

Art **Reviews**

Sharif Bey's Fractured and Beautiful Ceramic Figures

Bey's ceramics weave in cultural and familial themes, and reexamine, shatter, and incorporate older works to create layers of change in both form and meaning.



by Sarah Rose Sharp
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Sharif Bey, "The Oviary" (2018), mixed media ceramic sculpture, 16 x 12 x 5 inches (all images courtesy the Gardiner Museum)

TORONTO — Clay as a medium is often seen as fixed once it's been fired. But **Colonial Ruptures**, a body of work by ceramic artist **Sharif Bey** on view at the Gardiner Museum, not only weaves in cultural and familial themes, but also

reexamines, shatters, and incorporates older works to create layers of change in both form and meaning.

“It’s speaking about the industrial past,” said chief curator Sequoia Miller on a walkthrough of the exhibition. Bey was born into a family of multi-generational boilermakers — industrial welders who make boilers — and currently resides and teaches in Syracuse, New York. For more than a century, the city was also the home of Syracuse China; founded in 1871, it was one of the last domestic fine china manufacturers in the country when it closed in 2009. The works in *Colonial Ruptures* clearly reference the *nkisi* traditions of West-Central African cultures, but the nails, scrap metal, and pottery shards that bristle from Bey’s figures salvage the industrial refuse of Syracuse as well as the accoutrements of his familial profession.



Sharif Bey, "Boilermaker: Shinkie" (2021), earthenware and mixed media, 13 × 10 × 9 inches

According to Miller, boilermaker was among the only “fairly stable and relatively lucrative” careers open to young African American men into the 1960s. “It was one of the few ways that African American families could move into the middle class. [Bey is] thinking about his connection this whole lineage of labor, of production, of middle-class identity, and linking it to African American identity, [to] access to African cultural resources.”

The works in *Colonial Ruptures* are based in vessel forms — mostly bottles or pots — but many of them incorporate parts of older figurative sculptures, creating a patchwork of faces, limbs, or sometimes entire figures perched atop bottle stoppers. These are framed by manes and halos of old nails and pierced with pottery shards, sometimes salvaged from refuse collected from the abandoned Syracuse China factory. The presentation, which includes a cross-section of works from several series, including *Boilermakers* (2021) and *Choir Singers* (2020) is a pantheon of fractured and beautiful figures.

Many of these works are undated on Bey's website, perhaps because it is difficult to decide on a single date of creation. By reusing old pieces, he not only integrates his own history, but conceptually suggests a fracturing of time. The Ghanaian notion of *sankofa* ("go back and get it"), which encourages learning or reclaiming from the past as a way of navigating the future, positively vibrates from *Colonial Ruptures*, tearing apart any notion of predictability or linearity in the production of these works, and in effect compressing the Venn diagram of art and artifact into a perfect circle.