

Paul Briggs Ceramics: Bars, Chains, and Free Spirit

Concord's LaCoste Gallery has hit the ball out of the park yet again—this time with a remarkable and timely show by Massachusetts ceramicist Paul Briggs. The show, "Intuitive Responses: Poetic Justice in Clay," centers on six sculptures, each inspired by a specific poem written by a noted black poet. The poets are: Maya Angelou, Lucille Clifton, Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde, Harryette Mullen and Sonia Sanchez.



Lucy Lacoste and Paul Briggs

The works, part of Briggs' "Cell Personae" series, are built and glazed to resemble prison bars and chains—but, as Briggs explained at an opening on February 13, 2021, they show that despite oppression, the human spirit prevails.

Briggs writes in his artist's statement:

The poetry series came about as a way to look for hope and strength during these difficult times and their impact on people of color. It is my work toward finding courage in light of my ongoing work concerning legal violence and incarceration, the disproportionate number of people impacted

by the pandemic, and the awakening the siege on the capital brought about as we witnessed the different manner in which people protesting under the banner of Black Lives Matter received versus those flying banners of white supremacy. What became clear was the degree to which black poetry included so much pain and power."

At first, I found the work intense and powerful, yet off-putting—I mean, who wants to look at what seem to be iron bars and cages in the midst of a covid pandemic? But when Briggs explained more about what the works showed, they became, for me, profound and freeing. One of my favorites, "I've Known Rivers," was inspired by a poem in which Langston Hughes relates history and flowing water to the depth of the soul. Brigg's sculpture appears to be an iron-bar frame, locked in place by knotted chains—but the knots seem to give way to graceful flowing arcs which escape the bars—forming a waterfall-like structure that cannot be constrained.



I've known Rivers, Paul Briggs, after a langston hughes poem by the same name.



Caged Bird

Another work, Briggs's "Caged Bird, ", which includes sculptures of two birds behind bars, references the Maya Angelou poem of the same name. It's final paragraph reads:

*The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.*

[A link to the photos of the sculptures](https://www.lucylacoste.com/exhibitions/paul-s-briggs) and their poetic inspirations follows the [main writeup](#) at <https://www.lucylacoste.com/exhibitions/paul-s-briggs>

According to Lucy Lacoste, the gallery founder and owner,

Briggs has said that ceramics are, for him, a way to philosophize concretely." In this seemingly contradictory phrase, we already get a sense of his work, in which deep

structures of thought and feeling find material equivalents. Briggs' series Cell Personae exemplifies this approach. It is his personal response to the "other" pandemic raging through America – the mass incarceration of Black people, which is itself an act of grand-scale criminality. The works amount to a firm, resolved protest against this ongoing tragedy. Each is rectilinear, evoking the confining dimensions of a jail cell, and contains within it a nest of serpentine forms. They could be taken as symbolizing the psychic energy of imprisoned individuals – complex thoughts and emotional torment – or perhaps, more optimistically, the inevitability of eventual change. The works are remarkable for re-scripting the basic vocabulary of ceramics (slab construction and coils); Briggs brings to these familiar techniques a wholly new, compressed and clear meaning, of great relevance in this year of reckoning with issues of race in America.

The exhibit, at 25 Main Street, Concord MA, will run Monday-Saturday 12-5 through March 13, 2021.

–Anita M. Harris is a writer, photographer and communications consultant based in Cambridge, MA.

New Cambridge Observer is a publication of the [Harris Communications Group](#), also in Cambridge.