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Weekly Webb: Swedish ceramist Lindvall discusses his work in 'Voices' exhibit

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Have you heard of Dr. Seuss?

Swedish ceramic artist Pontus Lindvall said he's not familiar with the godfather of whimsy, yet Lindvall's work is full of Seuss' humor and off-kilter imagination. That's why a woman at his opening last week at the Yellowstone Art Museum asked the artist about Seuss.

As Seuss must have done in his generation, Lindvall stirs things up. The contemporary artist's work is part of the traveling exhibit "Voices," on display at the YAM through May 3.

The 40-year-old artist was selected by the Swedish Institute to participate in the traveling exhibit because of his distinct personality and bold work. The artwork created by 10 pioneering Swedish ceramic artists was selected by curator Inger Molin, who said they dealt with existential issues using "humor, naturalism or abstractions."

"Their works speak to each other, sometimes past each other and usually all at the same time. Their subjects are today's subjects," Molin wrote in the brochure accompanying the show.

Lindvall was meticulous about one thing during his talk - honesty. He showed slides where the Swedish government placed him in a retirement home to create art. The environment, he said, was filled with folks too sick or too senile to pay attention to what he was doing, but he embraced the experience anyway. Lindvall showed images from a project he completed where he created marble-like surfaces on plastic chairs to poke fun at a castle from the 17th century, which was built of wood that was made to look like stone.

"I try to make my experiences useful in some way," Lindvall said.

For his pieces in the "Voices" exhibit, Lindvall used plastic bowls with spouts as molds to form round shades he painted in loud 1960s-inspired colors. He covered the wires with ceramic tubes equally garish in color and design. Lindvall also covers plastic sewer

tubes with clay and then paints them with spray paint or any other paint that doesn't require a second firing. Why? Because Lindvall acknowledges that he's impatient.

"I'm coming from a background in craft. It's not scary to work with functional stuff. To me, if it

isn't a function in itself, it's a platform so there is function there," Lindvall said.

Billings artist Jane Deschner noted how Lindvall uses his sense of irony and humor to pull people into his work and life.

"He really exemplified the various ways an artist cobbles together a living from various projects," Deschner said.

The "Voices" exhibit crosses two generations of artists and a wide array of artistic styles. YAM curator Robert Manchester said the exhibit ranges from formal work to the "wacky stuff." Artist Renata Francescon stacked thousands of tiny squares of clay onto one another in sculptures that resemble towers of sea shells or rose petals. Eva Hild built a continuous curving line into her airy loops of thin porcelain.

"It's a broad range, but it comes down to two strains - the very formal work that comes out of the modernist movement and the wacky stuff," Manchester said. "Some of it's camp and some of it is artists like Pontus, where clay isn't just what they work with. His approach is different to, say, Hild, who is about making particularly elegant forms."

One artist used found objects, including tea cup handles carefully sawed off of cups and linked together to form a chain.

Already student groups are gravitating toward the show. A ceramic class from Montana State University Billings attended last week's opening, and plans are in the works for other college and high school groups to tour the exhibit.

One of the most memorable parts of Lindvall's talk was when he showed slides of his discovery of hand-knit sweaters created by female prisoners in Albania. Lindvall was so fascinated with the sweater's geometric designs and vibrant colors that he purchased a huge box of them, designed a funky label, and is attempting to market them through a shop in New Zealand.

Lindvall sets a fine example of how one man's imagination can change how we define art. And that, to me, is downright Seussical.