

Smithsonian MAGAZINE



"We all have histories as makers," says ceramicist Sharif Bey, who says as long as he can remember, working with clay has been therapeutic. (SAAM, courtesy of the artist)

Four Craft Artists Use Their Medium to Tell the Story of Our Times

The Renwick's newest show challenges everything you thought you knew about craft art

By **Alicia Ault**
FEBRUARY 5, 2019

When Smithsonian curator Abraham Thomas realized that the 2018 Renwick Invitational would open just after the midterm elections, he knew that he wanted the juried exhibition to be about more than just the showcasing of midcareer and emerging artists. He felt that it should say something about the times—and the

four artists selected for “Disrupting Craft,” on view through May 2019, make big statements about where we stand.

Thomas, along with independent curator Sarah Archer and Annie Carlano, a senior curator at the Mint Museum, chose the artists in large part because of their political activism and focus on community engagement. The Renwick Gallery, Thomas says, is the perfect setting to encourage visitors to delve into some of the great debates of the moment.

The Smithsonian’s museums “are important civic spaces where we should be able to create a safe environment where we can have different conversations,” says Thomas. He’s hoping the show engages with audiences over “the questions it raises about immigration or about complex cultural identity.”



An assemblage *Assimilation? Destruction?* by ceramicist Sharif Bey, is primarily about globalization and cultural identity. It is also a reference to Bey’s identity as a potter and an artist of color. (SAAM, photograph by Libby Weiler)

A mass of disembodied ceramic human heads randomly piled onto the floor in the first gallery provides one jarring example. The viewer is confronted by the bald figures, all with a slightly different physiognomy and in the different shades of human skin—brown and black, and occasionally, white. The assemblage by ceramicist Sharif Bey, titled *Assimilation? Destruction?* is primarily about

globalization and cultural identity. It is also a reference to Bey's identity as a potter and an artist of color.

The piece is never the same in any exhibition—the 1,000 or so pinch pot heads are brought to a gallery in garbage cans and “unceremoniously dumped out,” says Bey, showing a video of the process. The heads break, crack and get pounded into smaller shards. Over time, he says, the piece, which he created for his MFA thesis project in 2000, will become sand. Ultimately, *Assimilation? Destruction?* signifies that “you're everything and you're nothing at the same time.” With its shifting collective and individual shapes, the assemblage is also “a comment on what it means to be a transient person,” he says.

Bey, 44, has had his own migrations—out of a Pittsburgh working-class neighborhood into that city's artistic incubators, taking classes at the Carnegie Museum of Art, and being selected for a prestigious after-school apprenticeship at the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild. It signaled a new and perhaps previously unconsidered career path for a kid with 11 siblings in an industrial town. Currently



a dual professor at Syracuse University's College of Arts and School of Education, he has never lost touch with his first love—making functional pots, some of which are included in the Renwick show.

“We all have histories as makers,” says Bey. “My orientation is the vessel,” he says, adding that for as long as he can remember, working with clay has been therapeutic. He often works in his living room while watching over his

children—it helps him evade the guilt he feels when in the studio, which his wife says is like his own little vacation, he says with a laugh.