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Martha Russo's amazing ceramics: life, death and things in-between
The Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art compiles a lifetime's worth of art by the Boulder artist

By Ray Mark Rinaldi | Denver Post Fine Arts Critic | May 6, 2016



Martha Russo has added pieces to her giant "nomos" over the course of decades. IPTC: Martha Russo has added pieces to her giant "nomos" over the course of decades. Photo by Ray Mark Rinaldi, Denver Post. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, *The Denver Post*)

The [Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art](#) has made it a hobby lately to take shows that might seem routine and turn them into moments of genuine excitement. That happened last winter with a retrospective of [Susan Wick's](#) drawings, and it's taking place now with [Martha Russo's](#) "coalescere." This is an important exhibit capturing 25 years of hard labor by a crucial Colorado artist.

Russo's ceramics repel and attract at the same time. She's a bit obsessed with internal body organs, a sensibility left over from her early studies in developmental biology at [Princeton University](#) during the 1980s. Russo turns her clay into stomachs and spines, giving us a tactile view of the things that makes us tick or, sometimes, sick.

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But these aren't pure anatomy lessons. Russo connects her body parts to our brains and emotions. They're knotty and bulbous and, ultimately, fictional. Her piece, "yon," for example, sits on the floor and extends a good 10 feet and has two stomachs connected by a snaking intestinal tube. It doesn't look like our tummies exactly, but it looks like we think they look when we imagine them, or when our anxieties take over the operation of our digestive system.

There are pieces in "coalescere" that reflect a lifetime of effort, monumental achievements, like "nomos," a three-sided wall installation made of thousands of small, spindly porcelain fingers that Russo has fabricated over the years and linked together. It's both life-based — appearing like bones or sticks or some colony of sea creatures — but also larger-than-life.

That link between things small and big, or the massing of tiny parts into some greater whole, defines Russo's best work. Two objects in particular, the giant floor piece "phagocytosis" and the hanging wall sculpture, "klynge," take this to extremes. Both have scores of individual clay parts, each formed by hand, that come together into mysterious, amorphous beings — impossible, uncontrollable, super heavy blobs that are both skeletal and growing. Russo's inspiration comes from sea shells and shedded skin, seeds and pods, all elements that exist somewhere between life and death.

This ability to freeze intimate objects is both metaphorical and physical. "The Lightness of Being," an installation on the back wall, consists of everyday items Russo has simply dipped in porcelain over the years, preserving their essence. A waffle, a glove, a feather duster, her son's hair — are these things dead or alive? The artist raises the question but leaves the viewer to answer.

It's all very personal, and that's what makes this show so relatable, viscerally appealing, even when it's unsightly. Curator [Mardee Goff](#) has pulled together everything this artist has to offer. You see how much effort this work took and, like with Wick's retrospective, real insight into what it means to turn your life over to art-making. This is hard, hard work, back-breaking, energy-sucking, brain-hurting, ego shredding, naked stuff.

You can't imagine how Russo pulled it off, but you understand why. It's a compulsion to tell a story, autobiographical and universal, with no beginning and no end and a million tiny chapters in between.

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COALESCERE

The Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art presents a retrospective of work by artist Martha Russo. Through June 12. 1750 13th St., Boulder. \$1. 303-443-2122 or bmoca.org.