

Q&A WITH ROBIN METCALFE

by Antonio Tan

Robin Metcalfe is guest curator of [*Camp Fires: The Queer Baroque of Léopold L. Foulem, Paul Mathieu and Richard Milette*](#), and is also the Director/Curator of Saint Mary's University Art Gallery in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Robin recently took some time out of his busy schedule for a brief Q&A about the provocative exhibition.



ANTONIO: How did *Camp Fires* come about?

ROBIN: The proposal of *Camp Fires* actually came about five years ago when I curated a solo show by Léopold L. Foulem, a retrospective of his work at the Gardiner called *Récupération*. After it was installed at the Gardiner, I had a conversation with Charles Mason, who was then the Gardiner's Chief Curator, and Raphael Yu, who has an interest in queer ceramics. Between the two of them, there was the idea of expanding the field of inquiry to include the two other ceramists (Paul Mathieu and Richard Milette). The three ceramists naturally fall together because Paul Mathieu and Richard Milette, the two younger ceramists, were students of Léopold. They form a kind of grouping, and they've exhibited before on a number of occasions as a group, and I'd say they represent a community of discourse. They have a long history of sharing ideas about their work.

A: Why Léopold L. Foulem, Paul Mathieu and Richard Milette?

R: All three artists are very important on the international level. They've all been written about and exhibited in major venues in the United States, Europe and elsewhere. Léopold has won the two major prizes for craft in Canada: the Saidye Bronfman Award and the Jean A. Chalmers National Crafts Award. Although the three artists do not consider their work to be craft and place their art principally in the frame of contemporary visual art, they all consider themselves very much ceramists, and are a part of the ceramics conversation. The difference for them – why they call themselves visual artists – is that their work deals with conceptual issues. They're not so much concerned with function and the "well-made pot" as they are with the language of ceramics as a cultural language and as a set of signs.

Their art is also very provocative and sometimes confrontational, sometimes very funny and occasionally quite ribald. Their work tends to startle people, and that's another reason why it can also make them feel uncomfortable. Their work can very much amuse, enlighten and engage, but it's not what people are used to seeing.

A: What are the themes in this show?

R: The show begins with the idea of *Camp* as a Queer aesthetic. All three artists are openly gay and they all include openly gay content in their work. I wouldn't say, however, that any of them is chiefly concerned with gay issues in their work. It's one of the themes they work with. They're more consistently focused on conceptual issues about the history of ceramics. But the idea of *Camp* is larger than simply being a code word for "gay." It's a cultural sensibility that emerged from Queer culture, from gay male culture, and in certain ways lesbian culture. And then it's become more readily accessible to broader audiences, although I would say it has intrinsically Queer content to it, and a Queer aspect. But it also involves issues around the decorative and the extravagant. *Camp* is usually said to deal more with surface than content with form. I think that I would say that it deals with form and surface as content, and that's what these artists do as well.

The idea of *Camp* also has a strong resonance with the Baroque, and we use the word "Baroque" in the subtitle of the exhibition. The Baroque period was the last period in which the highly decorative and extravagant was strongly associated with the ruling class and with dominant masculinity. After the French Revolution, there was a great change in the ruling class aesthetic, where especially in terms of ruling class masculinity, an idea of restraint and, you might say, repression came in. What had been associated with aristocratic aesthetics in the 18th century was seen as suspect in the 19th century, and in fact, came to be associated with homosexuality, partly because it was a language of forms that had been abandoned by the ruling class, as the bourgeoisie replaced the aristocracy as the dominant class. Those forms and sensibility were abandoned by the ruling forces in society, and they became available to be appropriated by gay men to make a new language addressing issues of gender. It was a more expressive language than the aesthetic associated with the dominant norms of masculinity that emerged in the course of the 19th century.

A: What do you hope audiences will take away from *Camp Fires*?

R: I'm always hesitant to say what I hope people will take away, because the nature of Art is that it doesn't deliver a fixed message. Art, if it's alive, if it's good, is capable of surprising anyone: it can surprise the artist, it can surprise the curator, and it can surprise the audience. I want the audience to be pleasantly surprised, to be provoked, to think, and maybe to rethink their assumptions. I'm expecting that they may be amused as well as challenged by the work on display.

[Camp Fires: The Queer Baroque of Léopold L. Foulem, Paul Mathieu and Richard Milette](#) opens May 29 and runs through September 1 at the Gardiner Museum.