

# Ian Johnston: Transnational Absolute

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# Ian Johnston: Transnational Absolute

Even in our environmentally-conscious age, how often do we stop and think about the origins and afterlife of the objects that we consume?

Questioning the nature of refuse, the scope of global consumption, and the limits of ceramic art, Ian Johnston's artwork addresses humanity's complex relationship to the objects of modern convenience and the environment at large.

Of particular interest to Johnston is the biomorphic sensuality found in many of our most ubiquitous consumer objects (ie. compact fluorescent light bulbs, plastic shopping bags, car parts) and how the reorientation and repetition of these forms can reveal truths about the world.

Ian Johnston: Transnational Absolute presents poignant allegories on the life cycle of the things and our relationships to them. The exhibition includes three component parts: two installations *Machine for Singing* (2007-2009) and *Swimming Upstream in the Comfort of: Homage to Yves Klein* (2006-2009) along with the series of ceramics *Tangible Shadows: Intersections* (2005). Among the many questions Johnston's work poses: What are the origins and afterlives of the objects that we consume? What is authentic in a world filled with copies?

Traversing the boundaries between sculpture, and installation, and ceramic art, Johnston's artworks reflect our shared habits back at us to show us who we are.

Jordan Strom  
Curator of Exhibitions and Collections

## **Tangible Shadows: Intersections (2005)**

This series of sculptural ceramic vessels is both a testament to, and documentation of, a process that was inspired by the idea of Milagros, the votive offerings found in Hispanic folk culture.

The choice of forms used in *Tangible Shadows* followed a journey that began with human anatomy and ended with the automobile body. Bicycle seats and motorcycle tanks served as a transition between the two forms. The works are hand built using drape-molded slabs. Familiar forms are abstracted through the process of draping the source objects in fluid clay sheets. This muting of identity creates a tangible shadow of the object.

The forms intersect one another in an impossible and surgical manner. Intersections range in subtlety from the obvious and tangible crossings of human and machine form.

## **Machine for Singing (2007-2009)**

Situated between two spaces this work of installation art is visually disconnected but within hearing distance of each other.

Three sides of the main room are ringed with stark white shelves that support rows of traditional Chinese-style bowls. The features of the bowls suggest that they are the type produced in the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD). The bowls line a flood lit room much like gleaming products in a gift shop. Bowls from the Song Dynasty are highly prized collector's items and “knock-offs” are a big business around the world.

Nearly all of the ceramics are paired with an electronic device indicating that some action will take place; however the viewer's presence in the room seems to prevent this action from happening. As visitors are arriving and leaving the gallery they unknowingly activate the electrical devices through the simple of act of walking on the carpeted area in the gallery's front entrance. The sounds recall the chiming of temple bells. The experience of disconnected sound and appearance of the artwork signals the expansive space that often exists between consumers and the makers of consumed objects.

Among other things, Machine for Singing raises questions about how we search for authenticity in contemporary life, and often produce a proliferation of copies in the process.

## **Swimming Upstream in the Comfort of: Homage to Yves Klein (2006-2009)**

This installation combines elements of painting, sculpture and mural traditions. As with Johnston's earlier artwork *Tangible Shadows*, *Swimming Upstream...* uses discarded automobile parts to evoke a broad spectrum of sensuous forms. This layering of severed vehicle bumper covers creates vertical patterns that resemble layers of geological strata or figures from the animal world.

The blue paint used in this mural, known as International Klein Blue (IKB), is a pure pigment. The blue evokes a sense of both water and air, two elements within which a person can temporarily defy gravity. The colour distorts depth perception creating a visual vortex when applied to a large flat visual plane. In the case of the bumper covers, the blue plane from which they emerge becomes a vertical sea, in front of which the viewer hovers weightlessly.

*Swimming Upstream in the Comfort of: Homage to Yves Klein* elicits a calming tranquility at the same time that it asks the viewer to consider the scale and effects that humanity's discarded objects have on the world around us.

## List of Works:

### Tangible Shadows: Intersections (2005)

0 arm – m, arm – f, 2005,  
porcelain with terra sigilatta, 7 x 14 x 8 inches

8 arm – m, platonic voids, 2005  
glazed terra cotta, 10 x 12 x 6 inches

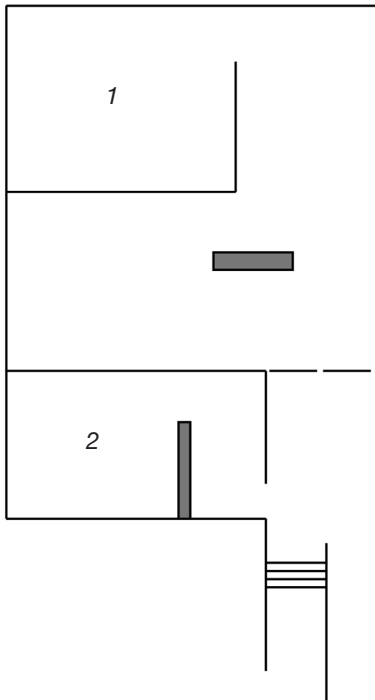
10 hip – f, platonic void, 2005  
stoneware with terra sigilatta, 12 x 19 x 18 inches

### Swimming Upstream in the Comfort of: Homage to Yves Klein (2006-2009)

altered vinyl automobile bumper covers,  
dimensions

### Machine for Singing (2007-2009)

porcelain, wood, steel, carpet, electronic components  
dimensions



1  
*Swimming Upstream in the  
Comfort of: Homage to Yves  
Klein (2006-2009)*

2  
*Machine for Singing (2007-2009)*

3  
*Tangible Shadows: Intersections  
(2005)*

## Artist's Biography

Ian Johnston is an architect turned sculptor based in Nelson, BC. He has exhibited his sculptural ceramic work internationally since the mid nineties. Johnston studied architecture at Algonquin College, and Carleton University in Ottawa and with the University of Toronto at Paris, France.

Prior to opening his Nelson studio in 1996 he spent five years working at the Bauhaus Academy in post Berlin Wall East Germany. At the Bauhaus, together with two architects, he developed and facilitated a series of semester long international, interdisciplinary workshops around themes of urban renewal and public intervention in a tumultuous time of cultural transformation.

His recent body of work *Refuse Culture: Archaeology of Consumption* examines our relationship with the environment in a series of installations using ceramic and mixed media appealing to multiple senses of the viewer.

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