



**Jennie Jieun Lee**

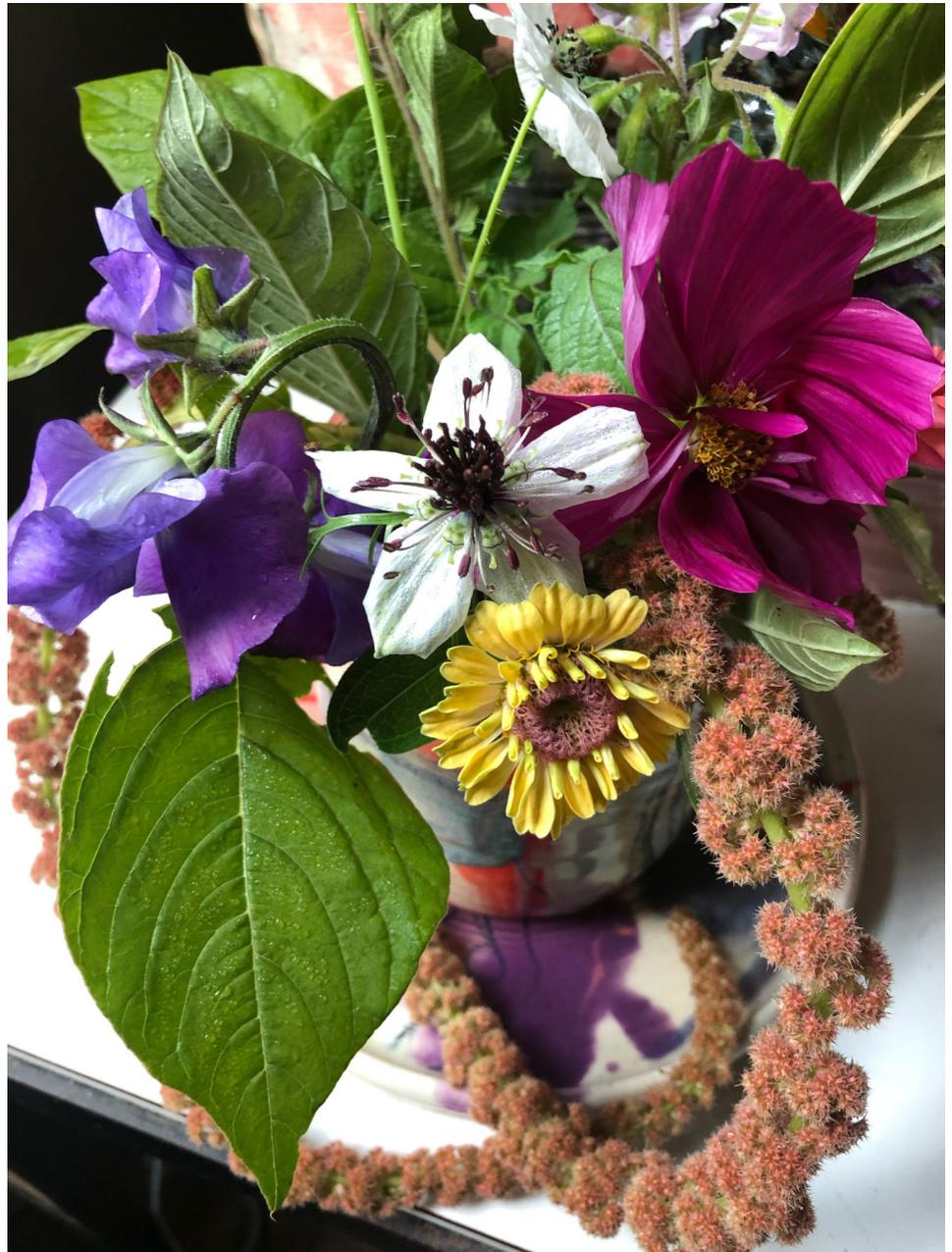
In conversation

*Sowing as the World Ends*

*August 6 - September 11, 2021*

**Jennie Jieun Lee** is an artist who challenges the conventions of ceramic sculpture. Embracing the inherent vulnerability of the medium—that is often tamed by its practitioners—Lee fires her works in various states of uprightness and collapse, and pours copious amounts of glaze on them. Disrupting ceramic's historical association with controlled domesticity, Lee creates busts, vessels, and paintings that oscillate between the deliberate and accidental, and the decorative and distorted. In conjunction with her solo exhibition *Sowing as the World Ends* at Cooper Cole, we took some time to speak with Jennie about her practice.





**CC: Jennie, to start could you tell us a bit about your artistic process?**

JJL: I started making this show about a year ago and originally had no idea what I was going to create. In all honesty, I was depleted and wanted to do something entirely different and or nothing at all.

Usually, I am regularly making work and the objects dictate the bigger picture of their relationship. However, with this show it was really my interest in gardening and learning from farmers on the internet that became the foundation of the exhibition. I began reading books on planting flowers in the fall and winter (winter sowing) and watched tutorials on creating healthy soil for the spring. In preparation for the (hopeful) blooms, I started making ceramic identification markers with the names of each flower and that began the subject migration of flowers and gardening crossover to the paintings for Cooper Cole.

**CC: What is your studio like? We saw some images of experimental arrangements with bowls, vessels, plates, and flowers you grew. How do these objects relate to each other?**

JJL: Me and my boyfriend Graham Collins moved to upstate New York a few years ago. For now, my studio is partially in the dining room, and partially in a sun room. The light is great during the day but terrible at night due to lack of good lighting so I've been getting up early to work.

There were a few reasons to why I began growing flowers. First being, I was never into nature, in fact I was kinda against nature due to fear of the woods, bugs, the unknown so the fact that I was able to grow anything is simply a miracle. Secondly, I wanted to try to grow a flower cutting garden so that my friends in the city could come and pick them and be happy. Thirdly, the woman who used to live here for thirty odd years was an avid gardener. She has since passed away but flower catalogs keep arriving in the mail for her so I felt inclined by her spirit to continue her legacy by learning how to grow flowers.

It is strange that I never really paid attention to the flowers that people put in vessels, particularly ceramic vessels like mine. It took a pandemic with open time and despair of the state of planet to motivate me to learn. Naturally, the flower seeds I gravitated towards planting were ones which mimicked my glaze colors. And as the flowers began popping up, it was addicting to fill every vessel I had laying around along with plates, bowls, cups to see the vivid conversation happen between all of them.

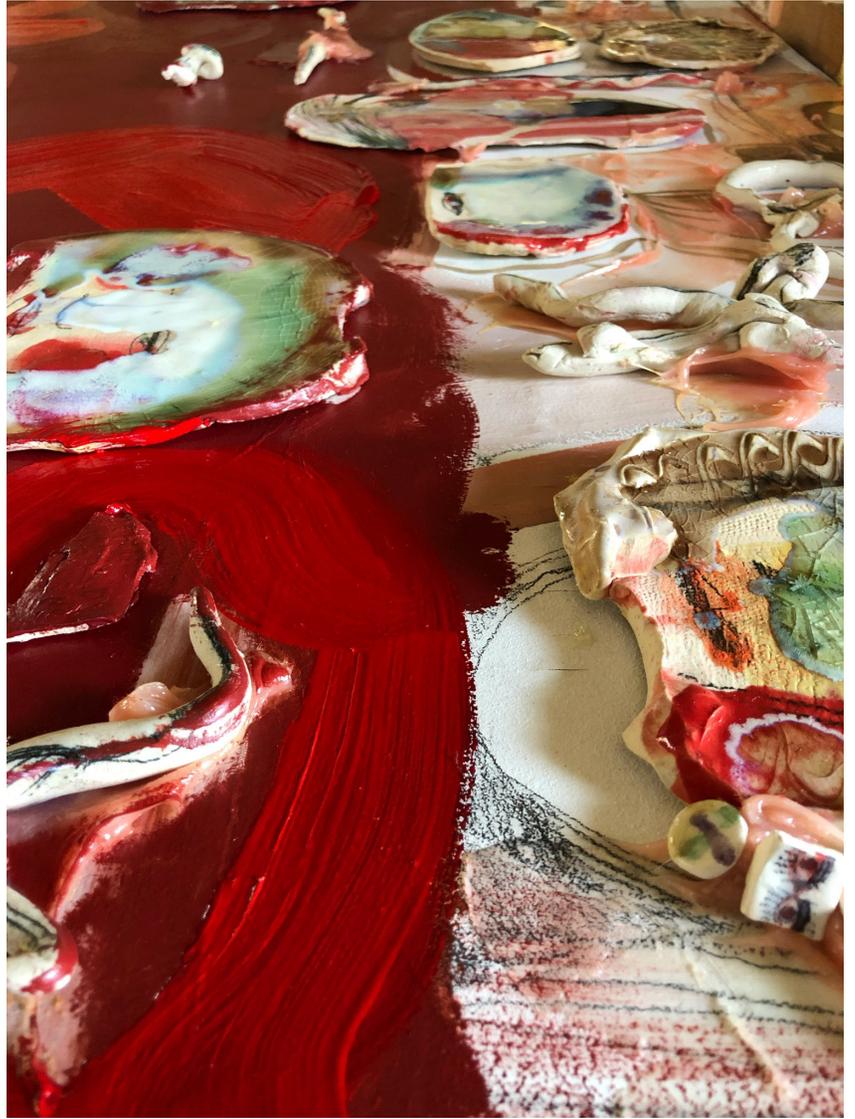


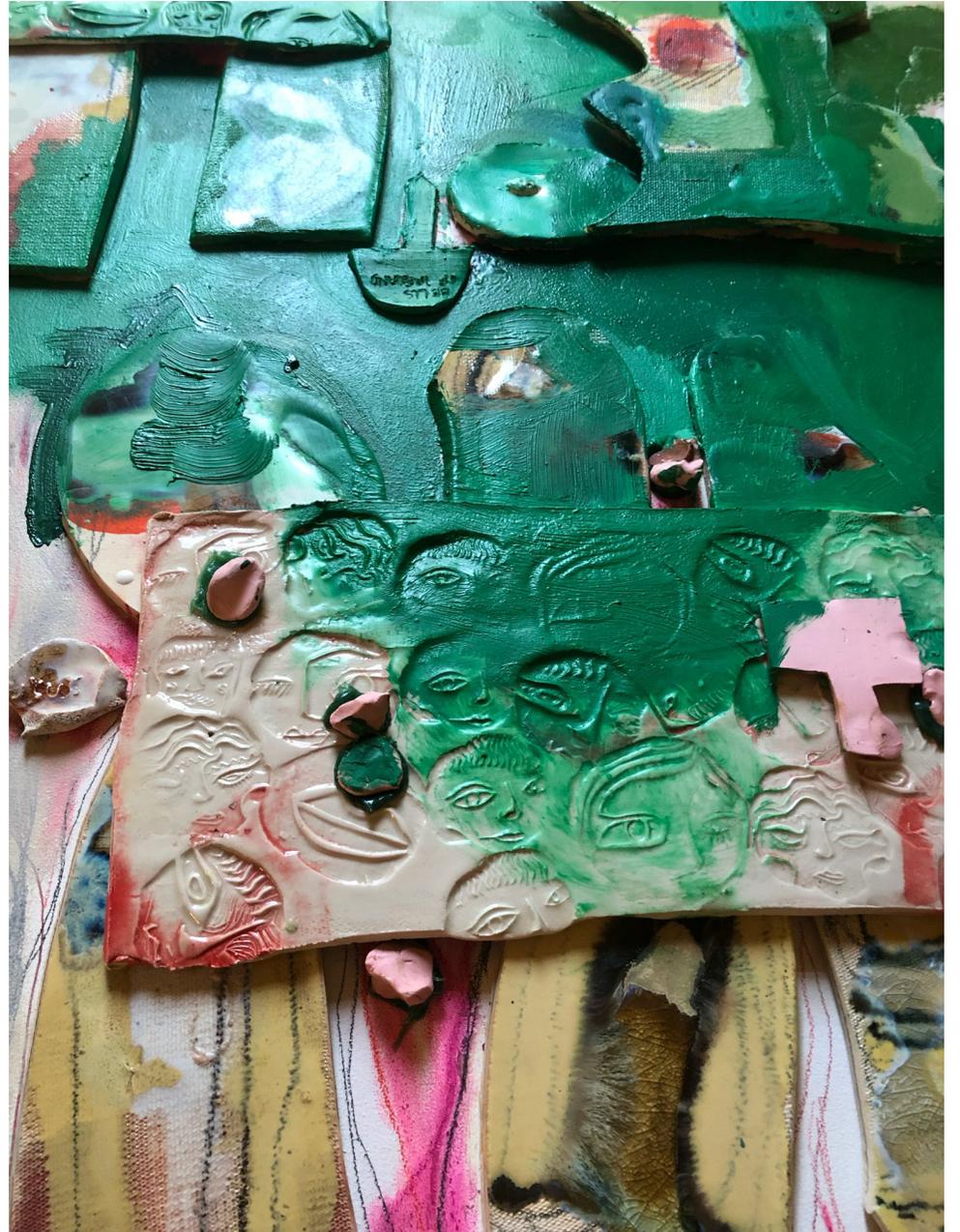
CC: What drew you to ceramics initially?

JJL: My mother brought me to a ceramics class when we first moved to the states in the 1970's. I made a relief of her face with clay and loved it. During undergrad at the Museum School in Boston, I learned how to throw on the wheel and I would do overnight sessions at the school and throw all night. I couldn't stop. Then I took a long break from art and making and returned to ceramics about 8 years ago.

**CC: Using material and form, your works are able to challenge assumptions about domesticity, fixity, and control. Could you tell us how you think about these themes?**

JJL: I love that Betty Woodman started by selling her ceramics in yard sales on her property and craft fairs. I also love that ceramics can be found anywhere to buy and depending on which market they are sold in, they can be worth anywhere from 50 cents to 50 million dollars. As one of the oldest materials to be worked with and on, it always thrills me to find something that is made out of ceramics and is used in a way I never knew. They are used to block bullets in vests, made into ancient tablets where people would write their shopping lists on, they are props used in films to break and throw near people when they are angry.... I like using clay as my foundational material so that I may exploit and explore beyond what it is normally seen as. I also want to, one year, dedicate the entire 365 days just to glaze chemistry and development of color. Give myself the time to focus on merely producing colors, textures and the effect of glaze through experimentation.





**CC: Is there an emotive or psychological aspect to your works?**

JJL: It's all emotional and psychological. The specifics aren't clear while I am in the process of making the work but art to me is about the underlying messiness and dark feelings that we may not be able to talk about right away but needs to get out.

I just finished reading Amy Sillman's essay, *Shit Happens; Notes on Awkwardness* (originally published in Frieze d/e no.22, December 2015-February 2016) where she talks about abstraction and the awkwardness of making a painting and I really feel her when she states "...the ambivalent state of making a painting and being stuck with the uncertain future of the lovable but fallible body that is the artwork. Also when you're painting, you don't really 'know' what you're doing so you're doomed to work in between hoping and groping." Making my show was so much like this— being lost in a foreign space where I felt like I was on my knees moving through a crawlspace under the house with no light and limited air to breathe. The state of the world, the news, bodies piling up from Covid, waking up with daily existential crises. I wasn't sure how to finish these paintings. But going outside for air while working and hoping for these plants to grow helped a lot.

## CC: How do you embrace vulnerability in your practice and works?

JJL: Vulnerability has been having a moment lately. Whether it is covered on a Ted talk to watching the runners' faces right after the finish line in the Olympics. Answering these questions honestly is vulnerability to me; to speak about what affects me at my core and how I deal with it in art. Many mornings I wake up not particularly happy to start the day. Like my friend Stephanie once said, I woke up yesterday, why do I have to do it again today?

I think I try at least to bring some of that energy and angst to the ceramics: the uncertainty and uncomfortability of what is happening now, the anxiety of the future, and the underlying current of inevitable death that will happen to us humans.

Also when I think about mass vulnerability, the show that Graham is bingeing right now titled *Alone* comes to mind. Contestants are by themselves with limited supplies and a video camera, learning to survive outside with nature's harsh elements in some part of this world.

They try to make it 100 days alone and you see them physically and emotionally break down on camera. It's really uncomfortable to witness due to the fact that you are a voyeur to their pain as they cry, sing, go slowly mad to themselves. But I guess this is why the show is in its eighth season and people want to see vulnerability for many reasons. A person could be shut down emotionally and by watching someone cry from pain may tap into their own buried feelings. Sometimes looking at art can do the same thing. It shifts something inside that was unmovable by the regular daily rituals we are trapped by.

CC: Can you tell us about the imagery in your wood panel works?

JJL: The pieces I made for each painting have to do with:

- growing flowers, names of all of the seeds
- computer faces I've gazed upon on the screen during Covid
- various clay bodies and glaze experimentations
- the union of paint and ceramics and how to collapse the boundaries between the two
- shapes, lines made in ceramics acting as pencil and pen lines
- pieces made for functional work like shirt buttons and plates crossing over to wood panels
- ceramic pieces are stuck to the panels with stained resin I mixed to mimic the pink goo that Carol Ann is covered with in Poltergeist 1 when she comes through the ceiling at the end
- flowers and vessels cloning one another in hues and texture







## CC: Is there a thematic or question around the works in *Sowing as the World Ends*?

JJL: The title is my riffing off the book *The Mushroom at the end of the World* by Anna Tsing. It is a wonderful book that Anna Sew Hoy recommended to me during the beginning of Covid which took my mind off for an hour a day of what the world was like outside. I thought, if everything really is falling apart at the seams and the accumulation of violence seem to be snowballing, what are the opposite things I can do with myself? Making paintings and ceramics was not at the top of that list.

The Matsutake mushrooms in her book grow in unexpected places, sites of ruin and human destruction. But communities are built, all looking for this unique specimen which carry a nostalgic and beautiful quality. A very exclusive token, sold for a lot of money and gifted to bridge long term relationships.

That's when I started looking into composting, growing flowers and essentially looking at the nature that was around me in our yard. What could I do with what I have? How can I make the pollinators happy? What can I do to be of service to the earth instead of taking from everything and everyone? Also with flowers, I never could really afford to buy myself any— they are expensive (now I know why— so much work!) and then they die. So like ceramics many years ago, I made a wish to make them myself so I can be surrounded by them and give them away to friends. Now I understand the beauty of their dying. They're not meant to last because they are just like us. Fleeting.

And I think my favorite thing to do lately is give someone flowers.

Also, I liked how my title sounded like a soap opera from the 80's like *As the World Turns....*





CC: What are you reading right now?

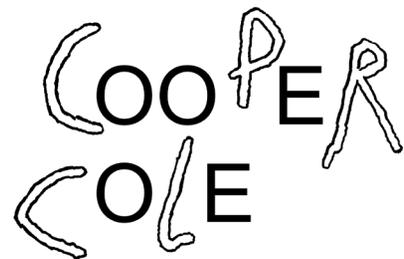
JJL: I just finished *Luster* by Raven Leilani.  
And now I'm almost done with *What I Loved* by Siri Hustvedt

I've never really read fiction because I thought truth is stranger than fiction but during the pandemic, so much has changed internally and if we don't change, we die.

For more information about **Jennie Jieun Lee** please contact:

Cooper Cole  
1134 Dupont St.  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
M6H 2A2

@coopercole  
coopercolegallery.com



COOPER  
COLE