

Victor Cicansky, The Gardener's Universe

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Victor Cicansky, *The Gardener's Universe* (detail), 2020. Photo: Courtesy of Confederation Centre of the Arts.

Clay has always been an important medium for sculptors, both as an intermediary stage in the casting processes, and as the finished object itself. Despite the category of 'ceramics' often being relegated to the fine crafts, and thus seemingly outside of a fine art discourse, many senior Canadian artists have consistently used clay as a sculptural medium, including Joe Fafard and Gathie Falk. Even more younger artists, such as Colleen Wolstenholme, Brendan Tang, Mark Courtemanche, David R. Harper and Shary Boyle use ceramics as part of their contemporary sculptural practices. One is not meant to sit on one of Mark Courtemanche's ceramic chairs, nor to pound nails with his earthenware hammers. Brandan Tang's 'vases' contain nothing but their conceptual content. The absence of function seems to firmly place his work, and that of his peers, in the fine arts.

The work of Regina-based sculptor Victor Cicansky has been challenging critics and institutions throughout his career, because he pushes the boundaries between art, craft and design. In so doing, he has carved out his own niche, one that conflates rather than transcends boundaries. Function is often the fault line he explores.

His retrospective exhibition, *Victor Cicansky: The Gardener's Universe*, organized by the Makenzie Art Gallery, includes work from over fifty years of art practice, and strives to make the case for Cicansky as an artist whose categorization is irrelevant. Comprised of freestanding pieces, wall works and objects on plinths and in vitrines, the exhibition design evoked the garden of the title, with viewers threading their way through brightly coloured and exuberant displays, presented thematically rather than chronologically.

A craft historian will approach Cicansky's work from one perspective, a design historian from another and an art historian from yet another. In the book that accompanies this exhibition, they do just that. Cicansky's aesthetic is more important than any label, and it is in conveying this aesthetic, with its wit, generosity, and depth of feeling, that this exhibition most satisfies. The bulk of Cicansky's work is in brightly glazed terra-cotta, and his subject matter is solidly rooted in his personal history in Regina's immigrant community. His parents immigrated to Canada from Rumania, and Cicansky was raised in a neighbourhood where houses often lacked running water and electricity. His father built their house, and Cicansky who left school at sixteen, built his own house that same year. Before returning to formal education he made his living building outhouses. When his neighbourhood, Garlic Flats, was finally connected to municipal water and sewage, the loss of his outhouse business prompted him to return to school. He earned a teacher's certificate and, eventually, a Master of Fine Arts degree from UC Davis in California.

Steeped in the California "funk" ceramics tradition, Cicansky returned to Regina where he began teaching at the University of Regina in 1970. He remained on faculty until his retirement in 1993. From the earliest works on view in *Victor Cicansky: The Gardener's Universe*, it is apparent that function rarely followed form in this artist's work. He went to graduate school as a potter, but returned to Regina as a sculptor. In graduate school he made ceramic clothing, luggage, furniture and footwear, objects that could be described as containers, if not exactly vessels. They all also implied function, but were representations of objects, rather than actual devices. More traditional works such as 1967's *Lidded Jar*, yielded to a work such as *Untitled (zippered vase)* from the next year. This work combines the look of a vase with that of a bag or satchel. The lip is rendered as an open, zippered, mouth, rigid despite its apparent softness. Function remained possible in *Untitled (zippered vase)*, as flowers could still be put in the object, but the obvious disconnect of the non-functional zipper created a disjunction between the expectations of what a ceramic vessel could, or should be. Expectations of both vases and zippers were confounded.

In the early 1970s, Cicansky began a series of sculptural works that harked back to his days building outhouses. Works such as *Singing the Joys of an Agrarian Society* (1972), *Mixed Farming* (1973) and *Cabbage Man with Fading Dream* (1974) used figures in architectural settings, often based on outhouses, to create narrative sculptures with folk art overtones. Cicansky's use of vernacular imagery reflected a current trend in the 1970s and 1980s. Prairie artists such as William Kurelek, David Thauberger and Joe Fafard were working in folk-art inspired styles, and in Nova Scotia, artists as diverse as Gerald Ferguson, Nancy Edell and Eric Fischl were making works inspired, in part, by folk art.



Cicansky's vernacular idiom, narrative strategies and his celebration of his roots in both the craft tradition and as a working-class 'jack-of-all-trades,' kept him out of critical favour. It wasn't until the 2000s that any of his work was acquired by the National Gallery of Canada (NGC), for instance, which until that point considered his work to be fine craft and thus outside its collecting mandate. Perhaps his decision in the 1980s to begin working in bronze helped change some perceptions of his work. Ironically, perhaps, because so much of his bronze production, such as *Dining on Peaches and Pears* (2000), acquired by the NGC, and *Low Table with Lemons* (2007), is functional furniture.

Throughout his career, gardening and farming have been central to Cicansky's visual and object-making language. Whether depicting trees or food plants, canned vegetables or farming implements, Cicansky revels in the cycle of food production, from planting, to gardening, to preserving, to consuming. His farm-to-gallery aesthetic is remarkably timely today, and its leaven of good humour only makes the work more fitting for our fraught times.

Containers are at the core of functional ceramics, and Cicansky, despite his only sporadic forays into function, makes containers one of his major themes. The canning jar, that near-ubiquitous kitchen tool for preserving fruits and vegetables, is perhaps the most recognizable subject of Cicansky's sculpture. As individual objects, or collected together on 'pantry' shelves, these small sculptures depict the contents of the jars with the jar itself stripped away. If one was to hold one of these 'jars' it would be the modelled textures of beans, asparagus, or corn that fingers would find, topped by a gold-glazed lid.

Cicansky also works figuratively, combining portraits with objects to create hybrid busts. In his series of chairs, the subjects seem to be absorbed into over-stuffed chairs that hold fruit and vegetables. In *Another Bumper Crop* (1987), for example, a couple sits in a love seat, their laps filled with vegetables. The couple's torsos seamlessly blend into the chair, one hardly notices that they have merged with the furniture.

The tour of *Victor Cicansky: The Gardener's Universe* was truncated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which is unfortunate, because this exhibition was both timely and challenging—though of fine art orthodoxy rather than the viewer. Once one stopped wondering, vainly, which label to view the work under, it was a remarkably satisfying experience.

Ray Cronin is a Nova Scotia-based writer and editor. He is the founding curator of the Sobey Art Award, and former Director and CEO of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. He is the author of numerous catalogue essays, articles for Canadian and American art magazines, and is editor-in-chief of *Billie: Visual Culture Atlantic*. Cronin is the author of nine books, including: *Alex Colville: A Rebellious Mind* (2018), *John Greer: Hard Thought* (2019) and *Mary Pratt: Life & Work* (2020).