



POISE: PETER CHRISTIAN JOHNSON

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On the cover: East Coker, 2016 , porcelain & glaze , 14 x 28 x 16"

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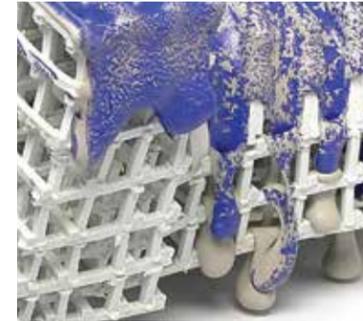
This solo exhibition of sculpture examines the transformation of ceramic material when exposed to the strain of the firing process. The work pairs pristine porcelain with thick saturated glazes that together capture the oppressive effects of gravity on the forms. Exhibited at Ferrin Contemporary, 1315 MASS MoCA Way in North Adams, Massachusetts in 2016.

POISE explores the tension between acts of labor and collapse, between precision and failure. It is a meditation on entropy that uses Gothic cathedrals as a foil to examine the dichotomy of beauty and loss. For this exhibition I have created a series of highly organized architectural forms based on the floor plans of historic cathedrals. These forms are distorted and deconstructed under the weight of the glaze in an attempt to find virtue in brokenness.

— Peter Christian Johnson

FALLING FROM GRACE: PETER CHRISTIAN JOHNSON

by Glenn Adamson



...And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfillment.

— T. S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*: “Little Gidding”

When Peter Christian Johnson puts one of his sculptures into the kiln, it looks perfect. Innumerable little pieces of porcelain, extruded at $\frac{1}{4}$ " gauge, make up a delicate orthogonal lattice. Each vertex has been joined together by hand, using a small amount of liquid clay slip. The structure has been built up layer by layer, in a miniature approximation of the building process by which cathedrals once rose from the ground, generation by generation. Finally, Johnson places a layer of glaze material on top, and fires up his burners. In the kiln, the works melt, crumpling into themselves. The ceramic grid is unable to support its own weight, and that of the heavy, glassy, colored material on top. By the time the piece is fully fired, it seems on the verge of total collapse, a few degrees of heat away from becoming a heap of slag. And that, of course, is just how Johnson wants it.

Comparisons spring to mind. There are Madelon Vriesendorp's hilariously distended skyscrapers, which graced the cover of Rem Koolhaas's influential postmodern polemic *Delirious New York*. Or Robert Smithson's "Partially Buried Woodshed," an art action staged during the Vietnam War era on the campus of Kent State, where Johnson himself teaches. Or the cathedrals of Coventry or Berlin, gutted by firebombs but still standing as memorials. Or, most gut-wrenchingly of all, the indelible memory of two towers, emitting plumes of smoke and finally crashing down on a bright September morning.

When we humans erect a great work of architecture, we are creating a monument to ourselves. Our buildings provide our most tangible proof that our intentions are consequential. When the same architecture comes toppling down, we see our own authority humbled, our

power brought to its knees. No matter what the origin of that destructive downward motion might be – the imaginative satire of Vriesendorp or Smithson, the existential ideological conflicts of World War II or 9/11 – the result is in some sense the same. We see in an instant that our buildings, extensions of ourselves, are as mortal and transient as human flesh. What took months or years or centuries to construct dissolves with sickening suddenness into the dustbin of history. Johnson's anti-monuments represent this moment to us in exquisitely tragic, spiritually resonant form.

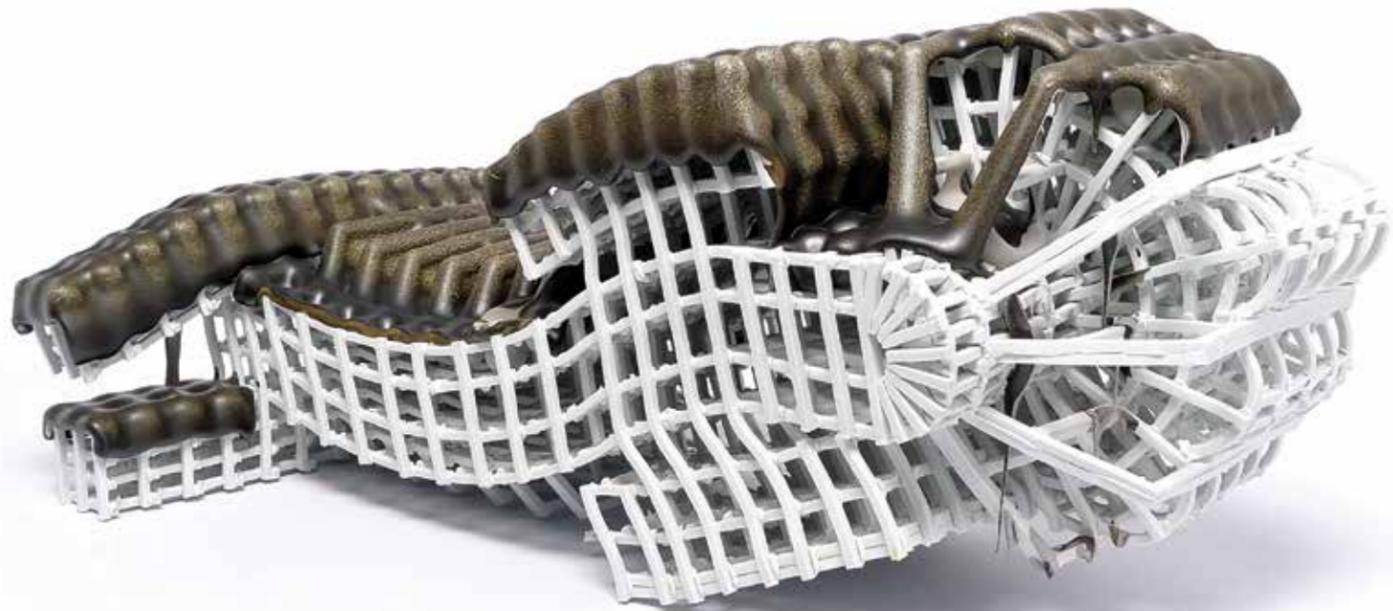
In their iconography, Johnson's failed and fallen structures run the gamut from secular to sacred. One work, entitled *Burnt Norton*, recalls the Crystal Palace of 1851 (itself destroyed by fire in 1936), whose transparent iron and glass construction was a precursor to modernism. *The Waste Land* echoes the delicate lines of the Chrysler Building, an Art Deco skyscraper that Hollywood filmmakers love to destroy in sci-fi, superhero and monster flicks. Johnson's most common point of reference – as seen in *Little Gidding*, *East Coker*, *Preludes* and other recent works – is the medieval church. The squat tower forms in these sculptures may fleetingly recall those of the World Trade Center, but they are more closely connected to Notre-Dame and Chartres, an association that is enhanced by Johnson's use of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* as the principal source for his titles. The lines of Eliot's quoted at the top of this essay are typical of the poet in their intricate, back-switching logic. This is a world in which all things solid melt into air; a world of haunted spirituality, in which paradise has already gone missing and will not be regained.

Johnson's sculptures literally evoke this process of falling from grace. As the firing process takes its toll, degrading the hard-won armature, entropy comes close to claiming the work. As the artist puts it, the "abstraction of temporality" exerts itself. But notice: the sculptures, while warped and wracked, do still stand. Just as Eliot continued to search for meaning through his poetry, Johnson gives us not an image of outright hopelessness, but something much more complex and contingent. The cathedrals in Berlin and Coventry, after all, were not totally destroyed by bombing. Their charred and skeletal remnants remain as memorials, and as tourist destinations.

Similarly, Johnson's cage-like formal vocabulary calls to mind not so much solid architecture as scaffolding, which may be temporary but nonetheless holds things up. When I mentioned this to the artist, he agreed and said that he had been fascinated by pictures of the U.S. Capitol under repair, completely shrouded and obscured by its scaffolding. I in turn was



Little Gidding
2016
porcelain & glaze
15 x 31 x 14"



The Waste Land
2016
porcelain & glaze
15 x 29 x 13"

reminded of a possibly apocryphal story about Florence Cathedral, whose enormous dome was designed by Filippo Brunelleschi. So novel was its engineering that upon its completion, when the supporting structure inside the church was pulled away, many workers refused to stand underneath, convinced the whole structure would come tumbling down upon them.

All forms of power rely on provisional infrastructure for their establishment and upkeep. It is this state of affairs, rather than apocalyptic disaster, that Johnson's works really address. Neither standing proudly upright, nor entirely abject, they occupy a precarious middle ground, in which change is the only thing we can rely on... Well, perhaps not the only thing. It is well to remember that these sculptures are not just images, but physical objects, intensively and masterfully crafted. They may recall floorplans or digital wireframe renderings, but they are not those things. Much labor has gone into them. So too a traditional kind of know-how, which has deep roots in the earth and our relationship to it. Johnson plays with the notion of failure, but particularly when shown in a group, the sculptures attest to the fine control that a knowledgeable maker can exert over matter.

This thought opens up another, complicating, line of interpretation. While these sculptures may speak of the limits of authority, the impermanence of our grand edifices, they provide equally eloquent testimony of human material intelligence. Their forms call to mind not only melting buildings, but also vaulting bridges, which are among humanity's most awe-inspiring and heroic technical achievements. Johnson has spoken of the works as marking "a sweet spot of contradiction," and duality is indeed deeply embedded in them. It is significant that the very glaze that threatens to crush the pieces also helps to hold them together; though it looks fluid, in fact it functions as an all-over armature that provides structural rigidity. Note also Johnson's overall title for this body of work, *Poise*, which suggests not an image of imminent collapse but a trained body, perhaps a dancer or gymnast, in a position of highly controlled equilibrium.

In his influential essay "The Enchantment of Technology and the Technology of Enchantment," the anthropologist Alfred Gell writes of an experience he had at the age of eleven. Brought (or perhaps dragged) by his parents to visit Salisbury Cathedral, he was deeply bored, until he turned a corner and encountered a model of the church, built out of matchsticks by a local hobbyist. While the giant stone building had not stirred him in the least, he was deeply impressed by this much smaller, more fragile armature. Gell hypothesized that this was because he, as a little boy, could not conceive of the masonry of the larger structure – it was literally beyond his ken. He could immediately appreciate the model, by contrast, for: "Matchsticks

and glue are very important constituents of the world of every self-respecting boy of that age, and the idea of assembling these materials into such an impressive construction provoked feelings of the deepest awe.”

Gell’s point was that we must have some affinity, some shared terrain of capability, in order to be captivated by technique. The implication for craft is significant, for this affinity occurs most effectively at human scale. We are likely to remain unmoved by the products of mass industry, and perhaps even by grandiose architecture, but we find handmade holiday gifts poignant and meaningful. The same principle is at work in Johnson’s creations. As I mentioned earlier in the essay, depictions and experiences of architectural breakdown are not hard to find. Indeed, the classical ruin is among the most abiding images of western art. So the importance of Johnson’s works is not necessarily that it adds to the sum total of our storehouse of images. Rather, it is that he materializes and humanizes this longstanding trope, in a manner that uniquely “enchants.” Like the young Alfred on his trip to Salisbury, we stand before these works transfixed, stopped in our own tracks much as the ceramic sculptures are stopped in theirs.

Over the past century, there have been many attempts to turn the course of art away from its historical roots in craft. Artisanal skills have been banished or displaced again and again: by the Ready-made; by Conceptualism; by the rise of custom fabrication; by digital technology. Yet craft remains relevant, not only within art, but within the broader culture. Why is this? The reasons are complex, but the bottom line is that, as a way of capturing the human condition, the work of the individual maker simply cannot be replaced. That human condition includes labor and failure, endurance and hope. Our buildings rise and fall. Our purpose, as Eliot writes, is altered in the very moment of its fulfillment. Johnson’s achievement, in these mutable miniature monuments, is to bring these contradictions home. Architecture may not last for all the ages, but his are just right for right now.

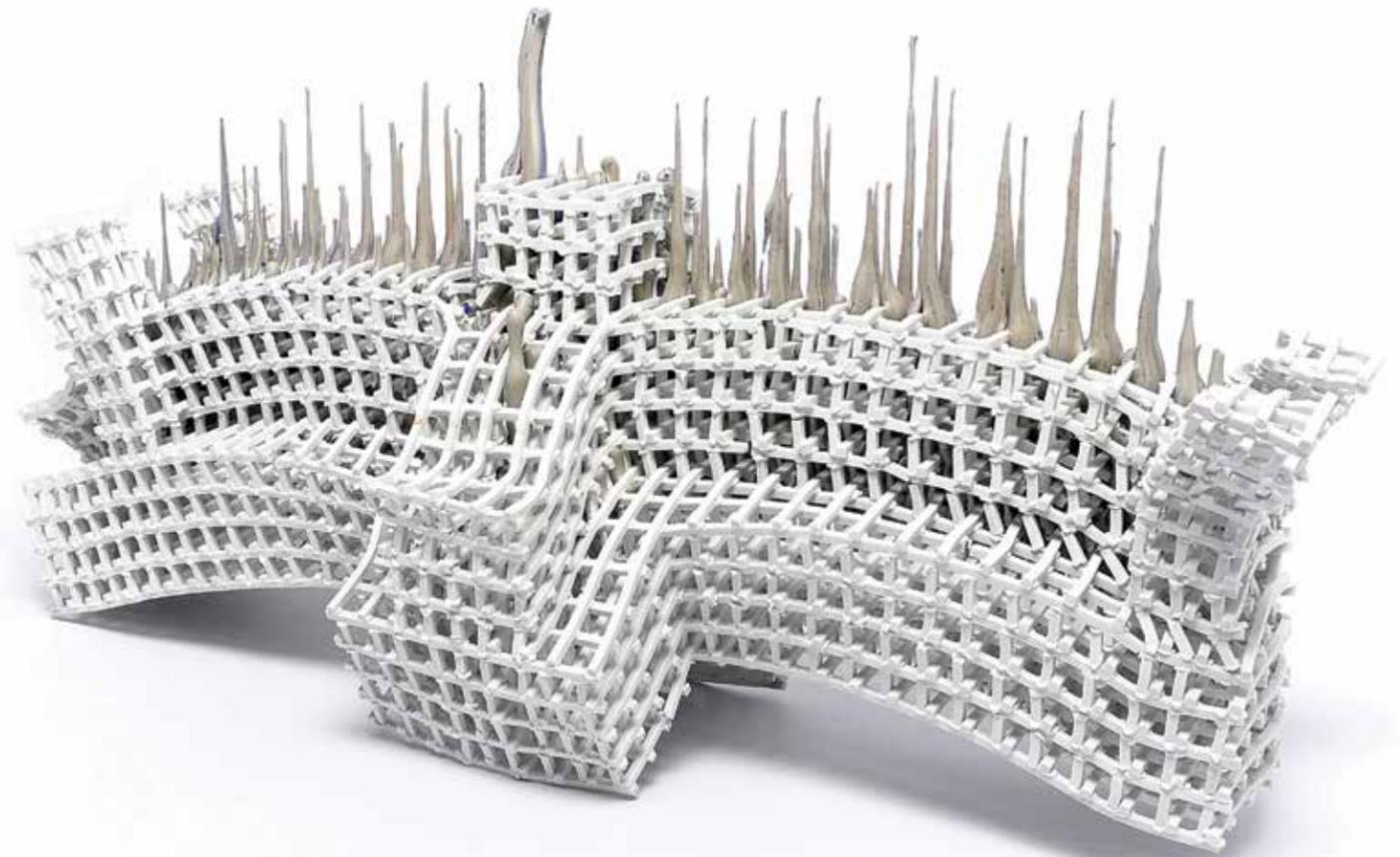
Glenn Adamson is currently Senior Scholar at the Yale Center for British Art. A curator and theorist who works across the fields of design, craft and contemporary art, he was until March 2016 the Director of the Museum of Arts and Design, New York. He has previously been Head of Research at the V&A, and Curator at the Chipstone Foundation in Milwaukee. His publications include Art in the Making (2016, co-authored with Julia Bryan Wilson); Invention of Craft (2013); Postmodernism: Style and Subversion (2011); The Craft Reader (2010); and Thinking Through Craft (2007).



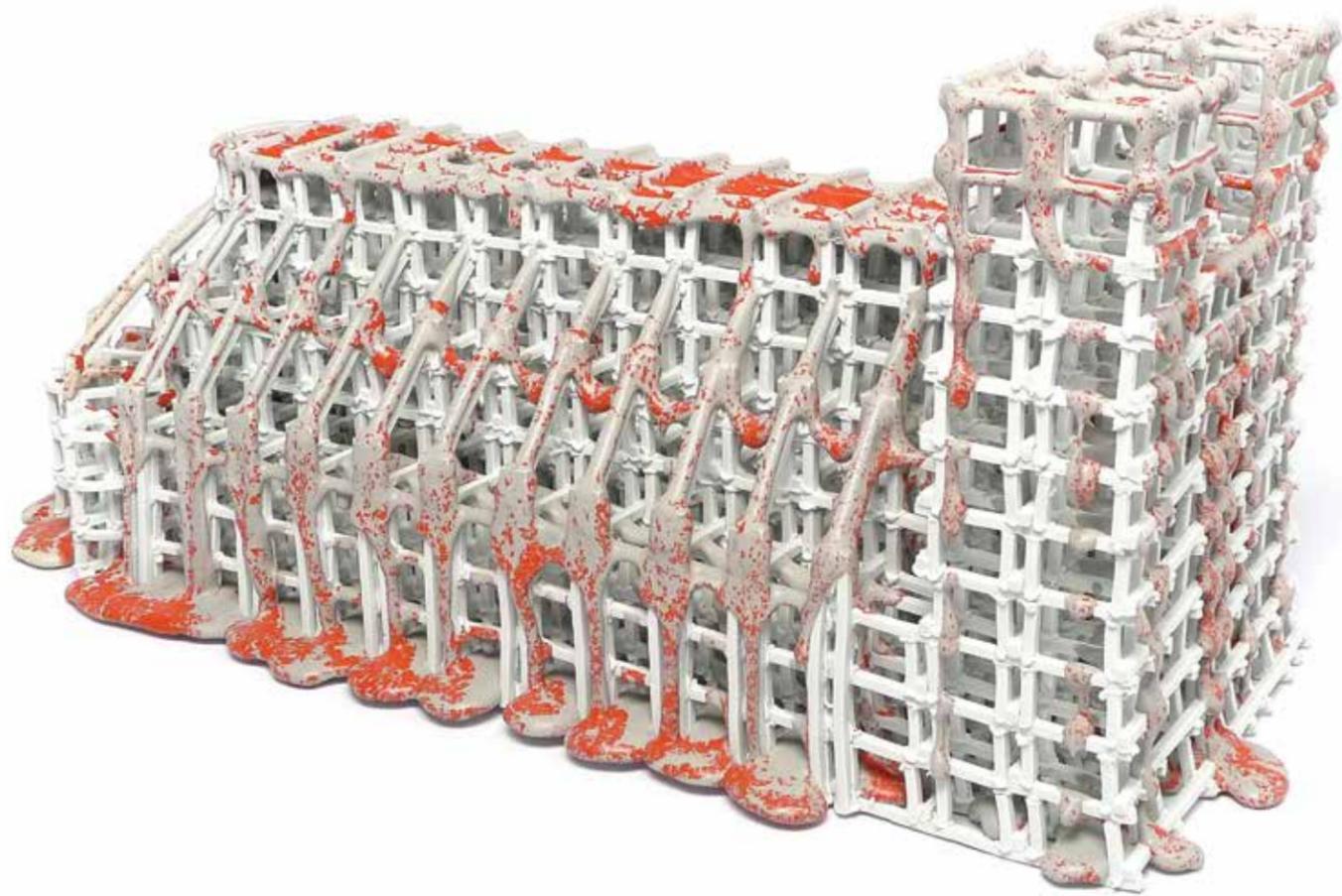
The Hollow Men
2016
porcelain & glaze
18 x 29 x 11"



East Coker
2016
porcelain & glaze
14 x 28 x 16"



Burnt Norton
2016
porcelain & glaze
14 x 35 x 17"



The Waste Land
2016
porcelain & glaze
15 x 29 x 13"



Ash Wednesday
2016
porcelain & glaze
15 x 15 x 12"



*POISE:
Peter Christian
Johnson*

at Ferrin Contemporary
1315 MASS MoCA Way
North Adams, MA
December 2016





My work explores transformation using the kiln as a vehicle for deconstruction. The porcelain grid systems become an architecture over which to stretch a fluid skin that warps or collapses the structures under the strain of the firing. They expose the relationship between soft and hard, the fluidity of a membrane, and the moment of intersection between these contrasting elements. They pair labored construction with unpredictability, and capture the entropy embodied in the process.

— Peter Christian Johnson

Peter Christian Johnson is currently Assistant Professor of Art at Kent State University after serving for more than a decade as the head of the ceramics department at Eastern Oregon University. He earned his MFA from Penn State University and a BS in Environmental Science at Wheaton College. Peter has been a Visiting Artist at the Alberta College of Art and Design, Australian National University, the University of Florida, Montana State University, as well as numerous other institutions. He has been a resident artist at The Archie Bray Foundation, the LH Project, and the Odyssey Center for Ceramic Arts. His work has been exhibited in Canada, Australia, and throughout the United States.



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— Glenn Adamson