

The Mitchell Art Gallery is nominating Benjamin Oswald and his work, *The Fall* (2023) for the 2024 Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize. This porcelain work was chosen above all others because of its masterfully rendered meditation on time and loss made possible through the ancient form of the vessel.

Exhibited as part of *The Shape of Absence*, a solo project exhibited at the Mitchell Art Gallery in the fall of 2023, that investigates the way a hollow vessel holds space for the apprehension of not knowing. As noted in the introductory text for the exhibition, “Oswald’s formal investigation of these enclosed shapes in clay are as much about peering into the ancient form to uncover the big mysteries of our existence as they are about peering into the vessel-as-body as a tool to contemplate the human soul.” Ancient vessels forming archaeological records of human existence have been a key puzzle piece in helping us better understand our history. This profound material history of the objects we have used for millennia to hold what we needed as a species to survive, now as artifacts are the great holders of stories. Formally, vessels are defined by the absence of matter and form within them, enclosing a nothingness that is not visible, and contains almost infinite potential in what it could hold.

Thinking about the relationship of ancient container and void, Oswald’s exhibition provides the viewer with thinking tools to encounter the existential questions that this body of work raises about absence and nothingness, and their potential to define human experiences.

The minimal, meticulously built and thrown colourless porcelain vessels offer a sublime encounter with these deep questions – a process made intriguing and beautiful through these elegant forms. A preceding formal investigation to *The Fall*, Oswald’s Cut Vessels series interrupts the sacred-feeling infinity of the smooth form created by a spiral of coiled clay with a profane vertical slice. Works in this series are represented in *The Shape of Absence* as well as in the group exhibition *The Shape of Things*, a survey of Alberta contemporary ceramic artwork curated by Diana Sherlock and Lindsey Sharman

which also was on view during the fall of 2023. An exercise in curiosity, these works allow us access to the otherwise mysterious interior, letting the formal and imagined secrets they contain spill out.

*The Fall* reflects a subsequent investigation on this trajectory by setting up the iconic vessel form along five phases of disappearance or dissolution as each individual work tips further into the wall. On one hand, by engaging the wall in this way, it invites consideration of the also-white gallery as one of the vessels in the exhibition. On the other, it appears as if the vessels are being toppled out of three dimensions into flatness. As part of the greater existential and epistemological core questions of the exhibition, this absorption into a surface reflects the affective experience of postmodernity, which as Frederick Jameson argues, as had a serious flattening effect on culture. *The Fall* speaks to the hollow feeling of living in an era in which depth—history, context, nuance, source—is continuously extracted and excluded from discourse.

The language that historians and architects employ to understand the characteristics of a vessel—shoulders, lips, ears—are a reminder of how the vessel is a body, and thus serves a deeply metaphorical purpose in its potential for representing human embodied experience. *The Fall* can also be read as a meditation on aging and mortality. As a senior viewer to the exhibition noted, the work reminded her of how she feels increasingly invisible to others as she ages. In that interpretive experience, this work further provides space to think through mortality, the end of our material existence, and the conspicuous absence of knowing what happens when we die.

This exquisite series of objects and the remarkable depth of ideas that it makes visible is indicative of Oswald's exceptionally thoughtful and highly skilled approach to artmaking. This has not gone unrecognized. In the past six years, Oswald has distinguished himself in receiving the Robert Weghsteen Memorial Award in ceramics, four solo exhibitions, gaining gallery representation, two Edmonton Arts Council grants,

and placing in a series of design awards. The many local and international residencies and workshops that he has participated in, including at the prestigious Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Centre in Denmark make clear just how dedicated Oswald is to ongoing learning and refinement of skills and ideas.

A dedicated and accomplished artist, Oswald is truly deserving of the honor of the Foote Prize. And if he receives the prize, he would be a meaningful not only for his career, but also for the Edmonton ceramics community as a whole, as a ceramic artist has not won this prize previously (according to the records available online). By every measure, Oswald is a brilliant Edmonton artist and is deserving of this recognition, as *The Fall* meaningfully demonstrates.