

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY
KAREN KOBLITZ



Cultural Diplomacy, Cultural Quotation:

THE CERAMIC CIRCUITS OF KAREN KOBLITZ

ANDY CAMPBELL

In 2003 U. S. Customs seized a seventh century rhyton, a ceremonial drinking cup, in the shape of a griffin. The object had been looted from an Iranian cave, where many other treasures were stolen in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution. Taken into U. S. government custody, the rhyton sat in a storage facility in Queens, New York, for nearly a decade, in a kind of purgatory. In 2013 the election of Hassan Rouhani, a relative moderate in theocratic Iran, to the position of President in that country made the U.S. decide to return the rhyton as an opening to diplomatic talks. Two days after the exchange, Presidents Rouhani and Barack Obama shared a telephone call — the first such high-level contact between the two countries since the revolution — and took preliminary steps towards crafting the signal nuclear deal between Iran and six other foreign powers that was to become the hallmark foreign policy achievement of the Obama administration.¹

To be sure, such diplomatic deals involving art, antiquities, and other valued objects are not a rarity, but occur on a frequent basis between a revolving cast of individuals, dealers, museums, and governments. The line between looting and collecting is, above all, a matter of power and position, as the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah reminds us. Notions of patrimony, heritage, and culture are political problems without solutions, but which nevertheless have deep implications.² Take the rhyton: one might think that there would have been unanimous celebration within Iran upon its return. However, while political reformers saw the object as emblematic of a rich and storied Persian heritage, one that was lost during the revolution, religious hardliners sought to discredit the authenticity of the object itself, undercutting its status as a cultural treasure. The

formal irony of this object — the griffin being a chimera of a lion and an eagle, each animal with profound symbolic resonance in Persia and the United States, respectively — was probably not lost in translation.

Karen Koblitz recreates this object of global concern in her ceramic sculpture *Cultural Diplomacy*, 2015, suggesting it as the embodiment of international power relations *in media res*. The artwork serves as a touchstone to think about geopolitics through some of its more common discursive form — dialogue, diplomacy, and disarmament. In an act of discretion the U. S. diplomat charged with returning the rhyton bought a white paper bag from Hallmark to put it in, then slid it across a conference table to his Iranian counterpart. Koblitz makes her work pointedly address what was at stake. Her ceramic rhyton cups are filled with uranium ore, yellow cake, and plutonium -- ingredients required in the manufacture of nuclear weapons. Highlighting the rhyton as a potential means to end hostilities, the artist makes a case for the contextual meanings of cultural objects, and their shifting nature. This rhyton is more than a rhyton, in other words, more than an old ceremonial vessel; it is nothing less than an embodiment of the fears, suspicions, and hopes of people around the world for nuclear disarmament.

There is one more wrinkle here, which is that the radioactive ingredients filling *Cultural Diplomacy* are not really what they seem — because civilians are not allowed to possess nuclear materials in such quantities, if at all, Koblitz would be in deep trouble if they were. The “nuclear ingredients” that the artist fills the rhyton’s three cups with are ones common to ceramic enterprise. The “yellow cake”, for example, is actually powdered yellow underglaze. In this way the sculpture also references the processes of a media that has been at the heart of Koblitz’s artistic interests since she visited Italy as an undergraduate student. I take this work to be emblematic of her uniquely layered way of working -- one that makes sense of cultural idioms and forms, and translates them into a dense ceramic circuitry, connecting various parts of the globe via the affective and humanistic relationships shared between particular people. As anthropologist Margot Weiss notes, a circuit connects “realms that are imagined as isolated and opposed.”³ Such a circuit might be the distance between nuclear material and the clay often used to build pots, or the space between a pressing geopolitical issue and the sacrosanct notion of the artist working. By proposing and enlivening such circuits, Koblitz brings the world nearer, laying bare moments of connection through shared visual symbolism.



Cultural Diplomacy, 2015, stoneware, earthenware, fired underglaze, 13" x 16.5" x 12.5"



Nectar of Baku, 2007, earthenware, 27" x 22.5" x 4.5"



Mohammed's Line, 2002, earthenware, 18" x 11" x 9.5"

Examining the whole of Koblitz's oeuvre helps to question the geographical codings and limitations of conventional Western art history. Her influences, as they show up in her work, extend past her initial fascination with Italian ceramics (*Column #6*, 1991; *Santa Caterina of Deruta #2*, 1997) to the visual traditions of Russia and the Caucasus regions, most specifically Azerbaijan (*Globalization #5*, 2001; the "Facing East" tapestries, 2006-7; *47 Vessels from Sheki* 2006-7). Some works evince an interest in Mexican folk art (*Gina's Journey: Tree of Life for my Daughter*, 1996), while others make sense of the literary and visual forms of Persia and the Near East (*Nectar of Baku*, 2007; *Mohammed's Line*, 2002) or the pop culture of Japan, such as Pokémon (*Globalization #3*, 2001). Still, Koblitz also makes room in her practice for local histories (*Arts and Crafts Still Life #2*, 1994; and the *LA Landmark Series*, 2003). The result is a corpus that is at once intimate and external, curious about the world and its politics as much as it is about the artist's own origins and ancestry.

Nearly all of Koblitz's work builds in this way, and evidences an interest in place, heritage, and translation. The paisley shapes that recur throughout the exhibition are really iterations of the teardrop shaped motif known as *buta*, a Zoroastrian symbol of life that dates as far back as 2000 BCE.⁴ In the 1600s the East India Company introduced the motif to Europe, and it became all the rage in France, England, and Holland during the following centuries. Today, the design is likely to recall 1960s and 70s British fashion, bespeaking a kind of pop-globalism that infiltrated the UK in the final years of its imperial ambitions. Koblitz returns the symbol to its origins and in *Lifecycle #1*, 2009, where each *buta* contains the elements of a growing life — a brain, a heart, a fetus. In *47 Vessels from Sheki*, dozens of earthenware pots are filled with oil and madder root. Referencing the natural resources that occasion global conflict (oil) and artistic enterprise (madder root is used as the red dye for wool carpets), these weighty vessels are arranged in the *buta* form, an acknowledgement that they animate the lives and deaths of those in Azerbaijan.

We could file such cultural quotations away under “appropriation”, and indeed there is a need to complicate a category that has come to stand in for a much broader strategy in art-making, expanding the limitations of its literature beyond the by now well-worn histories considering photography, the real, and media culture. Yet appropriation doesn't quite hit the mark. In works such as the tapestry *Garden of the Golden Bear*, 2006, Koblitz marries the symbolism of California



Garden of the Golden Bear, 2006, hand-woven wool, 36" x 24"

with the carpet weaving traditions of Azerbaijan. Because this work and others within the *Facing East* series were occasioned by a U.S. State Department Cultural Connect Envoy Grant, Tom Gunning's insight that "travel becomes a means of appropriating the world through images" is here particularly apt.⁵ While the term appropriation implies an asymmetrical relationship between actors — how could it not, when the economic and cultural differences between Azerbaijan and the U.S. are so striking? — Koblitz repeatedly attempts to shorten that gap, bridging the chasm between geopolitical powers. For example, in *Leili's Secret*, weaver Abilova Qanira, whom Koblitz met at a Romani settlement in Baku, includes her initials and the small image of a swallow in anticipation of one day visiting the United States. Another artist might have demanded the carpet be woven again, since these elements were not part of the original design. Instead, recognizing the strength of the

Abilova's Journey, 2007, hand-woven wool, 36" x 24"



Abilova's Journey, detail



gesture, the will to be credited as part of the artistic process, the artist dedicated a future work to this unexpected insertion. *Abilova's Swallow: Inshallah*, 2009, takes Qanira's swallow motif and wraps it around a tri-footed pot. The second part of Koblitz's title, Arabic for "God willing", is a prayer therefore shared between the two artists — a hope and a cementing of friendship.

There is much more to say — about Islamic architecture, Jewish identity, Persian poetry, tourist tchotchkes, and the task of genealogy. Over the course of a quarter century, Karen Koblitz has circled these concerns, drawing them tighter and tighter in a life's work dedicated to the profound insight of ceramics as a uniquely "live form."⁶ As art historian Jenni Sorkin writes in her book dedicated to ceramics and communal pedagogy, ceramics "deviates" from more vaunted Western artistic traditions such as painting or sculpture, resulting in "a fascinating and entirely confounding medium, in that its resultant object is a work that entirely conceals the performativity of its process and instead extols the virtues of its materiality."⁷ In Koblitz's carefully built work, we could add that it also exalts the virtue of being in the world — reminding her viewer of what is otherwise concealed.

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1. Christi Parsons, "The Gift of Diplomacy; a U.S. offering to Iran, a chalice thought to be looted antiquity, helped pave the way for the nuclear deal," *The Los Angeles Times*, 30 November 2013 (A1).
 2. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Whose Culture Is It, Anyway?" in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: WW. Norton & Company, 2006), 116.
 3. Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.
 4. Aygul Salmanova, "Most Ancient Example of Buta Pattern Found in Nakhchivan," *Azernews* (26 December 2017), web. <https://www.azernews.az/culture/124625.html>
 5. Tom Gunning, "The Whole World Within Reach': Travel Images Without Borders," in Carol Traynor Williams (ed.), *Travel Culture: Essays on What Makes Us Go* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 26.
 6. The first to propose this description of ceramics was the California potter Marguerite Wildenhain, and it was subsequently taken up by Jenni Sorkin. My knowledge of this history comes directly from reading her book, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 11.
 7. *Ibid.*, 15.