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Time to Let . . . Go with Babak Golkar’s terracotta vessels

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The city’s public life just became much more interesting thanks to [Babak Golkar’s](#) ceramic vessels. Starting on opening night, they have continued to resonate with people.

The vessels break the rules: unlike most art which is only for looking, Golkar’s brown terracotta vessels are meant to be looked at – and touched. Every time someone comes in contact with one of the vessels, she or he comes in contact with clay – with the earth. Maybe people are responding to something elemental in the material.

The vessels aren’t standoffish and intimidating. They’re just the opposite: they’re inviting and engaging.

The installation is called [Time to Let Go . . .](#) It’s at OffSite, the [Vancouver Art Gallery’s](#) public art space on West Georgia at Shangri-La.

All the vessels are resting on burlap bags filled with sand and cement in the reflecting pond. The idea is to take a few steps on the brick platforms that lead to each vessel. Once you’re there, lean over and put your face into one of the snug openings.

At that point, what you do is up to you.

You can scream into it as I did. I found it very therapeutic. You can also whisper, say a prayer, or just stare into the void (see photo below) and listen.



Even though the vessels are in public, looking inside transported me to a private space. Maybe that's another reason why people are responding to the work: it gives them permission to do something private in public.

When I Tweeted the photo above out on opening night, I got a major and immediate response. It was Retweeted and commented on throughout the evening. One woman replied that she thought the vessel was eating the woman's face. It's not, of course – but her reply certainly made me laugh.

I decided to yell into the vessel because I'd been primed after seeing a similar version last year in Golkar's exhibition the [Dialectic of Failure](#) at the West Vancouver Museum. In that exhibition, the ceramic vessels were small enough to pick up in your hand. They were called Scream Pots and were meant to capture and contain a scream. Golkar said he initially came up with the idea for Scream Pots after he found images online created by a Japanese teenager of someone screaming into a plastic terracotta pot. Initially, Golkar thought the image was a product of Japan's long history with ceramics. But if it was, Golkar could find no evidence of that.

But it did get him thinking about ceramics again.

Trained as a ceramicist, he decided to move away from traditional craft to a more conceptual art practice because of the ideas of [Paul Mathieu](#), the influential ceramacist and associate professor at Emily Carr University. Golkar said Mathieu was an important teacher for him because of the way he bridged the gap between art and craft. Golkar said he recalled Mathieu pointing out that Marcel Duchamp's Fountain – arguably one of most influential works of art in the 20th century – was a urinal made out of porcelain. But in all the attention paid to the work as a readymade, everyone forgets or overlooks the importance of the material with which it was made.

But since Golkar left ceramics in 2002, he's been looking for excuses to return to the medium but in a new way. He wanted to both honor the craft but push it into new conceptual directions.

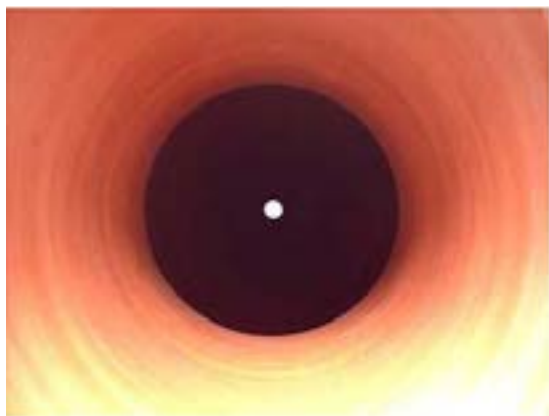
Time to Let Go takes the ideas and objects from the West Vancouver exhibition and builds on them. The vessels are bigger – but so are the ideas.

Previously, the work's title bracketed the work by describing what they were meant to do. In the exhibition at Offsite, the title Time to Let Go is more open ended. Letting go can mean screaming or leaving anxieties behind. It can also refer to the letting go Golkar has had to do as an artist and allow the work to change and maybe even deteriorate over time during the duration of the installation. The title makes it easier for viewers to create their own meanings around the work too.

"I'm letting go of my work in the most vulnerable way," he said. "I'm putting ceramics out in public."

Golkar will be giving a talk about Time to Let Go on Saturday starting at 1 pm in the Blue Moon Theatre, Shangri-La, and then moving outside to the installation.

It's a busy year for [Golkar](#). In September, he has two exhibitions opening on the same day in Dubai and Brussels; In October, he'll be showing his work for the first time in Tehran at Sazman Ab Gallery in collaboration with West Vancouver Museum. Later in October, he'll be showing in La Biennale de Montréal. [Time to Let Go](#) . . . continues at Offsite to Sunday, Sept. 28.



*All photos by Kevin Griffin. Bottom photo shows looking into one of the terracotta vessels. For regular Art Seen updates, follow me on Twitter [@KevinCGriffin](#)