

RETURN VOYAGE:

# HARLAN HOUSE

## SETS SAIL

by Heidi McKenzie

Harlan House is one of Canada's doyens of ceramics who has, over the past four decades, established an international career and a reputation for excellence in craftsmanship, marrying both Eastern and Western traditions while building a seminal legacy of form and function. This fall, House displays a new body of work that might seem to many a 180-degree departure from his characteristic sublime/traditional wares. House largely abandoned the wheel in favor of slip casting cheeky, if not satirical, take-offs of iconic corporate and political moguls such as Colonel Sanders, Ronald McDonald, George Bush, and Stephen Harper. Given such tumultuous upset on an otherwise reliably consistent creative landscape, an inquiry was definitely in order: Who is the man behind the art, what moves him to create, and why has he seemingly embarked on such a startlingly non sequitur journey?

House lives in the small community of Lonsdale, Ontario, two hours east of Toronto, where he and his wife, Maureen raised two

children and have grown a thriving pottery over the past four decades. House grew up in Lethbridge, Alberta, the son of a contractor. His mother was a landscape painter. As a boy, his neighbor, a low-relief leather embosser, took the young Harlan under his wing, and taught him the craft. By eleven, House had set up shop in the family's basement, and busied himself hand-tooling and selling his wares. According to House, who has been carving porcelain for over forty years, the process of working low-relief leather is identical to working on clay, and "after fifty years of doing the same thing, I'm getting pretty good at it."

After a brief post-high school sojourn "kicking around the oil patch," selling clothes, and working at a mental hospital, House fell upon the Alberta School of Art, "I walked in the doors and knew I was in exactly the right spot—it didn't seem to be an option."

House began his studies in painting, however he was soon enamored of his roommate's potter's wheel. "Every time I sat at



Above: Harlan and Maureen House on the 50th anniversary of their first meeting at their high school spring dance. Photo: Vanesa Trillia.

Right: *Crowe's Gift*, 14 in. (36 cm) in length, thrown and handbuilt porcelain with carved decoration, fused together at cone 12 with celadon glaze, sandblasted decoration added to vase, 2005.





wheel, it just felt like I was home.” His early works in both media were fuelled by an activist spirit akin to one evidenced in Edward Burtynski’s photography. House’s early ceramic sculptures took the guise of wall pieces that addressed the never-ending building of freeways in National parks, oil exploration cut lines in the mountains, and cities that paved their greenery. “I felt I was responding the way any artist would and should.”

Believing that there always has been a role for art in affecting social change, House was keen to have people take notice of the potential ills of corporate commercialization, consumerism and industrialization. House is nothing if not a man with a message. “I hope that I’m pointing out the invasion of corporatism into my life and everybody’s life that’s around me. I want to point out the idea that large corporations can control virtually everything that goes on.” Frustrated, House felt he lacked the finesse and expertise to render his visions in clay. “Any time you do something that is idea-driven, you start to meet your limit when the ideas are bigger than your tool kit.” House set about building his tool kit, a process he ironically refers to as his “40-year detour.” It is that “detour” that fomented House’s signature iris vases, as well as his quietly beautiful family of functional forms.

House draws his inspiration from many sources, reaching back to the Sung dynasty and Italian Renaissance, as well as the French Expressionists. The common unifying attraction for House is the artists’ absolute commitment to both excellence and beauty.

*M Extreme Happiness*, 42 in. (1.06 m) in height, slip-cast forms (hull and deck made separately), glaze, sgraffito decoration, cherry wood base, and florescent lights, 2011.

Aside from a ten-year child-rearing hiatus in the mid-1970s, House has continued painting as a corollary creative outlet. His social commentary regarding the absurdity of mass production of junk food took foothold in the mid-1980s. “As an artist and as a human being, I was mystified and astonished that these tycoon corporations could get away with foisting cheap, mass-produced food onto society in general, and young people in particular.” Although a staunch atheist himself, House habitually sources the Church in his work juxtaposing contemporary consumerism in the mix, “Religion is the first and most successful form of advertising. That’s why I chose KFC, McDonalds, and Coca-Cola to work with.”

House’s wife, Maureen, his high school sweetheart and life-companion of over half a century, is a seminal force in House’s practice and the success of his business. Maureen is responsible not only for the business side of the studio, she is the indispensable and enthusiastic assistant. One of the enduring images from House’s 1997 visit to China that found its way into his studio was that

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of the boats he had witnessed on the canals. When House began making boat-like vessels, it was Maureen who placed a flower in a cast-off—a simple act that birthed a whole new series of boat vases for House. It was also Maureen who was the able-bodied assistant and technician in the studio who allowed House to physically manage the moving and firing processes for the larger sculptures. House’s boats evolved in size and monumentality into metaphors for the vessels that ferry mass-produced “junk” back and forth from the West to the East.

A recent boat vessel sculpture, *M Extreme Happiness*, stands five and a half feet tall and was inspired by the onslaught of American tourists in Venice. For House, the boat is simply a look at the question, “How big is big, and is big better?”

House’s most recent exhibition, “China: Made in Canada,” which ran August 18–September 25, at the David Kaye Gallery in Toronto, Canada, is the fruition of two years of creative output. The recipient of a Canada Council for the Arts grant, House was freed from the shackles of having to earn a living through his art and established clientele. The works displayed brazenly sports



Left: *McRose Holder and Fries*, 12¼ in. (31 cm) in height, slip cast super-size form, with cobalt brush drawing and Qing Bai glaze, 2011. The vase form is meant to hold long stem red roses.

Above: *Harland in the Peonies*, 13⅝ in. (35 cm) in height, slip cast, carved, and glazed with HH celadon, fired to cone 12, 2011.



*Starry McDee for Tea*, 13¼ in. (34 cm) in length, assembled slip-cast porcelain, with stenciled slip decoration and Qing Bai glaze, fired to cone 13, 2010.

the often distorted yet familiar logos of KFC, Coca-Cola and the ubiquitous “golden arches.” On the surface, the shift in the work is a move that seems to see the artist “jump ship” from his terra firma. House literally went back to the drawing board to re-tool his skill set in order to realize the scale of his ambition. House travelled to the Meissen Manufactory in Dresden and the Sèvres plant outside of Paris in order to learn first-hand the tricks of the trade employed for two and a half centuries, before current industrial technology, that would allow him the mechanisms to build, maneuver, and fire large-scale works, as well as manipulate porcelain slabs and slip cast to the degree the new works demanded.

Aside from the cunning play on words (China, the country and china, the good dishes) the show is a sweeping criticism of anti-localization and growing globalization that ultimately leads to the exploitation of human beings in the name of efficiency and economy. “I know that it is the goal of many American food corporations to make all of Asia and especially China their next great pot of gold at the end of the proverbial rainbow,” House reckons. His deeply ingrained corporate loathe stems from having lived in a tiny village for over forty years and having watched the local vendor/farmer be all but pushed out of the picture. “I go to the local hardware store and a Walmart is there instead. I have to go to Home Depot for plumbing supplies. The local butcher shop went under, and I have to go to Metro and Loblaws to buy poorly packaged meat from kids who have never seen a side of beef. The local place that used to sell local fish was put out of business by processed and packaged Canadian fish that was sent back to us from China.”

House is most eloquent in qualifying his artist statement for his new work: “I am a concerned artist up to his waist in a corporate junk food, low calorie, light beer, butter free, every-man-for-himself world; where time is money, [the] bottom line is all that counts, and pasta is grown by Mr. Kraft. I have watched our society move into near lock step with Corporate America. I want to expose my misgivings by using well-known corporate and political symbols on my vessels. It is my contention that we, as a society, have given up more than we have gotten from industrial and corporate giants. I have witnessed the near total domination of our food supplies by super box stores, and at the same time seen an onslaught of mediocrity in quality.”

House is a firm believer in a process method. In the spring he leaves his studio behind and turns his attention to his vast garden and home repairs, swapping one apron for another. “The real purpose is to remember what you’ve been doing, to compost the whole thing and go into the studio in the fall fresh, when you have thought about what it is that is important in your own little art world.”

Ultimately, House continues to diligently work away at realizing the legacy inculcated in him as a boy at YMCA camp at Waterton Lakes National Park; simply put, “It would be a real good idea if this place is in better shape when you left it than when you came.”

**the author** *Heidi McKenzie is an arts journalist and ceramic artist living in Toronto, Canada. She has written for the Globe & Mail, Toronto Star, and currently publishes in POV magazine, Fusion magazine, and Ceramics Monthly.*