





YOU AND I ARE EARTH

Nicole Levaque

06.20.2025 - 08.09.2025

On Nicole Levaque's *You and I are Earth* Shannon Garden-Smith

I did not have the opportunity to visit Nicole Levaque's exhibition, *You and I are Earth* at Hamilton Artists Inc last summer. Funny, then, that I feel like I know what it might have felt like. The artist brings this up when we connect on a buggy zoom call—that is, that we all *know* what it feels like to be in intimate contact with ceramic, which is of course, clay or earth. We know its coolness on our skin, the sound it makes as our fingers wrap around it, and how it gradually warms with the extended contact of our body heat. There is something inherently tactile, embodied, something that exceeds the visual in a practice that takes up this material. Levaque's work resists the correct and the finished, instead suspending ceramic in experimental states variously oozy and skeletal, all full of the incessant nibbling of fingers, hands and touch.

Ceramic as a vessel for food and drink, a holder of things that we consume, is a material of the everyday, of routine,



of return, and of the minor. Levaque's work emerges from parallel rhythms. She tells me that she populates the shelves, cabinets, and crannies of her domestic space with her sculptures. She lives with and visits them in a daily way. When she is compelled, she draws them back to the studio and to the kiln responsively adding to, re-firing and re-glazing. Any exhibition of her work presents the sculptures in the

form they take at that given moment, but which the artist will likely revisit, append, extend and remix in the future. In this way, the sculptures are like bodies that the artist tends to in an unending labour. Levaque's labour involves tender care but also the whole gamut of being in a body—breakdown, struggle, pain, ecstasy. To be clear, the experience of visiting Levaque's work, which I later get to do, is pure joy. Her installations present jubilant bacchanals of glazed surface and colour, but in which the joy of the forms encompasses something more complex—maybe the *jouissance* of their making—where the process is a transgressive pleasure that pushes the maker's body to its limits. A pleasure that is also pain.

The forms push the maker's body, but the bodies of the sculptures are also pushed inviting in the possibility of the crack and defying masterful, “proper” technical approaches to ceramic for something deeply attentive and responsive. This calls up something of philosopher Báýò Akómoláfé's invocation of the crack as an ecstatic form that exceeds the proper, the known form. Akómoláfé writes:

You know what doesn't "behave"? Cracks. Architects don't design cracks, don't anticipate cracks...They are the excessiveness of the frame...Cracks are not "solutions," not guarantees or final answers. But something about them marks deterritorializing tensions and obliquely traces out new realities [1].

Akómoláfé and Levaque's cracks are ecstatic disjunctions that allow us to feel into the world as it actually is and to contend with complexity, even if for a moment. The crack doesn't solve, and it doesn't just "let the light in" but it does create a fissure, a tiny dark cavern inside the sleek surface of modernity. The crack is a vital site for unmaking in this time of intersecting crises which demand other ways of relating to this earth, of re-feeling our daily, continuous intimacy and immanence with it.

....

The mediated, distanced experience that I first have of the

[1] Akómoláfé, Báyo. *Selah: A Báyo Akómoláfé Reader*. Ayin Press, 2026, 15.







show, clicking through online images of the byzantine knots and spindles, undulations of clay fired into incredible candied architectures that recall the accretions of termites or corals, is written into the exhibition. The exhibition title, referring to a 16th century memento mori plate, is probably something you have seen in your Internet travels too. The image of a porcelain plate, veined with cracks and emblazoned in a tender blue cursive that spells out “You & i are Earth”

reaches across time so powerfully that it might even pause your scrolling for a beat.

We read in this digitally circulating image of the plate many things. As a memento mori, it was likely a gift to a lover or someone dear, the “You” and “I,” the recipient and the giver, respectively. Its text speaks to human mortality, but also to a relationship with life, the flesh, and materiality that understands the sacred eventual return of all to the earth—dust to dust. It is a comfort. The invocation of the second person pronoun “You” implicates us in a way that feels just a little startling, where the “i,” the 16th century giver of the plate has already returned to the earth, as has its intended “You.” The object might also seem to be speaking the declarative text itself. The “i” is the plate, a ceramic, quite literally made of clay, of earth. The ceramic declares that you too are earth as much as it is. That is, subject as earth, subject as plate, subject as object but in a way that shifts and blurs our understanding of these bounded categories so that “You & i” *are* “You & i” and also, “You & i” *are* “earth.”

We contemplate all of this from a digital image, likely



something algorithmically served up to us on a social media app, a medium and mode that feels wretchedly removed from such understandings of geological time. Yet the screen on which the image of the 16th century plate is delivered up—the phone or device that we handle with routine intimacy, perhaps paralleling our tactile relationship to ceramic—is also composed of matter and minerals, critical minerals of which we hear so much today. These too are earth.

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Copy Editing, Documentation + Design: Sonali Menezes
ISBN: 978-1-926454-36-8



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Hamilton Artists Inc. would like to acknowledge the generous support of its funders, donors, sponsors and programming partners.



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