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Grounded in Culture: A Review of “Terra Recognita: A Ceramic Story” at Mariane Ibrahim

BY VASIA RIGOU | AUGUST 2, 2023

“Terra Recognita: A Ceramic Story” at Mariane Ibrahim, installation view/Photo: Courtesy of the gallery

Using ceramics as a form of storytelling, “Terra Recognita,” on view at Mariane Ibrahim, brings together five women artists who are unafraid to push the boundaries of the ancient art form. Nadira Husain, Zizipho Poswa,

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Jennifer Rochlin, Leena Similu and Shafei Xia offer a diverse representation of cultures and ceramic practices: each piece serves as a vessel that encapsulates the present, past and future as their individual backgrounds, experiences and personal histories come front and center.

"Terra Recognita: A Ceramic Story" at Mariane Ibrahim/image courtesy of the gallery

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The space is beaming. Large-scale works meet intimately sized ones; hand-coiled sculptures meet glazed forms; and earthy colors meet bright reds, blues and yellows. Symbols and stories across mediums and geographical boundaries intertwine—and somehow, the unexpected ensemble makes sense. In a minimal yet intricate setting, the viewing experience demands attention to detail. Themes of cultural identity and history—collective and personal—become apparent as the artists delve into an exploration of race, gender and personal experience.

Husain's practice spans tempera-on-canvas painting, drawing and textiles, and extends to three dimensions with ceramic tile and Indian powder paint compositions. European and Eastern motifs collide as she brings Indian miniature traditions into the mix. The end result is a colorful kaleidoscopic representation of multicultural coexistence.

Cape Town-based Poswa creates large-scale, hand-coiled sculptures that reflect her deep-rooted inspiration from the Xhosa rituals she witnessed growing up in the Eastern Cape Province—a nod to her heritage (as part of the second-largest ethnic group in South Africa after the Zulus), Xhosa women and African womanhood. Similarly, Los Angeles-based Similu connects with her West African roots through her experience of becoming a mother. Contemplating the heritage and culture that she would pass down to her child influenced her ceramic work toward a manifestation of the female form and the power that lies in femininity.

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In Xia's work, the real and the fantastical intertwine in works that feature animals (namely, tigers, known to symbolize power in Chinese culture) and naked female figures that serve as the artist's alter egos. In this exhibition,

Xia presents a miniature living room. Pig figurines sit atop ornate chairs—a sight that's equal parts funny, playful and borderline disturbing. Elsewhere, a California ceramicist and painter combines her two worlds into one by, well, painting on ceramics. Rochlin's figurative work is presented on intentionally misshapen vessels that are heavily marked by the artist's own fingerprints—another intentional decision that allows an intimate look into her work, process and personal experience.

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Ceramics—despite being one of the world's oldest art forms—have been discovered and rediscovered time and time again. In "Terra Recognita," the medium is again challenged in both form and function as the artists explore charted territories and discover new lands. Making the viewer pause, take a step back and reflect makes for an impactful experience where the personal and the collective become one. More than that, a closer look reveals that the state of ceramics in reality reflects the state of the self.

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