EN

Conditional Freedom

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Conditional Freedom

Select. Acquire. Enrich.

Exhibition curator: **Frédéric Paul Bodet**

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Ville de Genève

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VILLE DE GENÈVE

Introduction

The *Liberté Conditionelle* (Conditional Freedom) exhibition features an emblematic selection of ceramic works, acquired by Musée Ariana between 2010 and 2024. The contemporary collection has evolved considerably in recent years, finding itself increasingly at the crossroads of applied arts, design, and contemporary art. Director Isabelle Naef Galuba and former Chief Curator Anne-Claire Schumacher worked in tandem for almost fifteen years, taking a critical look at the diversity and vitality of ceramics and glass art, while at the same time studying and promoting the museum's historical heritage. They focused on both sculptures and containers, always favouring clear, high-quality artistic concepts. Contemporary acquisitions have been made intuitively, with a view to creating original links—formal, technical, or expressive—with the older collections. However, this freedom of choice has always depended on the generosity of a patron, as the museum has not had an acquisitions budget since 1994.

Today's retrospective of the works acquired is by no means exhaustive: over 300 purchases alone have been made in the period under consideration, but only around one hundred feature in this exhibition. The pleasure of showing such a large number of contemporary acquisitions to the public today is considerable, especially as all these works should form a coherent whole… The collection has a strong emphasis on sculpture, with a research focus on human figures and landscapes (i.e. mountain landscapes in this case). It tackles myths, both ancient and contemporary, and even mysticism… The container—the form for use or contemplation—fortunately retains its rightful place, a classic or innovative testament to its vigour in current production. The exhibition that results from these choices could only be profuse and accumulative… Nevertheless, as we move through the two rooms, different lines of acquisition clearly emerge. Relationships between the works are woven through a dozen duly titled ensembles, spread over five large podiums and two shelves running along the side walls on the left. On the right, the walls are mounted with a series of plinths that recall some of the contemporary exhibitions that have marked Musée Ariana's recent history.

The (psychological) mountain

One of the most original lines of acquisition in this collection is an approach to the theme of the mountain, sometimes depicted but more often transposed to the point of becoming a philosophical subject. The highest of these (and also the most metaphorical) is undoubtedly the black monolith by Swiss artist **Laure Gonthier**, entitled *La tendresse des Pierres I*, which was acquired in 2015. This monochrome mountain, assembled using the coil technique and then modelled, evokes handpicked fragments of nature that are transplanted and then sacralised in the Chinese manner of "scholar's rocks". With this project, which was carried out during a residency in the Netherlands, the Swiss ceramist speaks as much of a "quest" for landscape as of the "colossal" work that every artist engages in with matter. On this same podium, on the left as you enter, the smallest of the mountains on display (but not the least significant) is that of Ukrainian artist **Yuriy Musatov** and features a moving work that delicately expresses the feeling of nostalgia resulting from migration and uprooting.

The weight of the mental burden associated with life changes and dual culture is a powerful message, and mountains are the perfect vehicle for it: Korean artist **Myung-Joo Kim**, who trained in Seoul, France, and then Belgium, has established studios in both Europe and South Korea. She transposes the motif of the mountain in an expressionist approach that conveys the torments of its fundamental instability: the idea that a primordial and protective mountain (that of the Korean landscape of her youth) must take on another load, that of the burden of nomadism, and the nostalgia that goes with it… This eminently psychoanalytical "dual mountain" is a visual expression of what must be overcome and accepted for life to go on, and for fluidity to prevail over obstacles. It was acquired after its presentation in "Migrations", a collective project organised in 2022 for the International Congress of the AIC/IAC (International Academy of Ceramics) and can be seen on a "memory stand" in the exhibition.

Between two *Clouds*—airy white, but materially consistent—modelled by American/French artist **Daphné Corrégan**, stands an abrupt Cliff triptych in enamelled stoneware by **Claude Champy**, one of the most internationally renowned French ceramists since the 1980s. This dark work, swept by waves of lighter glazes, is built like a keystone. It was acquired in 2013, following its presentation in "8 Artistes et la Terre. Champy, Dejonghe, Godderidge, Lerat, Muraour, Nagasawa, Pontoreau, Virot", a striking exhibition that accompanied a landmark publication on these eight great contemporary ceramists. These are artists with accomplished careers, who use real or dreamed landscapes as the matrix for their work, with the awareness that the physical nature that surrounds them can become a metaphor for a host of metaphysical questions, such as our relationship with time and the cosmos. Camille Virot's magnificent *Bol-Genèse*, acquired in 2021, is another powerful example of this reflection on the origin and essence of the world.

The rocky landscape theme is echoed in other groups, such as **"Form/Colour Dialogue"** in the second hall, which features a beautiful moulded and modelled terracotta installation by French artist **Philippe Godderidge**, entitled *Demeures* (2013). With its complex, sunny polychromy, it brings together 33 brightly glazed bricks, 1 *Collapse sculpture*, 7 *Houses sculptures* and 15 *Stones*, all masses of raw earth crushed and joyfully variegated with engobes—a reconstituted, fragmented territory, drowned in the light of vibrant glazes that concentrate the telluric energies of the great Normandy bocage, all of it created with clay from the garden, since the French ceramist is also a farmer…

The living forces of nature run through the exhibition, right up to the imposing wall plaque hanging at the back of the second hall, a “carapace” by **Bernard Dejonghe** entitled *Areshima* (a Japanese-sounding name, but which refers to a Neolithic site in the Ténéré region of Niger). It feels like a volcanic bulge, a lava flow that syncretises the four primordial elements: earth, water, air, and fire. This is a striking materialisation of the transmutation of the states of matter sought by all ceramists, particularly those who fire their pieces in a Japanese Noborigama kiln. This is the case for Dejonghe, and for this reason, this sumptuous work concludes the exhibition. It is well surrounded by other works inspired by rural tradition, nourished by references to the Far East or Africa: powerful volumes in raw stoneware coloured by flames, the ashes from the kiln or smoke, and brought together in a theme entitled “**Sacred Fires**”.

Laure Gonthier
La tendresse des Pierres I,
2013
AR 2015-058

Bernard Dejonghe
Areshima,
2011
AR 2013-147

Myung-Joo Kim
Nostalgie IV,
2020
AR 2023-036

Human figure

In reference to the title of an extraordinary hymn to freedom and the Resistance which was composed in 1943 by Francis Poulenc to a text by Paul Eluard, this thematic corpus marks the significant and exciting part devoted to figurative sculpture in this exhibition. We know that humans modelled their own image long before using clay to make vessels. This primordial representation of the human body is a fundamental anthropological phenomenon, and one that continues to regenerate itself in astonishing ways across the centuries and in all artistic practices. The ceramic figure is close to the heart of the collection's director and honorary curator, who have devoted memorable monographic exhibitions to it, including those of Audrius Janušonis (2011), Akio Takamori (2013), Jean Marie Borgeaud (2014), Gundi Gietz (2016), and Johan Tahon (2019). These are just some of the ceramists who focus on the human figure, not in an anecdotal way, but in terms of the humanity it expresses in each and every one of us.

Organised in collaboration with the Kunstforum Solothurn gallery, in conjunction with the 2013 Parcours Céramique Carougeois Biennale, the **Akio Takamori** exhibition particularly fascinated the public at Musée Ariana by the natural character and attitudes of its simply modelled, softly coloured figures, whose intimacy the artist seeks to share with us. Alone or as a couple, their physiognomies are derived from memories of his Japanese childhood (the ceramist spent his entire career in the United States, in Seattle). Over the years, Takamori has created a contemplative world, devoid of any violence, almost unreal. In this respect, the sculpture *Sleeping Woman in Red Dress*, acquired in 2013, remains one of the most widely exhibited and circulated works by the museum in recent years, evidence that a figure, however minimalist and contemporary in its stylisation, is capable of engaging the eye and communicating a universal sense of peace, to the point of restoring faith in humanity.

The interplay between age and gender is particularly disturbing in Takamori's work, as it is in the world of **Gundi Dietz**… The female figures sculpted by this great Austrian artist are moulded in delicately coloured and incised porcelain. The bust of *Emily* with her arms cut off—which has been placed on a wall stand reminiscent of the retrospective the museum presented in 2016—certainly points to antiquity, but it is mostly orientalist, and unsettling in its introspective nature. The sculptor portrays an ageless, meditating woman, struggling with melancholy and perhaps also with the feeling of being uprooted and downgraded—a modest bareness that is very subtly rendered to express all the complexity of human nature.

These themes of the passage of time and borders, of the hybridisation of cultures—whether forced or consented to—run throughout the exhibition: a number of powerful figures are symbols of this, such as the hyper-realistic appearance, on the left as you enter, of a small, blue-eyed, blond American boy in jeans sitting on the floor eating instant Nippon Cup Noodles, a Japanese invention that was successfully imported into the United States and that is bought at motorway service stations. The inscription on the back of his T-shirt ("*Migration*" printed in Japanese, with a map of the country of origin, and arrows pointing outwards) says it all about the transversal destiny of **Hirotsune Tashima**, the Japanese artist who materialised in clay this vision from his childhood exile in the United States: as an Asian, he certainly does not look like the typical young blond American, but it is with the latter that he has to assimilate. This work is a recent addition to Musée Ariana's collection, donated by the artist after the *Migrations* exhibition (2022): a visual language that goes deeper than it appears behind its very pop-art narrative aspect, whose highly topical political message convinced Musée Ariana's curatorial team.

Multiculturalism is a constant theme in this anthropomorphic body of work. It is still evident, for example, in the human figures of **Esther Shimazu**, an internationally renowned American ceramist whose grandparents were Japanese emigrants to the United States. Trained in ceramics in Massachusetts, she now lives in Honolulu (Hawaii) and excels at transcribing the hybridity of local populations. The artist depicts Asian men and women, full-figured and bald like Buddhist gods, with features far removed from the traditions of Hellenistic beauty. She strangely yet harmoniously manages to blend the massiveness of Polynesian bodies with the daintiness of Asian movements. The reminiscence of her Japanese family culture is very present, intriguing and seductive in the refined way in which the intimate and ambiguous subjects are treated: the whimsical expressions of these smiling characters, who sometimes seem demonic, are reminiscent of the grimacing Japanese *netsuke* (*i.e.* small and very ancient miniature sculptures to be carried on one's person, representing popular or legendary characters or animals).

A number of mystical, almost ghostly figures haunt the second hall, entitled "**Transfiguration**". Here, an even more cerebral vision of human beings is presented, showing bodies on different scales, stretched by their desire for transcendence, seeking to extricate themselves from the void of existence. Lithuanian artist **Audrius Janušonis** is one of the sculptors whose work Musée Ariana has helped gain greater recognition, through a solo exhibition and the inclusion of several works in its collection. The harshness and spontaneity of his clay models catch the eye with their expression of truth. This intensity is heightened by the subtle and unexpected enamelling of such vulnerable or threatening figures of human tragedy. The same astonishing mystical force can be found in the work of **Johan Tahon**, a renowned Belgian sculptor represented in Switzerland by the Kunstforum Soluthurn gallery, who draws his references from myths and works of the past, particularly those of the medieval period. The *Refuge/Silence* exhibition that Musée Ariana devoted to him in 2019 impressed visitors with its deeply meditative and cultic scenography. Also a collector of ancient majolica, the artist draws inspiration from the shapes of ancient Renaissance medicine pots, *Albarelli*, whose usual size he considerably increases to transform them into large vases for offerings or ointments, which join here the tall figure in modelled and then moulded clay—the seams of the mould left untouched—of his impressive *Glacier Monk*.

Akio Takamori
Sleeping Woman in Red Dress, **2012**
AR 2013-156

Esther Shimazu
Monkey on the Back of Tiger, **2011**
AR 2013-159

Audrius Janušonis
Yes, no, I don't know, **2006**
AR 2011-318

Mutations/Transgressions

It is worth pointing out the extent to which this group of acquisitions tackles expressions of chaos and a narrative exuberance that is sometimes "high-risk" … Generous in its encounters with strange forms and characters, it seems to fear neither the monstrous, nor provocation, nor humour, nor unbridled sexuality, nor the attraction for the morbid, as if all side or deviant paths could lead to ecstasy. The subconscious reigns supreme and cruel tales abound. Contemplating some of the works here is like gazing into a cabinet of curiosities, or taking a ride on a ghost train… A contemporary torment is transmitted from one sculpture to the next, in a sequence of exhilarating or disturbing works on the left-hand shelves of the two halls, which are at once seductive and repulsive. Among other examples, the sculptures by Swiss ceramist **Christine Aschwanden** and Danish artist **Louise Hindsgavl** focus on porcelain figurines, recycled or overmoulded, to create half-human, half-animal hybrids that strikingly highlight the violent drift of contemporary society, especially as they use universally familiar effigies from popular culture. Various decompositions or recompositions by other artists are highlighted on antique or classical pedestals, further accentuating the gap between old and new world, grandeur and decadence.

Superheroes seem very tired and the ideal of beauty of yesteryear is now in pieces, which justifies a thematic section entitled "**Explosive reinterpretations**", in which "heritage" forms crack or collapse under the pressure of impact, where the faces of official portraits are turned inside out like gloves and seem to melt, as in the flamboyant works by Geneva artist **Christian Gonzenbach**, who has a strong following at the museum (*e.g.* the famous bust of the Marquise de Pompadour, remoulded in silicone and then inverted, with the anagrammatic title *EMADAM RUODAPMOP*, acquired in 2011, and *Hanabi*, a Chinese porcelain vase exploded by a molten aluminium cast, acquired in 2021). "**Cast/Moulded/Diverted**" seems to have become, in a way, the joyfully iconoclastic technical viaticum of the new generations, adept at decoded, deconstructed, or manipulated forms…

Christian Gonzenbach
Hanabi,
2020
AR 2021-040

Louise Hindsgavl
Protection,
2009
AR 2011-133

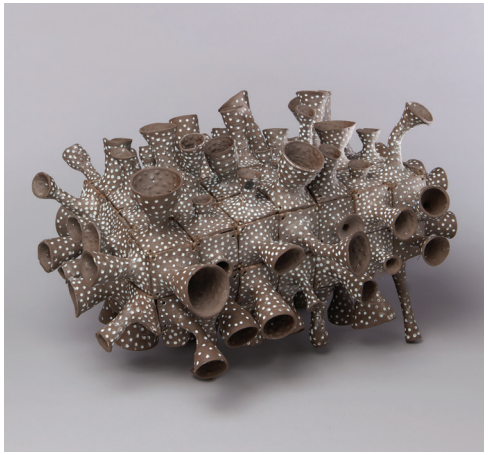
Post-natural tales

Another interesting aspect of this collection is the proportion of science fiction-like works, which deal with morphic modifications and heightened sensoriality—"**strange organisms**" that evoke life and growth in an abstract way, but also create ambiguity, both visually and conceptually. Among these unusual creations, **Ursula Commandeur**'s *Peeping Tom* is remarkable in more ways than one: it is made up of a hundred or so clay elements in the shape of eyecups, made of brown terracotta with white dots, and endowed with a certain flexibility since they are held together by intertwined wires. This wobbly structure looks as much like a submarine in the shape of an octopus as it does a microscopically enlarged version of a virus… A way of saying that Mother Nature no longer recognises her children!

The Holocene is a geological period, still in progress, that spans the last 12,000 years up to the present day. It is this amplitude that so fascinates **Paul March**, an Englishman living in Switzerland who, after an initial university career in neuropsychology, studied at the Geneva University of Art and Design (HEAD - Genève), Geneva University of Art and Design, and became a visual artist. Musée Ariana has followed the development of his work assiduously, admiring the way he embeds science and archaeology in a conceptual vision that is both sensitive and unique. His works are intriguing because, at first glance, their geographical, cultural, and even temporal origins seem indeterminable. Since 2013, several periods of his work have been marked by his obsessive interest in the rising curves of large Jōmon (Japan's artistic prehistory) flame pots. The anthropomorphic Jōmon *Dogū* figurines also implicitly influenced the *Substantia Innominata* series, a work of which the museum acquired in 2014. During the 2015 Parcours Céramique Carougeois Biennale, Musée Ariana awarded a Special Prize to the artist, with the acquisition of a sculpture entitled *In Pulverum Speramus*, after a Latin phrase taken from the *Book of Genesis*: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" …

The artist maps the way in which clay and human movement collaborate. In his recent *Holocene* series (an example of which the museum bought in 2019, at the time of his exhibition at Galerie Marianne Brand in Carouge), March has begun to create "skinless" works, revealing a bare, cuboid, and grid-like structure that develops both precisely and randomly. Once again, this is a strange organism, but it is also a parable of the "human architect", with their will to build, as much as to destroy or endanger. A small "**Construction**" section, in the second hall of the exhibition, brings together a number of works by leading ceramists such as **Michael Cleff**, **Doris Kaiser**, and **Jacques Kaufmann**, who use structural balance and subtle geometry as fundamental patterns for their minimalist formal expression, without forgoing a certain lyricism, inspired as they are by the proportions of vernacular architecture or by technical building materials.

Paul March
Substantia innominata,
2014
AR 2014-161



Ursula Commandeur
Peeping Tom,
2009
AR 2013-139

The “beautiful object”

As with the many transfers, both physical and spiritual, between East and West, which have been evoked at the heart of previous sculptural themes, references to Asia are also very present in a selection of fine vessels acquired by Musée Ariana since 2010. The history of ceramics and glass is in fact a constant back-and-forth between innovation and a return to the classics, the loss and rediscovery of techniques, experimental re-appropriations of glazes and personal re-readings of textures and graphic designs. Technical prowess can certainly be a decisive factor for entry into a museum collection, but not exclusively. Ever since the Japanese of the Meiji era revealed to the West that beauty was often born of imperfection, an interest in process rather than mere virtuosity has been a message that has permeated the history of forms in the 20th century. The contemporary eye is now attentive to all those little differences and rough edges that make a handmade object so joyfully unique, its presence—its life in short—revealing a personality and a greater observation and acceptance of what is happening in nature. There are many examples here, all of which share the same demand for line and a search for truth in the material, but there is not enough space! Depending on the mood, the eye will no doubt be drawn to the marmoreal whiteness of the porcelain biscuit in a flattened bowl by Swiss ceramist **Rebecca Maeder**; to the bold dialogue between colour and movement in the design of a bowl by German artist **Elke Sada**, whose graphic decoration is made on plaster in the manner of a monotype engraving, then cast in earthenware; to the velvety black reflections of a lacquered stoneware tea bowl by Japanese artist **Toshio Matsui**, in its traditional carrying case; to the beautiful amphora turned by a young potter from Drôme, **Emmanuel Peccatte**, who died too soon, whose surface striations evoke the movements of Saharan sand in the wind; or the acquisition in 2012 of a large vase blown in triple layers (overlay) with a rigorously chiselled decoration, designed by Swiss glass stars, **Philippe Baldwin** and **Monica Guggisberg**, from whom the Musée Ariana recently acquired in 2023 a new work, sculptural this time, with red and black colors blown (underlay).

Emmanuel Peccatte
Stries,
2012 - 2014
AR 2015-101

Elke Sada
Capriccio,
2013
AR 2013-157

Monica Guggisberg
Philip Baldwin
The Light Mummy,
2011
AR 2012-058

This 2010-2024 retrospective is intended to be a fair reflection of the forward-looking approach taken by Musée Ariana, which is committed to the latest developments in Swiss and international ceramics. During this intense period of activity aimed at the general public, museum transformations have renewed the halls devoted to the reference collections. In addition to the regular organisation of solo and group exhibitions, the curatorial team has constantly enriched the collections and maintained privileged contacts with artists, galleries, collectors, patrons, schools, associations, and public institutions. The acquisition policy has been aimed as much at strengthening the corpus of established ceramists as it has at spotting emerging artists. It is striking to see the extent to which the art works selected for purchase accurately describe the state of our globalised world, in constant evolution, full of paradoxes and brilliance. They also demonstrate, if proof were needed, the extent to which ceramics has broadened its sources of inspiration, its messages, and its modes of expression in recent years.

Frédéric Paul Bodet, Exhibition curator