

Corporeal Manifestations

A Review by Colette Copeland

TAKING INVENTORY OF MY WRITING OVER THE PAST FEW months, my focus has been on artists whose work explores abject beauty. Perhaps this points to a recurring trend in the contemporary art world or, conversely, my macabre sensibility in choosing exhibitions to review. *Corporeal Manifestations* fits within this genre. In conjunction with the 2010 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Art's national conference (NCECA), curator Sasha Reibstein collaborated with the Mütter Museum to present 11 figurative ceramic artists whose work explores the physiological and psychological elements of human experience.

Housed in the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, the Mütter Museum features preserved collections of strange anatomical specimens and medical instruments. Visitors can gawk at the famous Siamese twins, Chang and Eng or examine John Wilke Booth's vertebra. My favourite 'horrific' specimens are the book covers crafted from human skin. The museum's original mission was to assist doctors in furthering their knowledge in the treatment of disease and human anatomical defects. Today, education is still the primary focus. The current mission is to "help the public understand the mysteries and beauty of the human body and to appreciate the history of diagnosis and treatment of disease".

While the museum's initiative is to educate and enlighten, the collection also functions as a dark tourist site; a site associated with death, disaster and/or suffering. One of the debates surrounding dark tourism is the balance between tourist consumption and commodification of death for entertainment value versus education. Further complicating the debate is the question of the role of art within a scientific museum, specifically one that is also a dark tourist site. The Mütter Museum provides a specific context with which to interpret the artists' work in *Corporeal Manifestations*. In fact, it is an impossibility to disassociate the museum's history and collection when interpreting the artists' work.

Corporeal Manifestations is the first exhibition at the museum that is not directly related to the collection. Curator Reibstein, however, asked some of the participating artists to create work specifically for the exhibition. The resulting sculptures address themes of sexuality, body modification and gender identification. While all eleven artists could be loosely categorized as figurative, Jessica Kreutter's, Jason Briggs', Kate McDowell's, and Colleen Toledano's works diverge into surrealism.

Jessica Kreutter's *Oblation* (2008) features a lace-covered dining table laden with provisions. Situated on a silver platter is an indistinguishable main course, vaguely approximating a roast pig. The mutant feast beast is not of this world – neither human nor animal. The silverware resembles severed limbs. Defined as a religious offering

or sacrifice, this oblation conjures images of cannibalism.

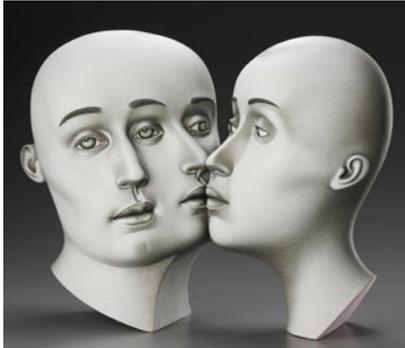
Both Briggs and MacDowell employ the binary relationship between attraction and repulsion in their works. Crafted from porcelain, Briggs' otherworldly chimeras *Baby* (2009) and *Cherry* (2009) are displayed on velvet cushions. Like Kreutter's work, the objects transform into mutant specimens served up for the audience's consumption. Interspersed throughout the organisms are tiny black hairs, adding a sexualized component to the work. MacDowell's ceramics source the mythical. *Serpentine* features a handbuilt porcelain brain encompassed by snakes. A few excised ears poke through the snakes, rendering the medusa-like figure senseless, except for the gift of hearing. In *Migrant* (also handbuilt porcelain) two dismembered feet transmogrify into tree roots.

Toledano's minimalist sculptures playfully reference 'Dada'. The slipcast porcelain work entitled, *Floor Body Plan* (2009) mimics an architectural building floor plan. Reducing the body to its foundational structure, the work is devoid of any humanizing element. The work *Skin Core* (2009, slipcast porcelain, foam and flocking) resembles a mammoth three-foot donut. A constructed manhole cover imprinted with the word sewer fills the middle of the donut sculpture. Perhaps a wry comment on the body as a cesspool?

The other seven artists investigate aberrations of the human body. Melissa Mencini appropriates the canon of high sculpture with her works *Hypertelorism* (2007) and *Pure Motor Hemiparesis* (2007). Her use of ceramics and paint emulates marble. Using the traditional bust form, she elevates those with anomalies to the status of heroes. Anne Drew Potter's terracotta *Piggy* (2007) features a child with an oversized head, curled arms and shrunken feet. The figure's face is contorted in agony. Unlike Mencini's busts that venerate deformity, Potter's figure is vulnerable and exposed. Tip Toland also employs the bust form but without a pedestal. A hyper-realistic elderly woman entitled *Survivor* (2005) confronts the viewer with her unwavering stare. A carefully coiffed mohair wig contrasts the harsh wrinkles and lines demarcating her age. Quarter-sized holes pockmark her face and body, rupturing the realism. The crater-like wounds remind me of a cross between a hollow-point bullet hole and a hunk of Swiss cheese.

Tom Bartel's forlorn ceramic children with severed arms recall Brad Pitt's character in the *Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Although child-like in stature, Bartel's figures have old faces and souls. In the *Red Headed Step Child* (2010) sculpture, the artist painted red polka dots on the child's body, connoting a decorative pattern or perhaps referencing bloody bullet holes.

Sergei Isupov's work refers to gender anomalies. In



Top left: Jason Briggs. **Baby**. 2009. Porcelain, hair and chiffon. 9 x 12 x 15 in.

Top centre: Melissa Mencini. **Hypertelorism**. 2007. Ceramic and paint. 23 x 12 x 10 in.

Top right: Roxanne Jackson. **Cadaver Study with Grill**. 2009. Ceramic. 14 x 7 x 10 in.

Left centre: Sergei Isupov. **Halfway**. 2008. Porcelain. 16 x 20 x 9 in. Photo courtesy of Ferrin Gallery.

Right centre: Kate McDowell. **Migrant**. 2009. Porcelain. 6.5 x 20 x 16 in.

Above left: Anne Drew Potter. **Piggy**. 2007. Terracotta. 8 x 11 x 24 in.

Above centre: Christina West. **Hide**. 2009. Ceramic and flocking. 54 x 24 x 19 in.

Above right: Colleen Toledano. **Skin Core**. 2009. Porcelain, foam and flocking. 34 x 34 x 12 in.

All images courtesy of the artists, unless noted.

Halfway (2008) the artist explores traits that signify gender identification. His sculptural heads morph between male and female characteristics. He incorporated three-dimensional modelling software but hand-rendered the stylized porcelain heads.

The most realistic figurative works belong to Christina West. Using clay and flocking, her life-sized female forms confront their viewer with their vulnerability. In *Hide* (2009), a pregnant woman with arms behind her head faces the wall, eyes averted downward. Flocked patches on her buttocks and belly suggest that she is wearing an uncomfortable skin. In *Untitled* (2009), the figure is on her hands and knees, again eyes averted downward. A blot of ceramic bodily secretions pools under her legs, further heightening the compromising position.

Addressing hip-hop culture, Roxanne Jackson embeds some 'bling' into her ghoulish rendition of a skull in *Cadaver Study with Grill* (2009). Googling 'grillz', I discover that KrunkGrillz.com will customize *Gansta Grillz*,

making one's teeth feel 'krunk.' Apparently your grillz will stay on even after death.

Defined, abject beauty refers to beauty that is contemptible or wretched. A lesser-used connotation means obsolete or cast-aside. The artists in *Corporeal Manifestations* challenge us to question our assumptions about beauty by uniting that which both seduces and horrifies. Contextualising the works within the Mütter Museum collection creates an additional layer of meaning in the artists' works, thus intensifying the viewers' responses. In this case, art and science merge to both edify and educate.

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