

# UARK LAMP



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# Lamp: Reflections on the Enlightenment

by Adam Welch

**T**he status of the lamp in ceramics is low, ranked just beneath the toilet. Likewise, lamps have a negligible standing in the history of the field, in part, because they fail to rise above the level of kitsch—simulations of art, digested and watered down to meet the understanding of the common viewer. From a ceramics' perspective, a lamp's components ultimately can be made of any material—its primary function is light—trivializing ceramicness altogether. Furthermore, lamps epitomize the tedious “form follows function” and “function and decoration” diatribe that is typical of ceramic discourse. Lamps are mere accents to a room, complements to furniture, or worse yet, designed to recede into the background. An exhibition of lamps staged within Forage Modern Workshop, a home décor store, is a bold and daring move. Since irony is dead, or at least a straw man, where does that leave us?

Ceramics is enjoying its heyday in the artworld. It has been a decade since the initial groundswell of activity. Academia, not surprisingly, is lagging behind the times. How can this be? Universities pride themselves on being bastions of social and intellectual freedom, unique, risk-free, though not to say risk-averse, environments. There is homogeneity of age, ability and experience that increases participation and heightens engagement largely through commonality. Yet, the University is experiencing this zenith while simultaneously suffering an identity crisis; drifting untethered away from its intellectual roots, whose seeds were sown from Enlightenment ideals. There is a counterpoint to all of this, one example that

stands out, the ceramics department of the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. If that surprises you, it surprises me too!

Five years ago, few people were even aware this school had a ceramics curriculum, let alone a graduate program. Today, its reputation is growing rapidly, playing out on the national stage. Jeannie Hulen, who ten years ago was the sole faculty member in ceramics, had the vision and foresight to piece together an exceptionally talented team and remains the cornerstone of the program. Mathew McConnell is a skilled maker who brings a deep understanding of material and a strong foundation in ceramics with a keen perspective on the contemporary artworld. Linda Nguyen Lopez, who provided the impetus for the exhibition, is a rising star. Lopez is among the artists working in ceramics who is bursting onto the artworld stage as she shows her work at an exhausting pace around the country. Pair these two bright young artists with the two visiting appointments of Anthony Sonnenberg and Ian Meares, both on a three-year track, who bring inventive processes and knowledge in critical theory, respectively. Finally, add instructor Adam Posnak, a sensitive and skilled potter with a reverence for the material and its complicated histories. Together this team is creating what will arguably become the top graduate program in the country.

The faculty is young, vital and engaged, traits which separate them from most other graduate programs. A key contributing factor in the decline of academia's supremacy is epitomized by the disconnect between long entrenched faculty and what actually takes place beyond the classroom—the very world the university keeps them isolated and protected from. Though the university itself has become the champion of avant-garde culture, they are without doubt strange bedfellows. The whole ideological point of the

avant-garde is to destabilize just such linkages. Nevertheless, what is taking place in both worlds is equally important, so recognizing and reconciling the two is the only path forward; that is just what I see well underway in the seemingly sleepy community of Fayetteville.

The *UARK LAMP* exhibition held during NCECA Minneapolis brought together lamps made by the faculty, staff, post-baccalaureates, MFA and BFA candidates. The result was simultaneously ironical and sincere, humorous and serious, well-made and shady. Taken as a whole and at face value, the exhibition was sanguine. Why did Lopez choose Lamp as the theme? The lamp is uncharted water rife for serious critical inquiry. Perhaps it had something to do with light as a metaphor of Enlightenment, *l'age des lumieres*—the age of splendid illumination. Light, particularly the light of the sun, has long been a symbol of self-representation signifying truth, illuminating the world and casting out darkness, i.e., ignorance. In the eighteenth century, the Age of Reason forever transformed civilization and championed such radical ideas like individual liberty and rational inquiry, but most importantly to the matter at hand, had a profound effect upon the arts. It was the birth of the autonomous work of art and the reign of modernity.

As I explored the work, two things struck me. The lamp is either an aesthetical replica of the artist's typical production, or the artist sought to tackle the lamp on its own terms. What do these two varying approaches say about the makers? Allowing their aesthetic invention to be coopted toward a purpose entirely foreign to its meaning. Likewise, for those artists that took to task the project on its own terms, they are willing to break entirely from their agendas to entertain some tangential problem. I believe either path demonstrates an incredible sense of humor

and acrobatic mental capacity. The project exudes Lopez's wry wit while it smacks of McConnell's tongue-in-cheek humor and hint of foil. The lamps are meant to be funny, to break up the monotony of the rigors of school. Ultimately, the individual contributions are unique and offer a bouquet of possibilities.

The aesthetical proclivities of individual artists and how they approached the problem notwithstanding, the pressing issue is that the production of art by a University art department being exhibited in a home goods store. This exposes the underbelly of an art/commerce perplexity. That is, the fine line between art and commodity. Gone are the days when art becomes a commodity by way of the gallery, pretending that art is first and foremost some object outside the everyday experience of the world. Now art seems to begin as a commodity. *UARK Lamps* confirms this progression; at least at UARK they have succumbed to market forces by embracing it. Alternatively, just beneath the surface, behind the veneer, the argument for lamps as art vacillates between the superficial and critical. While some artists take themselves seriously, others are less rigid.

The exhibition is an affront to art and exhibition practice. That is the real genius; it illuminates the relationships between curator and artist, artists and practice, installation and exhibition. Is it a serious question anymore to ask, "What is art?" A quick glance around the contemporary scene makes one aware that the distinction between art and commerce has collapsed, or at least is a nonissue. This exhibition recognizes and acknowledges the evolution. The gallery and exhibition have been a site of contest for decades, reminiscent of Robert Smithson's concept of "cultural confinement," when a curator imposes limits on an exhibition and thereby the artist. Smithson sought to revive



art from the confines of the gallery space where it trades aura for a price tag. Lopez folds the whole conundrum back on itself, elevating it back to the forefront with an elegant tension.

There is unlimited potential, opportunity and a great deal of support within the university, nurturing a certain way of being-in-the-world. Academia is synonymous with intellectual freedom, which makes it the logical home of avant-garde culture. In many art departments this has the potential to create paralysis and a tendency for students to trade creativity for the skills necessary to make a living. The best schools teaching the best practices to gain the highest level of professionalism, tend to turn artists and art, into highly refined, intellectually fortified and savvy creations.

Is *UARK Lamp* a sign for a new wave of thinkers to reject reason? A renewed initiative to call everything, not just reason itself, into question? While I do not believe anything that momentous is in play, I do detect some sinister spark. Overwhelmingly, I see an exercise in legitimacy, an effort to authenticate these artists' endeavors in the face of a growing landslide of the primacy of truth. I see the lamp as another "last ditch" effort to shine light into the world, to illuminate the darkest of places in the hearts and minds of humankind.

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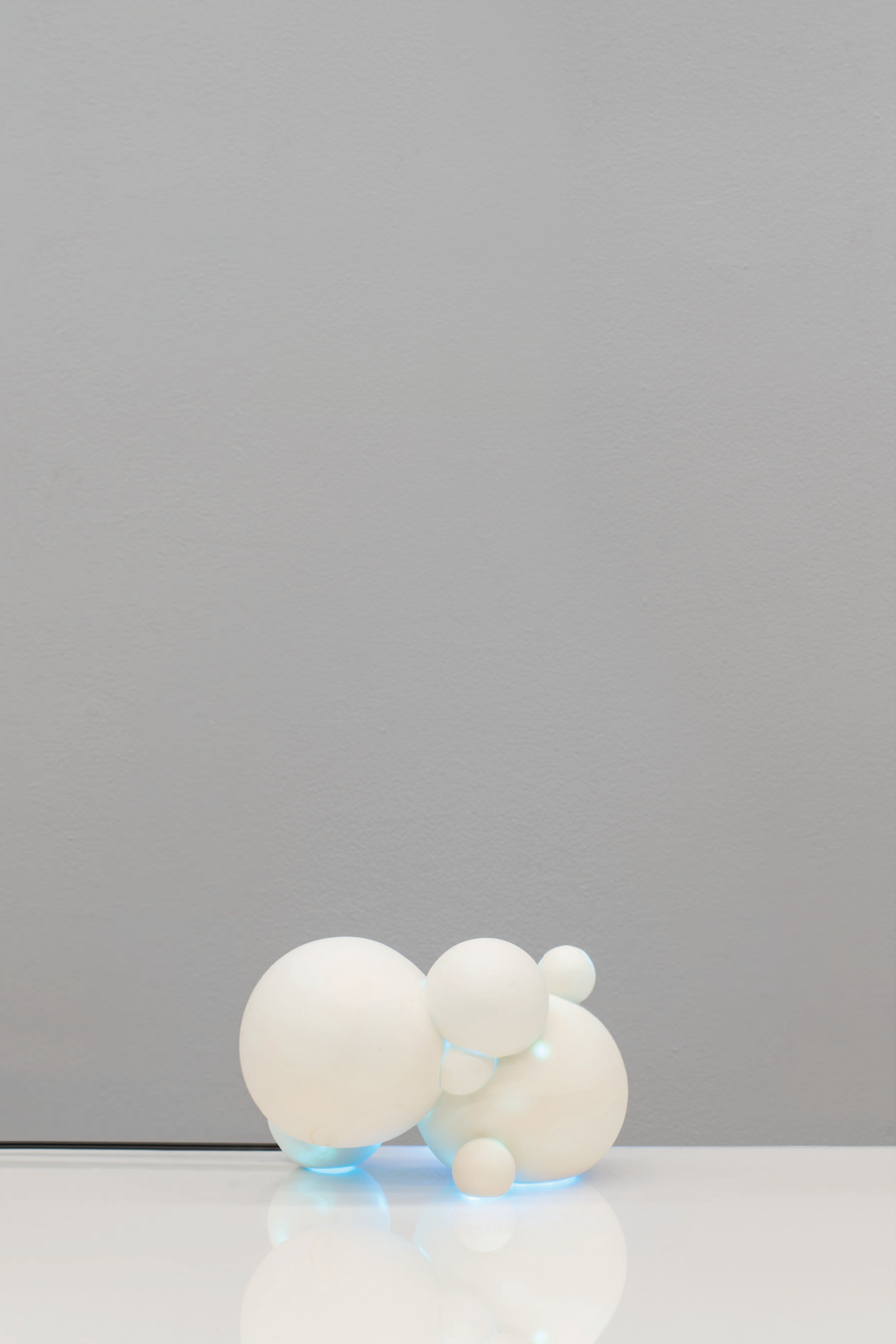






































- 8 Tony Sonnenberg, *Untitled*
- 9 Mathew McConnell, *Untitled*
- 10 Jaclyn Klassen, *Sheets*
- 11 MacKenzie Turner, *Figured It Out*
- 12 Janna Doss, *Untitled*
- 13 Anthony Kascak, *Hot Like Fire*
- 14 Sam Mack, *Write the Word Tender Until It Loses Its Meaning*
- 15 Chris Rodgers, *For Luis Barragán*
- 16 Brant Weiland, *Bubbly*
- 17 Aisha Chantal-Bryant, *Bannan*
- 18 Katie McColgan, *Quiver*
- 19 Eric Andre, *Light Up*
- 20 Liz Alspach, *Blue Curve*
- 21 Danny Baskin, *Untitled*
- 22 Minah Kim, *Belly*
- 23 Ian Meares, *...Cold Lampin' With A Bushel Of Flavor...*
- 24 Joanna Pike, *Lamp*
- 25 Payton Wiedner, *Flesh Pile*
- 26 Nicholas Dison, *Untitled*
- 27 Abbey Peters, *The Doorway Was Pink*





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