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Mindful Material
Bittersweet Beauty
Forging On
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Footed Bowl With Apples, 2010
steel, beeswax
42 x 55 x 36"
PHOTO: JIM ESCALANTE
COLLECTION OF THE RACING ART
MUSEUM



Kim Cridler: Bittersweet Beauty

BY GLEN R. BROWN

LIGHT FILTERING THROUGH fragile beeswax leaves hints at the tenuousness of individual living things, while illuminating the capacity of life in general to wend its way ever onward in defiance of obstacles. A distillation of the most fundamental dynamic in nature, Kim Cridler's *Field Study 16: Felled Mulberry* traces the cycle of life and death through the protagonists of a tree stump and a fresh sprig that, rising in trembling lines of resilience, forms a vignette of transcendence. Atop the stump, beside the sprig, and drawing symbolic potential from these natural forms rests the framework of a vessel. An obvious analogue, rather than a functional object, this skeletal vessel yields itself readily to the embrace of metaphor, hinting at complex relationships between human-made objects and the elusive concepts of time, mortality, and eternity. As in all of Cridler's sculptures and installations, the vessel's incapacity as a literal container heightens its conceptual resonance.

Absorbing the metaphorical connotations of its surroundings, the vessel condenses into a pure ideal that encloses human memory, hopes, fears, and desires.

Cridler first enlisted the framework vessel as a receptacle of the conceptual some 20 years ago while still a graduate student at SUNY New Paltz. Under the tutelage of Jamie Bennett and Fred Woell, she had been working diligently at jewelry making, but an encounter with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's 1987 exhibition catalogue *Marks of Achievement: Four Centuries of American Presentation Silver* opened her eyes to the significance of the handcrafted vessel as an element of material culture. "The essays described the meanings residing in ceremonial hollowware," she recalls. "They stressed the sentimental value of objects that might be passed down through families, the larger political expressions of power or control conveyed by works in precious material, and the importance of continuity, association with the glories of the past through neoclassical form: all these fabulous reasons, cultural and social, why hollowware vessels were significant. Those ideas opened for me a really meaningful place to work in the vessel format."

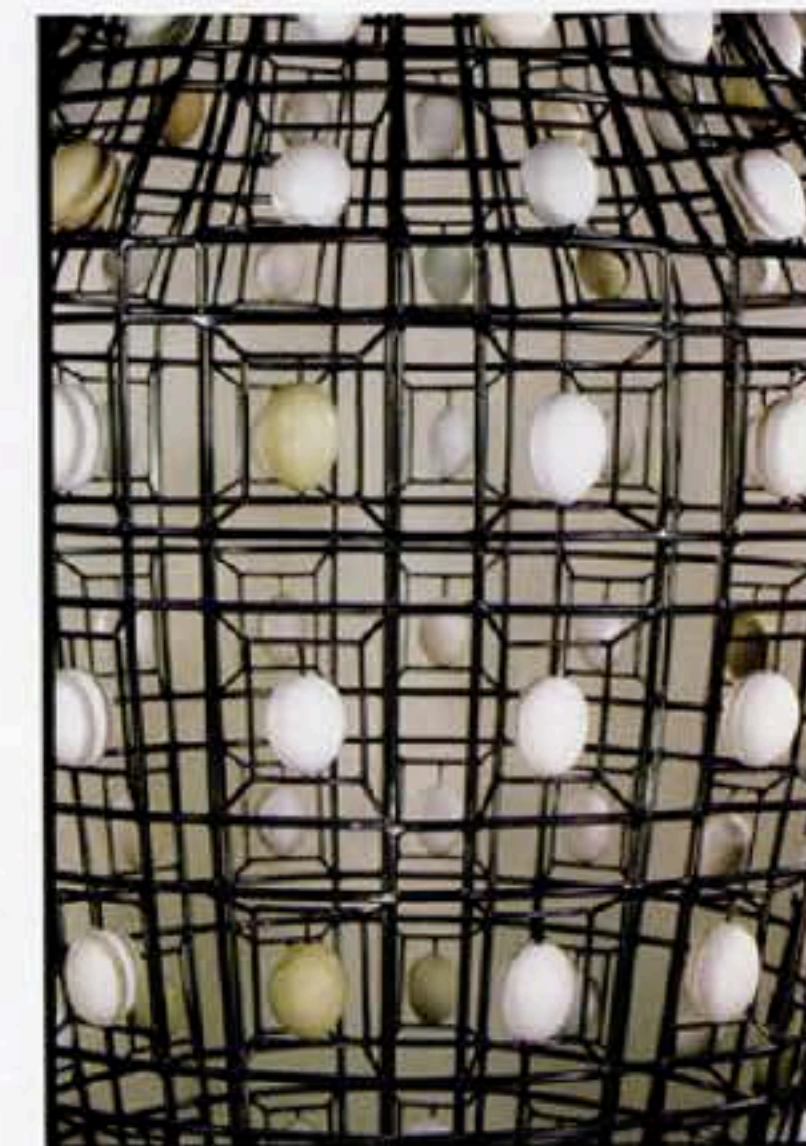
While the vessel's capacity to signify in social contexts is generally bound to physical use, Cridler's decision to negate utilitarian potential by abstracting of the vessel to a grid of contour lines is consistent with analytical artistic strategies since the late 19th century. What separates Cridler's reductive practice from that of modernist abstraction, however, is that her aim is not a revelation of essence but rather reduction to emptiness: a truly hollow ware that, like a tabula rasa, can absorb meanings from the environment with minimal internal interference. "What

was evident to me," she explains, "was that vessels acquired other meanings, that they weren't just functional. There was a whole web of sensory information surrounding these objects that included things like the historical, the cultural, and the familiar experience of using an object that was made by people in your family. So I started making objects that spoke of these other meanings of hollowware that were perhaps nostalgic and sentimental but also about cultural memory."

Recognizing that cultural memory may be alluded to but not defined by the individual artist, Cridler has sought to accrete meanings in emptied vessels by filling them with personal memories and connotations that may rise to the level of the general for her viewers, but that originate in the authenticity of her particular experience. Cridler grew up in a rural home where objects such as handmade vessels chronicled her family's history, but perhaps the most foundational of her memories involves a functional vessel far removed from the kitchen counter and dining room sideboard. "One of my strongest memories from childhood," she recalls, "was sitting in a gravity bin, one of those wagons that they pull behind tractors for collecting grain. I used to play in gravity bins full of wheat, literally within a huge vessel full of wealth. The agrarian experience is of birth, death, and rebirth and collecting wealth in the form of grain or any other kind of fruits of labor."

The gravity bin of Cridler's childhood, through echoes of its material and spatial properties, haunts her later work

Field Study 16: Felled Mulberry, 2012
steel, beeswax
71 x 18 x 21"
PHOTO: VERMILION PHOTOGRAPHY



Kept, 2000 (full view and detail)
steel, egg shells, satin
vessel height 79"



"My Wisconsin Home, 2012
installation view at Racine Art Museum
steel, plate glass, bronze, horn, beeswax,
carnelian, marble, howlite, mother of pearl,
blown glass, silver, copper, brass

Despite their emphasis on impermanence, Cridler's works are bittersweet rather than morose, skirting the abyss of despair through the saving grace of beauty.

as an artist. In some cases towering eight feet in height, her welded-steel vessels could easily encompass the human body. Just as significant, however, are the allusions they often make to the concentration and containment of an agricultural bounty. *Footed Bowl with Apples*, for example, consists of a steel-framework vessel, 5 feet in diameter, crowned with leaves and apples of tawny beeswax. At first glance, the sculpture might seem a straightforward reference to orchards and the harvest. It was, in fact, inspired by "the experience in fall of travelling through the countryside and seeing some of those renegade apple trees that no one has picked, gorgeous structures with golden globes of apples still hanging from them."

Representational elements in Cridler's works do not, however, serve simply as vehicles of narrative. They also act, like the framework vessels to which they cling, as a visual disquisition on the nature of craft objects. Their role in this regard is to illuminate the constitution of ornament, both as an aesthetic device enhancing the visual appeal of functional objects, and as a repository of cultural, and historical meanings that tie such objects to particular contexts even as the objects themselves move freely across space and time.

Upon encountering art historian George L. Hersey's speculation that the earliest examples of ornament in ancient architecture were skeuomorphs derived from the prehistoric custom of suspending sacrifices in sacred arbors, Cridler was disposed to conceive of all manifestations of ornament as more powerfully connotative than its reputation as mere decoration implied. Her first large-scale attempt to address the symbolic value of ornament was the sculpture *Kept*, a

colossal double-walled framework vase set atop a 14-foot runner composed of satin-covered, welded steel. Integrated into the steel network of the vessel's walls—in reference to the egg-and-dart moulding of classical architecture, and in speculation on the ritual and sacrificial origins of this decorative device—are scores of blown eggshells.

The eggshells, which Cridler likens to seeds, serve as general reflections on life, fecundity, and the wealth of harvest, but their symbolism is also subtly enhanced by the proximity of the steel runner, upon which is inscribed a Dutch still-life image of hanging game. Death is the eternal complement to life, to be sure, but Cridler's message is multivalent, relating most intriguingly to the vessel and human desire—perhaps, in fact, to the most basic of human desires. The intent of Dutch baroque still-life painting was, after all, not merely to blandish the eye through alluring detail. Rather viewers were drawn into art then returned to nature better prepared to circumvent the temptations of the passing world, and through such sensual restraint to attain the bliss of everlasting life. Cridler's invocation of the *vanitas* image in the context of an eggshell-thin vessel generates a compelling metaphor of the frailty and impermanence of the human body, its vulnerability in a seductive and destructive world. Perhaps more interestingly, it serves as a reminder that even the treasured objects through which we seek vicarious immortality are not immune to the debilitating influences of time. *Kept*, Cridler explains, is "about wanting to keep something for ourselves and the folly of that because we are in an endless cycling."

Despite their emphasis on impermanence, Cridler's works are bittersweet rather than morose, skirting the abyss of despair through the saving grace of beauty. She employs this quality—manifested through the ornamental aspects of her work—as a sign of her acceptance of the way of all living things. "My works have become consciously about cyclical change and the experience of being mortal," she explains. "They're about recognizing cycles in these very large patterns that surround us and how the relationship to those larger cycles, the notion of generations, can be a comfort."

The degree to which Cridler's work has addressed the handmade vessel as a vehicle for aspirations to continuity across cycles of birth and death was made clear in her major 2011 exhibition, "My Wisconsin Home," at the Racine Museum of Art. Incorporating colossal framework vessels that Cridler had produced since 2009, the exhibition also included smaller works from her "Field Studies" series. Conceived partly as a means to explore the consequences of grouping vessels, "My Wisconsin Home" derived its curious dynamic from a blending of Cridler's experiences with decorative arts museums and her everyday encounters with nature in the Wisconsin countryside. Appropriately held in the liminal space of the museum's Fifth Gallery windows, the exhibition contrasted the institution's role in preservation with the impermanence of things bound to the rhythms of nature.

Most representative in this regard was an installation



Field Study 15: Burr Oak, 2012
installation view at Kendal Gallery,
Kendal College of Art & Design
steel, bronze
6 x 6 x 16'

Pail with Fish, 2010
steel, cast bronze, mother of pearl, silver
51 x 32"
PHOTO: JIM ESCALANTE
COLLECTION OF THE RACINE ART MUSEUM



Urn with Bees, 2009
steel, cast bronze
70 x 35"

Bottle with Leaves, 2010
bronze, horn
72 x 33"
PHOTO: JIM ESCALANTE

"I want to create tension between the almost intellectual understanding of an object and a really rich, haptic, meaty, sensual experience."

incorporating a 16-foot long bronze branch that Cridler would later integrate into *Field Study 15: Burr Oak*. Initially intended as a reference to Wisconsin oak savannas and the renowned resilience of the species *Quercus macrocarpa*, the fallen limb, still bearing a diadem of golden leaves, readily adapted itself to the prevailing theme of the Racine exhibition. "It looked," Cridler recalls, "as if it had crashed into the space. It became a reminder that, much as we might want to plan everything out (and that window was about planning and ordering objects on shelves) life won't leave you alone. It won't leave you untouched by cyclical change."

This wistful observation serves as the leitmotif of Cridler's recent work, though it always surfaces in tandem with reflection on regeneration. In *Field Study #15: Burr Oak*, for example, the foot and rim of a toppled vessel bear poignant words from the ancient poetry of Ovid: "All things change; nothing perishes." Echoing this sentiment, the sculpture *Pail with Fish* pairs a double-walled funereal situla of darkened steel with a radiant wreath of bronze-and-mother-of-pearl fish that through their circular schooling conjure an ancient symbol of perpetual renewal. *Urn with Bees* combines another variation of funerary vessel with clusters of golden bees that congregate around the circular orifices of an orb: a perfect sphere that rests atop the symbol of death and implies through its continuous surface an endless rotation. The urn below is implicitly drawn into this rotation by the circling patterns within its framework, suggesting the

inextricability of death from the endless motion of life.

Urn with Bees encapsulates the tragedy of human existence, the failings of the flesh to support the boundless aspirations of the spirit, while it underscores the power of life in general to perpetuate itself despite the constant shadow of death. Such perseverance is exalted by Cridler's six-foot-tall vessel *Bottle with Leaves*, a long-necked bronze framework bearing foliage fashioned from horn. The compelling impression that this sculpture conveys of the vessel as container and preserver of life would resurface soon after in a public-art commission that Cridler and husband William Bennie, an industrial designer, received for the courtyard and entryway of Sage Hall at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. Sage Hall's status as both a paragon of state-of-the-art "green" architecture and as the first new academic building constructed on the funding-challenged campus in 40 years made it the perfect site for a symbol of life's tenacity despite the obstacles and setbacks that plague it.

Cridler and Bennie's proposal for the courtyard included five intricately patterned cast-iron grates, the largest situated at the center of the space and serving as a platform for a six-foot-tall bronze-framework vessel enclosing a living beech tree. Titled *Arbor Alma* this literal centerpiece, like its close relative in *Bottle with Leaves*, draws upon a particular memory from Cridler's childhood. "We had a tree that had grown into a metal structure," she explains. "I was fascinated by the notion that despite our best plans, sometimes the things that we feel certain about are slowly overtaken by nature. I thought that there was poetic justice in that. We spent a long time thinking about the right

kind of tree for *Arbor Alma*. The beech is extraordinary; it's incredibly long lived. It has remarkably smooth bark that makes it look almost human. And then there's a relationship between beech and book: centuries ago books were made from beech bark. So it was this wonderful tree for reflecting on the interrelationship of man and nature and thinking about drawing out knowledge of the world."

The image of a vessel embracing a living tree writ through with the joys and melancholy of human experience extends naturally from Cridler's reflections on the semiotic capacity of handmade hollowware as a carrier of cultural information. Since her graduate student days, theory has permeated her work in the studio, infusing her sculptures and installations with signs of both ethical and ontological inquiry. At the same time, the success of Cridler's art ultimately arises from the degree to which she is able to make her sculptural vessels, not mere visual appendages to arguments about the meaning of decorative objects, but rather themselves fusions of beauty and function, albeit a conceptual function. The distinctive tenor of her work no doubt derives partly from this fusion. "I want to create tension between the almost intellectual understanding of an object and a really rich, haptic, meaty, sensual experience," she asserts. "I'm interested in the notion of beauty not only as a physically pleasurable element in our society but also as a moral calling. My goal in life is to make something so beautiful that when you look at it you forget yourself for just a moment."

Glen Brown is a Professor of Art History and Associate Head of the Art Department at Kansas State University.

WILLIAM BENNIE & KIM CRIDLER
Arbor Alma, 2011 (full view and detail)
installed at Sage Hall, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh
fabricated and cast bronze, cast iron, beech tree
vessel 72 x 48"

