



# GREG PAYCE ILLUSIONS

by Heidi McKenzie



Sometimes clay seems to be genetically imprinted in our DNA. For celebrated Canadian ceramic artist, Greg Payce, the subject of a solo exhibition titled “Greg Payce: Illusions” at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, Canada, which is currently on view, this was the case. Payce, a 40-year veteran in the field who counts over 120 national and international solo and group exhibitions, can’t remember a time when he wanted to be anything other than an artist. As is common for many children growing up in both urban and rural places, Payce remembers digging for clay in his backyard and fashioning animal figurines. What’s not common about Payce is that, at the age of six, he had a transformative experience as he sat mesmerized in front of his neighbor’s television watching a potter create a vessel out of a lump of clay on a wheel. “From that moment on I was obsessed. I always knew where I wanted to go in life. Getting there was another issue.”

Payce grew up in Edmonton. In high school he dropped science classes in favor of art, and spent every spare hour he had working in his school’s clay studio. He attended the University of Alberta in the early 1970s at a time when working in clay meant everything else *but* making pots. He is somewhat of a self-professed misfit in both camps of the ceramics world, neither fully embraced by functional potters, nor fully received as a fine art sculptor. He has nonetheless reconciled inherent conflicts between form and function, and makes mugs, bowls, and teapots “all the time” while demonstrating for his students at the Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD), where he has been a faculty member since 1988.

At his core, Payce is a vessel maker, and believes that vessels are in essence abstractions of the human form. “They [his work] are all pots. They are all vases—not ideal for flowers, mind you. I am not trying to deny utility. All my pottery garnitures are open vessel forms,” he explains. “The direction of my work has been toward using vessel forms to investigate concepts within the rich ceramics historical context.” The covert use of negative space, focusing on the liminal spaces, emerged from looking at Italian Mediterranean alborelli or apothecary jars and Sèvres porcelain garnitures. In the case of the apothecary jars, the cylindrically shaped vessels used to be lined up on shelves in rows, touching at the base and the lids and curved in toward the middle to create a space for the human hand to easily grab each one. The form’s design was shaped by the function.

Payce acknowledges the work and thinking of his friend and peer, Paul Mathieu, as a major influence. He recalls a resolute statement tabled by Mathieu while visiting ACAD some years ago, “I hate clay. It’s just a means to an end. When you fire it, it becomes ceramics.” For Payce, ceramics is about the discourse rather than the material, “Ceramics is about ideas and transmission of culture,” he states. “Clay is the raw material and ceramics is the fired cultural object. They are very different things physically and conceptually. I am particularly interested in how ceramics has historically shaped culture. It is fascinating to learn how and why



Above: *The Customs and the Spirit of the Nations: Occident 2011*, 3 ft. 10 in. (1.2 m) in length, lenticular images of ceramics. The porcelain forms are a work from 2008 entitled *Entre la Passion et la Raison*, a template-thrown porcelain work, 21 in. (53 cm) in length. The background objects are various historical and contemporary ceramics from Mexico and Spain. Below: *Al Barelli* (shown with the artist), 6 ft. 10 in. (2.1 m) in height, wheel-thrown and assembled earthenware sections, terra sigillata, 2001.



Opposite (top to bottom): *Albedo Lux Europa*, ceramics, projections, video, 2009; *Albedo Lux Asia*, ceramics, projections, video, 2009; *Albedo Lux Talavera*, ceramics, projections, video, 2009.

people made things and how these objects fit into the social and aesthetic framework of the time.”

Payce minored in anthropology at university, feeding his lifelong fascination with ancient ceramics and art from around the world. “I’m a big museum hound, always looking at art from different cultures. It takes it back to the roots of where all that started, in the Enlightenment when the lines between East and West were beginning to dissolve.” “All that” refers to Payce’s signature use of negative space, and specifically his piece, *Entre la Passion et la Raison*, which is a rendering of the universally recognizable profile of the French Enlightenment philosopher and historian, Voltaire, as immortalized in marble by Jean-Antoine Houdon in 1778. Payce’s piece, created in 2008, is an unadorned two-vessel porcelain work, with the space between the vessels forming Voltaire’s profile. He was subsequently inspired to further explore this iconic muse, intrigued by its potential to provoke critique of the era it symbolizes. His research continued in 2009 when he stumbled upon an original edition of the complete set of writings of Voltaire during a multi-disciplinary field trip to an 18th-century chateau outside of Paris, which he undertook with colleagues from ACAD as part of his research for a group show in Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada.

Payce’s work has many times been described as a multicultural mosaic. Often working in series, making different iterations of the same foundational sculptural form, Payce contextualizes his work within different cultural frameworks. His recent five-part series *The Customs and the Spirit of the Nations* takes *Entre la Passion et la Raison* not only to another level but to another realm. The works are two-dimensional renderings realized in lenticular photographic prints. In layman’s terms, we have come to know lenticular photography as the novelty item that we used to pull out of the bottom of a Cracker-Jacks box, i.e., a wiggle picture. It is a technology in which

a lenticular lens is used to produce stereoscopic three-dimensional images with an illusion of depth, or the ability to change or move as the image is viewed from different angles. In Payce’s case, he sets his work on a 4-foot turntable in a light box in his studio, and using masking tape and a compass, demarcates 24 angles from which he photographs his work. Payce then outsources the processing of the image to Montreal. The first lenticular image Payce created was based on his piece *Pantheon*—which is on loan for the Gardiner Museum’s current show. *Pantheon* has 40 eight-inch-tall pieces, and the lenticular image of the work is 18 feet long.

Payce works in earthenware, porcelain, and for site-specific locations, in bronze and aluminum casting to accommodate the Canadian freeze/thaw climate. For example, his monumental sentry-like 2010 piece, *Claire*, located outside the Gardiner Museum, is powder-coated turned aluminum. The glowing female figure revealed in the space between the two vessels that comprise the sculpture faces the museum’s high-traffic, urban, University Avenue intersection. In this very visible location, it is a signpost of what’s in store for the viewer.

The thesis of the show’s curator, Amy Gogarty, is remediation—in the sense of the word as it is used by new media scholars as refashioning or reworking ideas from one idea or medium and transforming them into another. Remediation embodies Payce’s point of view regarding the philosophy and definition vis à vis the field of ceramics. “I have always let my work lead me as much as I lead my work,” he says. “I do not believe that ideas are more important than objects, materials, processes, or technology. I develop the ideas in my work from the ways that things are made, and particularly the ways that we can use technology and our own technique and skills to move in new, uncharted, and exciting directions. I think of all this new stuff [lenticular images, video,





prototyping technology] as ceramics—it might not be the material, but it’s all about ceramics.”

For the exhibition, the main upper gallery of the Gardiner Museum is divided into two spaces with one half of the room set up as a large dark room for viewing video. For most of the video projects, Payce worked with composer John Abrams and videographer Rod Stuart. Three of the videos are based on Payce’s 2006 work, *Albedo*, and reference his personal feminist interpretation of the spiritual strength and light of women, which he sees as an equalizing force in an otherwise historically male-dominated world. The piece is comprised of 34 porcelain vessels arranged at chest height atop a semi-circular base. The negative spaces between vessels form the images of progressively aging women. In 2009, Payce reworked *Albedo* using the medium of video, deepening the context by layering diverse cultural imagery with the original piece.

The resulting pieces, *Albedo Lux: Asia, Europa, and Talavera* (see page 38) evoke specific references to China, the Renaissance and Rococo, and 16th-century colonial Mexico respectively.

Payce’s first video, also featured at the Gardiner, is entitled *Harem*. The “set” for the videos is a turntable in Payce’s studio photo booth, the speed of which is controlled by his potter’s wheel. “It’s my personal joke. It’s all very low-tech, simple Mac iPhoto images projected onto the ceramic forms. It’s very trippy, kind of like planets moving together in front of you.”

*Illusions* is clearly a well-rounded retrospective of the last two decades of this prolific artist’s life with an emphasis on his current work. With over 30 sculptures, lenticular photographs, installations, or DVDs in the show, nearly one third of the pieces are from 2011. There are a number of groupings of ceramic garnitures both virtually and “in the clay,” as well as some of Payce’s earlier works inspired by antiquity in positive forms both serially and in the singular. As for the artist’s personal take on illusion, he explains, “When eyes are fooled, imaginations are thrown open wide.”

“*Greg Payce: Illusions*” is a solo exhibition curated by Amy Gogarty. The exhibition runs from February 2 to May 6 at the Gardiner Museum ([www.gardinermuseum.on.ca](http://www.gardinermuseum.on.ca)) in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

**the author** Heidi McKenzie is an arts journalist and emerging ceramic artist completing her studies at Sheridan College in Toronto. She has written for the *Globe & Mail*, *Toronto Star* and currently publishes in *POV* magazine, *Fusion* magazine and *Ceramics Monthly*.

Above: *Valhalla*, to 16 in. (41 cm) in height, template-thrown porcelain, banded with colored slips, fired to cone 6, produced from 2005–2011.

Left: *Pantheon* (detail of some of the 40 forms), each 8 in. (20 cm) in height, template-thrown earthenware banded with terra sigillata slips, fired to cone 04, 2004.

