

BMoCA



Martha Russo, *klynge*, 2016 (detail). Photo by Wes Magyar.

Martha Russo: *coalescere*

March 31 - June 12, 2016

coalescere (v)

1. to grow together or into one body.
2. to unite so as to form one mass, community, etc.
3. to blend or come together.

The first solo museum exhibition of sculptor and installation artist Martha Russo, *coalescere*, Latin for “come together,” highlights work created over the course of the artist’s career as well as a series of new works and large-scale, site-specific installations.

Russo’s primary medium is clay, but she is far from a traditional ceramic artist. Her organic, abstract creations push the boundaries of clay, shattering expectations and denying the realities of their heavy and fragile medium. At times anatomical, cellular, botanical, oceanic, or completely fantastical, her forms draw on an encyclopedia of sources and processes.

As an undergraduate, Russo studied developmental biology and psychology. Since then, she has spent decades subverting natural laws and defying scientific certainties through artistic invention. Gravity acts as a counter-medium in her work. Order and crisp typology are mixed with wild abundance and occasional chaos.

With an awareness of the psychology of space, Russo plays with our mind’s ability to react to certain scales and realities. Each element is carefully and uniquely produced by the artist’s hand and amassed into a body that draws us in for closer inspection. Both self-portrait and scientific discovery, her creations span 25 years of intense and exacting labor. Moving through *coalescere*, we encounter work both unsettlingly alien and achingly familiar. Her work echoes in our bones and guts, and we become another member of the accumulated specimens crawling around the room. It is a dreamscape, petri dish, and archive, and we are invited to explore.

A Field Guide to Mar

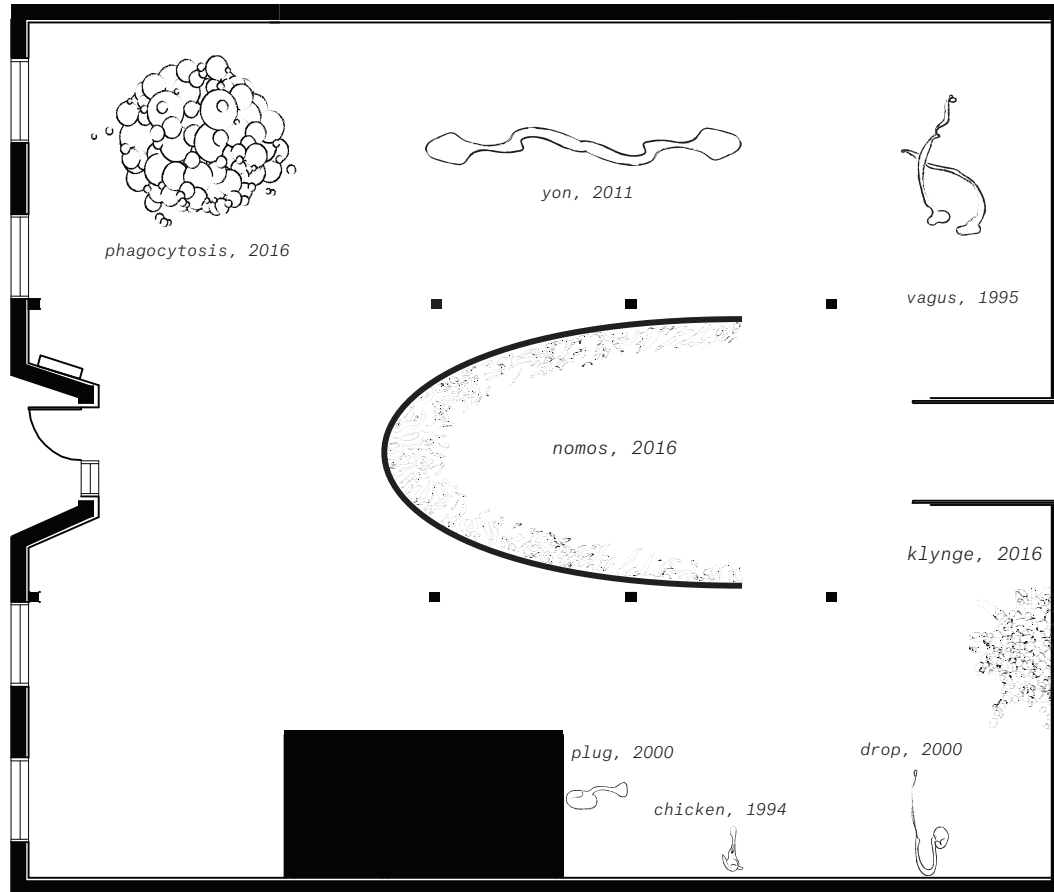
"I really see people experiencing the exhibition together, talking for a long time. And it's not nostalgia, like I want everybody to quiet discovery. My hope is there's a lot of different experiences

yon & vagus

Russo's scientific past lends itself to her understanding and play with human anatomy. Her fascination with the stomach in particular has grown over the years and is woven throughout her work in *coalescere*. The stomach, at our core, is harnessed to our autonomic nervous system and is primary in emotional responses within the body. It is this connection that results in sensations of butterflies, knots, and nausea as we digest different emotions.

In *yon* and *vagus* we see two different iterations of Russo's exploration of the visceral link of the human gut to emotions. In *yon*, Russo has invented her own organ, which appears as two stomachs connected by a long body that slinks across the floor. In *vagus* (named for the longest cranial nerve), Russo remains experimentally accurate as she fleshes out this unseen nerve in two intertwined spines that shoot upward from stomach bases, one harsh and spike-like, the other languid and flexible. The two disparate renditions twirling around each other reflect the spine in different emotional states. Our own internal anatomy is exploded into bright color and stretched proportion. It is strange to confront something so alien in appearance that is vitally linked to our own bodies and lives.

Q1: Your stomach is constantly changing shape, how many different shapes do you think it takes in a day?



nomos

Moving beyond sculptural investigations of her internal anatomy, Russo's large-scale installation *nomos* transitions our physical engagement from microscopic lens to macroscopic scale as we are intimately enveloped in something much larger than us.

nomos attracts individual responses from every person. Russo describes, "if people grew up inland, then they see rocks, or bones, or dead and decaying plants. And if they've grown up on the edge of the land, by the ocean, you tend to see squid, schools of fish, or coral. It's all about what they grew up with."

Q2: Looking at *nomos*, how many individual ceramic parts do you think make up its whole?

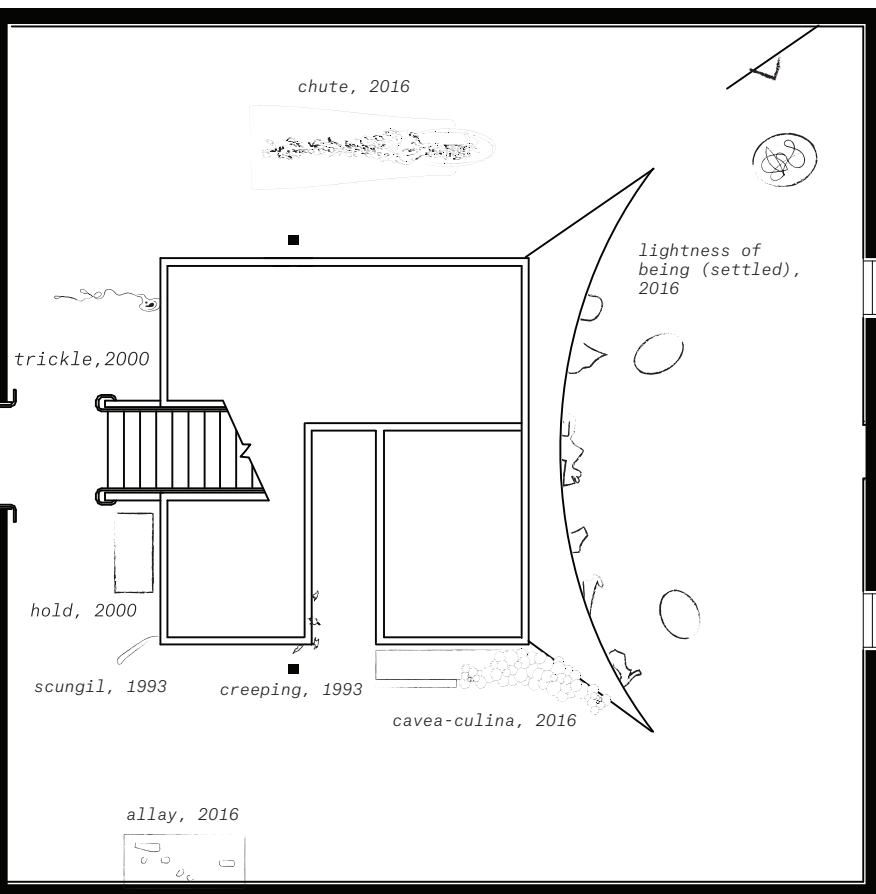
klynge

Ceramic as a medium is traditionally linked with both functionality and fragility. In *klynge*, Russo defies what we expect from ceramics, building a new materiality for the dense medium. Both the heavy material and the labor are invisible in the accumulation of her slip-cast shapes rising up the wall. The end result recasts seemingly weightless forms into a calm but active colony.

Q3: Imagine all the individual components of *klynge*. When combined together, how much do you think *klynge* weighs?

Martha Russo: coalescere

, and feeling about things that they haven't really talked about
be kids again, or go back to their childhood. It's more like a
of seeing and being." - Martha Russo



cavea-culina

The lab bench used in this piece is from Russo's studio, and has stored her tools, materials, and ideas for years. After using it as a base for creating new work, Russo has subverted its practical application and delved into the bench as a sculpture itself. Each drawer contains materials that capture moments, processes, or people who have influenced her practice. It provides intimate detail, as well as an overview of the past quarter of a century of Russo's life and career.

Bordering on a scientific Latin name, *cavea* "laboratory" and *culina* "kitchen", the title encapsulates Russo's process as a blend between the two, and a unique space for invention.

Can you find a drawer that contains a mouse?

Living in the mountains above Jamestown, Colorado, Russo has many creatures in residence at her studio. One morning, she found a mouse had fallen into a bucket of glaze. As an experiment, she placed the dead mouse in her kiln and fired it. Everything burned away except the mouse's bones, encased in a layer of glaze. Since then, several mice have surfaced in her work, an example can be found in these drawers.

chute

chute brings the viewer and artist together in an honest reflection of human fragility. Capturing a cascade of ceramic pieces frozen in their fall, the work threatens to spill over at any moment. The incredibly delicate, unglazed, and unprotected elements are suspended before us. Entrusting us to be cautious around them, their vulnerability gives weight to the process of growing older. Dealing with the artist's sense of mortality, that of inhabiting an aging body, *chute* serves as the artist's self-portrait. Every piece is the product of her two hands. The weight of *nomos*, *klynge*, and *phagocytosis* are fresh in our minds as we face this realization of the toll their creation takes on the artist's body.

lightness of being (settled)

Russo is constantly experimenting with different materials. This often involves objects being dipped in porcelain slip and fired, to become new versions of themselves. Looking closely at *lightness of being...*, detritus from her studio gloves, a waffle, cardboard, respirators start to appear. Traces of our daily lives become objects of beauty, captured in a weightless moment.

Henry's hair - Returning home one night, Russo found that her daughter had shaved her little brother's head and put it into a citrus bag. Russo recounts, "They were grinning ear to ear. Odelia blurted, *Henry said it was okay for me to shave his head, we want you to dip it so he can be in the show.*" Henry's hair has been part of multiple installations ever since.

Toast & Waffle - After burning toast one morning, Russo began playing with other types of bread as material. One morning she dipped a waffle in porcelain but before she had a chance to fire it a mouse chewed off the corner and ate the inside. Russo fired it anyway with the mouse's damage preserved forever.

(settled) captures a unique material moment in *coalescere*. The object rests on a dark metal disc at one end of the room, covered in live clay, it remains unfired. While *lightness of being* surrounds us with ghosts, *(settled)* is alive.

Martha Russo (b. 1962, Milford, Connecticut) earned her BA in developmental biology and psychology from Princeton University in 1985. A world-class athlete, she suffered a career-ending injury in 1984 while vying for a spot on the United States Olympic Field Hockey Team. After recovering from surgery, Russo was attracted to the physical nature of sculpture. She studied studio arts in Florence, Italy in 1983 and continued studying ceramics at Princeton University. In 1995, she earned her MFA at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Russo's work has been exhibited nationally, most recently at The Santa Fe Art Institute, Denver Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, and with the Allan Stone Gallery, New York. Through the social and politically based art collective, Artnauts, Russo has shown her 2-dimensional works in 230 exhibitions in 17 countries. Russo lives in the mountains northwest of Boulder, Colorado with her husband and two children. In addition to her studio practice, Russo is currently a Visiting Lecturer at University of Colorado, Boulder and taught Fine Arts at Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design in Lakewood, Colorado for 19 years. Russo is represented by the Claudia Stone Gallery in New York and Goodwin Fine Art in Denver.

RELATED PROGRAMS

ménage à trois

Expect the unexpected with BMOCA's new public program series.

tête-à-tête

April 7, 6:30pm

\$8 / free for members

Join Martha Russo, along with the people and objects important to the artist, for an intimate open discussion about her fascination with the internal body. Event will feature a tour through the exhibition tracking Russo's movement beginning from an idea or notion carrying through to an exhibited work.

down to play

April 21, 6:30pm

\$8 / free for members

Neuroscientist Tor Wager, Psychologist Leaf van Boven, and exhibiting artist Martha Russo discuss "dissonance," the discomfort experienced when one holds contradictory beliefs or ideas in one moment, and how *coalescere* explores this concept.

get dirty

June 9, 6:30pm

\$20 / \$15 for members

Martha Russo and Grateful Bread demonstrate the art of bread with a hands-on evening of making. Bread-making, as a live, time-sensitive medium of exploration, expands the parameters of creativity. The dough accurately records the touch of the hand, while simultaneously allowing for possibilities of both serendipity and freedom - a medium that parallels to and separate from Russo's clay. While we allow the bread to rise and bake, negronis and bocci will be provided.

EXHIBITION TOURS

Multiple Saturday tours offered throughout the exhibition.
For more information, please contact BMOCA staff.

SPARK! TOUR FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH ALZHEIMER'S AND DEMENTIA

April 19, 10:30am

A free series of programs specifically designed to make BMOCA's art exhibitions accessible for visitors with early-stage Alzheimer's or dementia and their caregivers.

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