

Muddy Boundaries **Mattea Sklut**

Using foraged, site-specific wild clay, artist E. Saffronia Downing creates a nonlinear archive of place, connecting her personal history to the ecological memories of the land she inhabits. She mines wild clay pits, revealing how the material reflects its native location's geological, biological, and human impact, and in working with naturally occurring materials, Downing's art-making practice is fused to the place of its creation. The artist's solo exhibition at ACRE Projects, *Pressed Flower*, challenges consumerist alienation and hierarchies that differentiate fine arts practices from vernacular art traditions. The labor Downing undertakes to source the clay is an act of defiance against the modern separation between people and the distantly made products and goods that furnish their lives with quality and comfort. Likewise, artists are taught how to use a medium, but rarely how to make the materials that are so essential to their artistic practices. In collecting and processing native clays, Downing models this disintermediation, at once offering a return to early ceramic practices and subtly resisting present-day dependence on conventional economic systems.

She directly confronts consumerist alienation in the domestic sphere by invoking quilt patterns in clay slab arrangements and experimenting with new applications and presentations of her ceramic practice. The disappearing folk art traditions of quilters, in addition to diminishing originality in the bricklaying and tiling trades, are directly linked to the twentieth-century technological and consumerist boom in the US, which replaced local, individual labor with mass-production and efficient uniformity. As vernacular arts and crafts became alienated from their creative legacies in favor of cheaper, faster production, a wider separation grew between these artistic heritages and the revered fine arts. By bringing the outdoors into the white cube gallery environment, Downing urges visitors to reflect on the arbitrary boundaries separating craft and fine artmaking practices and the deep ties between person and place.

Downing's experiments in muddying borders between the built environment and natural world manifest as impressions in clay, ceramic inlays in drywall, and beaded curtains. One such impression of a flower-like design lifted from the cement outside of her home in the Hudson Valley appears throughout *Pressed Flower*. This singular design, used to create the series of clay imprints and rubbings on paper, serves as the namesake of this exhibition and traces how familiarity and repetition inform artmaking and experimentation. This exhibition, a moment in Downing's ongoing efforts to steward a nonconforming economic and ecological system of artmaking, collapses space and time by simultaneously honoring the craft histories and labor from which she draws inspiration while adding ACRE Projects as a new site in her longstanding archive of place.