works' fragility imposed itself outwardly, upon the environment and upon me. Rather than portraying an ideal like the one Chopra spins, the forms assert themselves as unmasterable bodies, which means being both a little bit precarious, vulnerable to injury and haemorrhoids, but ultimately indomitable in that fact.

Leonard's aversion to control and symmetrical objects can cause some friction in a craft world that values those exact things. Craft aspires to mastery over medium and equates that mastery with beauty, leaving little room for fugliness. Ceramics in Aotearoa has a strong history of studio pottery that has allied it with that value system, and the country is yet to fully shake what Richard Fahey ungenerously but befittingly describes as the "widespread folksy bucolic pastoralism of the country potter selling their wares to urban day-trippers via a painted sign on the gate".[05] Things have since shifted to welcome more conceptual and contemporary practices, but it is overseas that Leonard has found the infrastructure and collectors for a contemporary ceramics practice.

When I spoke to Leonard, she was preparing for multiple upcoming international exhibitions, fairs and prizes: *Odd and Even* at Maison Louis Carré in Bazoches-sur-Guyonne; the Officine Saffi Award and miart, both in Milan; *Distorted Duets* at La Fonderie Kugler in Geneva; a solo show with Mindy Solomon Gallery, her Miami gallerist; the Sydney Contemporary Art Fair; and the Jingdezhen International Ceramic Art Biennale in Beijing.[06] She is, by now, mostly unperturbed by logistics (impossibly, she has only ever had one work break in transit). The main challenge posed by all these shows is reconciling her process—one that reckons with her personal experience and relies on "what went wrong"—with the deadlines and demands of her venues and gallerists.



(on right) Virginia Leonard, *I Come out of Surgery Looking Golden*, 2018, clay, lustre and resin, 90 × 53 × 53 cm | 35.4 × 20.9 × 20.9 in. Installation view, *Odd and Even - a Collection*, Maison Louis Carré, Bazoches-sur-Guyonne, France, 5 September - 28 November 2021. Photo: Aurélien Mole. Image courtesy of the artist.



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Virginia Leonard, *Room with a View* (detail), 2019, clay, lustre and resin, 90 × 53 × 53 cm | 35.4 × 20.9 × 20.9 in. Installation view, *Odd and Even - a Collection*, Maison Louis Carré, Bazoches-sur-Guyonne, France, 5 September - 28 November 2021. Photo: Aurélien Mole. Image courtesy of the artist.

"When you're making for shows", she said, "you can't do too much experimenting". Works need to arrive on time and in one piece, which, for Leonard, has meant curbing her present impulse to build big and melt things, and to stack those melted things onto yet taller and more absurd plinths. The largest work in her studio, *Plea se Please Please Give Me Love* (2021), sat atop a stool wrapped in a pink eiderdown she'd bought from TradeMe. "I love them because they're so yucky", she said, "and that's a polyester one which is even better". This one she had painted and taped around a prop underneath so that the fabric bulged out like a belly over shapewear. The work is obscenely tall, poorly proportioned and its colours clash, but somehow it is stately, too, like an old lady at the races in a hat adorned with the feathers of extinct Amazonian birds. Leonard would make more of these plinths, and make them bigger, if it wasn't for the logistical and financial obstacles to sending them overseas.

The yuckiness of her aesthetic, however, is not something she has to regulate to win favour from international institutions and collectors. In Europe and the United States, there are many more residencies, galleries and awards intended for contemporary ceramicists than in Aotearoa, and perhaps, too, fewer neuroses when it comes to practices that sit across fine art, craft and design. In early September 2021, Leonard was announced as the winner of the Officine Saffi Award for *Pus and Scabs* (2021), chosen for its "psychologically layered and exuberant expressionism."[07] Officine Saffi is a multi-pronged project promoting international contemporary ceramics. The award, and its affiliated gallery, workshop and publishing house, focus on work that straddles the categories of contemporary art, design and decorative arts. For Leonard, this recognition—which included a €10,000 cash prize in addition to the title—enables her to indulge many of the more violent and extravagant impulses that parameters and quotas set by her gallerists for more commercial projects can constrain.

I asked her whether knowing where things will be exhibited affects her process. "I think about it", she said, "but when I think about it too much it's never successful. If I think, they look laboured". Laboured, that is, as opposed to injured—as she intends them. Leonard refrains from dwelling on context as much as possible and the reference points she does use tend to be playful rather than

researched. Again, this reveals something of Leonard's calculated naivety, as well as the ongoing prescience of that early advice, "don't learn anything more", in her approach. Here though, it is a strategy through which she maintains her experience of chronic pain, which doesn't change or yield to context, at the centre of the work.



Virginia Leonard, *Dressing Up For Ward Rounds*, 2021, clay, lustre and resin, 76 x 55 x 47 cm. Photo: Oliver King. Image courtesy of the artist and Mindy Solomon Gallery, Miami.



Virginia Leonard, *Pus and Scabs*, 2021, clay, lustre and resin, 46 x 40 x 40 cm. Photo: Oliver King. Image courtesy of the artist and Officine Saffi, Milan (Premier award winner).



Virginia Leonard, *All I Want Is Knee High Boots With A Heal*, 2021, clay, lustre and resin, 98 x 45 x 47 cm. Photo: Oliver King. Image courtesy of the artist and Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland.



Virginia Leonard, *Woke and Limping*, 2020, clay, lustre and resin, 84 x 38 x 34 cm. Photo: Oliver King. Image courtesy of the artist and Gow Langsford Gallery.

Most of her upcoming shows are hosted by her gallerists or initiated by them for other sites to showcase their artists. In *Disto rted Duets*, for example, Leonard's work will be featured alongside that of other ceramic artists, as well as glass artists from Taste Contemporary's catalogue, and work from contemporary photographers curated by Jenny Smets. These groupings serve the commercial incentive of finding new audiences and collectors who may be familiar with the other media. They also place the works within a critical context, though one general to the gallery's entire portfolio, emphasising innovative approaches to materials. The matter of chronic pain, then, is not at the centre of these shows, but this is where the imposing quality of Leonard's work best asserts itself. If her work looks eccentric or even embarrassing, as if it might leave a greasy mark on the pinewood sideboard in the pristine, emphatically handsome modernist spaces of Maison Louis Carré—the host site of *Odd & Even* built by Finnish architects Aino and Alvar Aalto in 1959—then all the better. All the more unsightly.

As Leonard sees clay as a proxy for her own body, these exhibition spaces can often act as a proxy for the medical spaces in which she has spent so much time, being similarly white and clean. We spoke about some responses to her works that read them as floral, like the sort of bouquets you'd send to a hospital bedside with your condolences. "I hate that", she said, "I've got to mess them up to keep them away from that language"—the language of being sorry for your loss, for your damaged body. If she wants her works to be beautiful, it's the kind of beauty that allows imperfections to slip through, like the ashes through her holey urns. It's pink lipstick seeping into fine lines. It's clumped mascara on smiling eyes. It's *W oke and Limping* (2020), an almost fully gold work stacked like a rock cairn and strung with thick, green-toned resins as though someone has sneezed on The Chair of Saint Peter.

"It's all smoke and mirrors", Leonard says. The colours and the gold and the funny titles don't conceal the forms' deformation or their fragility, but nor does their deformation and their fragility compromise the forms' beauty. She yanks beauty away from symmetry and functionality and sleek-necked vases that we can imagine in our grip, and affixes it, like one of her spikes or

cauliflower ears, to forms gross and gangrenous and covered in glamorous lustres.

"That's my world", Leonard said, referring to the so-often gross and hostile experience of her pain and its medicalisation, to which she gestures drolly in titles like *Soiled Sheets* (2020), and *Dressing Up for Ward Rounds* (2020). "That's where I operate from […] but it's got to be beautiful too". 'Perfect health', then, might be a seductive idea, but Leonard's visual language shows us that its opposite, the unmastered and the unsightly, can be too.

Footnotes

01. Howard Risatti, *Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 126.

02. Quoted in "The Spider's Web," New Yorker, February 4, 2002.

03. Deepak Chopra, Perfect Health, Bantam Books, 1990, p. 16.

04. Eli Clare, Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 14.

05. Richard Fahey, "Tender Brick: The Material Epiphanies of Peter Hawkesby," Objectspace, 25 Nov 2020, www.objectspace.org.nz/journal/tender-brick-the-material-epiphanies-of-peter-1/

06. In light of Covid-19 lockdowns in New Zealand in August 2021, Leonard has pulled out of the Jingdezhen International Ceramic Art Biennale in Beijing.

07. "Officine Saffi Award 4," Officine Saffi, accessed 14 Sep 2021, www.officinesaffi.com/en/awards.

Biographies



Virginia Leonard holds a Masters of Fine Arts from Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, which she completed in 2001. In 2019 she won the Artist-in-Residence Prize in Finland as part of the Open to Art Ceramic Award, Officine Saffi, Milan, Italy, and was the recipient of the Glass House/ Stone House Residency in Chenaud, France. In 2017 she won the Ceramic residency at Guldagergaard, Denmark. She won the Merit Award in the 2015 Portage Ceramic Awards, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, Auckland. Leonard's work has been exhibited extensively throughout Australasia and internationally, including exhibitions in Switzerland, Italy, USA, and Denmark. Her profile is featured in the influential Thames and Hudson book 100 Sculptures of Tomorrow, and her work is held in numerous public and private collections worldwide, including Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; The James Wallace Arts Trust, Auckland; Musée Ariana, Geneva, Switzerland; Gallery of South Australia; and the prestigious Ann G. Tenenbaum Collection, New York.



Connie Brown lives at Te Henga on Auckland's west coast, working as a freelance writer and an assistant curator at Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery in Titirangi. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Art History from Victoria University of Wellington, and is currently working towards her Honours qualification at the University of Auckland. Her writing on contemporary art has been featured by Art News New Zealand, Enjoy Contemporary Art Space and Circuit Artist Film and Video.

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