

Figuration at the Clay Studio



*A Review by
Colette Copeland*

SAFELY SUBVERSIVE DESCRIBES THE RECENT EXHIBITION *Figuration* at the Clay Studio in Philadelphia. Featuring seven contemporary clay artists, the exhibition addresses current explorations in figurative sculpture. From a curatorial perspective, it is always a daunting challenge to present a survey of genre-based work. Should the exhibition focus on common themes found in artists' work or should the emphasis be on diversity in concept and process? Given the relatively small size of the gallery, it is not feasible for The Clay Studio to present a comprehensive survey. The minimalist approach to the exhibition, however, does not work in the gallery's favour. With only nine works on display, the gallery felt empty. Easily, double the number of sculptures could have fit without crowding issues. The spartan exhibition made me wonder if budget constraints prevented the gallery from showcasing more artists.

The *Figuration* press release states that "Humankind's fascination with himself/herself has been represented in pictorial or sculptural works for thousands of years . . . Few contemporary makers in clay in the past 40 years have created works that are both formally and conceptually compelling. This has changed in recent years with more artists creating works that demonstrate both an understanding of the complexities of sculpting or rendering a figure, while simultaneously charging the work with relevant and resonant meaning." While I agree with the statement's premise, the over-arching generality prevents a cohesive framing of conceptual discourse surrounding the artists' works. What are some of the issues that the artists are exploring and how do their works challenge traditional or existing paradigms surrounding figurative sculpture?

Despite these few objections, the works on display are compelling. The exhibiting artists examine issues of gender, sexuality and body aberration. I was familiar with some of the artists, since some of their similar works were featured in the *Corporeal Manifestations* show at the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia during NCECA last fall. I reviewed the exhibition for issue 82 of *Ceramics: Art and Perception*.

Clayton Keyes, Anne Drew Potter and Melissa Mencini investigate body abnormalities. Keyes' clay work *Arrival*, features a newborn baby girl, suspended from the wall. Her face is contorted into an anguished cry, with each detailed crease and wrinkle giving the appearance of an aged, withered woman. Keyes' proficient but subtle use of yellow and pink paint mixed with the glaze produces a look of veined, paper-thin skin. The infant's belly button protrudes. Her left hand and right foot are mangled, reptilian-like with webbing and mottled blue-green textured skin. Is the child a result of genetic cloning gone awry or a product of a toxic environment? Abject in her beauty, she demands the viewers' attention.

In *Rally the People* (2009) by Anne Drew Potter, a gender-ambiguous infant sculpted from terracotta lies on a low white pedestal. The child's protruding



Facing page: Clayton Keyes. *Arrival*.
Above: Melissa Mencini. *Innocent When You Dream*. 2011.
Below: *Rally the People*. 2009. Unglazed terracotta, handbuilt and high-fired. 24 x 11 x 8 in.

belly, unformed facial features with closed eyes and skinny arms resemble either a premature infant or a malnourished child. Potter describes her work as "performative objects that address the ways in which social meaning is projected onto the body". In addition to manipulating gender signifiers, the artist also references social injustice. The title *Rally the People* suggests a call to action – perhaps an end to war or hunger or political oppression. Potter's work presents a powerful narrative, one that resonates most strongly in her installations. In works such as the big head boys and the red army girls, the multiple figures interact with one another, creating complex layers of meaning. I wish the Clay Studio exhibition included more than a singular figure, as well as a piece more dissimilar from what was shown in the Mutter Museum exhibition last year.

Melissa Mencini's work was also featured in *Corporeal Manifestations*. She appropriates the canon of high sculpture, venerating those with disabilities to the status of





Above left: Paolo Porelli. *Electra*. 2010. Glazed porcelain. 54.5 x 33 cm.

Above right: Paolo Porelli. *Pomona*. 2010. Glazed porcelain. 57 x 31 cm.

Below: Lee Stoliar. *One of the Ways XVI*. 2008. 1024 x 1024 cm.

heroes. Her earthenware work *Innocent When You Dream*, is a bust of a person with Down's Syndrome. The male figure's eyes are too closely set, mouth open, with an almost-protruding tongue. His tie is slightly askew and he proudly wears a pastel blue balloon hat (also sculpted from earthenware.) It is the type of hat that a clown would make for a child while visiting a fair or circus, except lewder. The front 'balloon' resembles testicles, which creates an uncomfortable tension playing on the intersection between innocent and profane. As children, we are taught not to stare at those who are different. Yet Mencini not only gives us permission to



stare, her work requires it.

Lee Stoliar's work also generates discomfort in the viewer. His terracotta work *One of the Ways* is the most sexually explicit in the exhibition. The figure emerges from a wooden box and in the tangle of limbs, it is difficult to tell if it is one mutant figure or two. Three breasts, four arms, three legs and one head wrapped in a contortionist embrace, perform cunnilingus on itself or its other half.

Italian ceramist Paolo Porelli's work adds some humour to the exhibition. Writer Lori-Ann Touchette dubbed Porelli's sculptures "ultra-pop idols". Inspired by Greek and Roman mythology and contemporary culture, Porelli's glazed, white porcelain figures infuse the archetypal with surrealistic kitsch. In *Pomona*, the figure's head is a circular mass of spoons. She holds a donut in one hand while two small pigs graze at her feet. In Roman mythology, Pomona was the goddess of fruitful abundance. Porelli's goddess is the goddess of over-consumption, proffering sugary, gluttonous indulgence. The artist's other sculpture *Electra* is a white nurse-like or shaman-like figure holding a box with a long tube/cord. On the box is a carved 'E'. There are two Electras in Greek mythology: Electra who was raped by Zeus and Electra, daughter of King Agamemnon; and Queen Clytemnestra. It is unclear whether Porelli's *Electra* is there to use electricity to save or to kill.

Artists Christina West and Pattie Chalmers both explore gender roles in their work. Hung on the wall with hooks protruding under her arms, West's female figure wears a tortured expression. Dressed in a pink and brown Victorian-patterned body suit, her limbs and head are slip cast with white glaze, while her torso



is literally stuffed. Her head is contorted to the side in obvious agony. Like Keyes and Potter's work, West's sculpture is both terrifying and compelling. We are passive witnesses to her raw human pain. Hanging like a piece of meat, she is a fragile punching bag.

My favourite works in the exhibition are by Chalmers. The subversiveness so prevalent in the other works is quietly nuanced in Chalmers' clay and mixed media tableaux. In *Constant Vigilance*, a woman in a large Victorian skirt slings a shotgun over her shoulder while clasping a pair of binoculars. A blimp hovers overhead. She looks away from the viewer with what only can be described as a 'shit-eating grin'. What is she heeding? What is she hiding? In *Yellow Roses*, a woman with a look of resignation holds a letter in her hand. A small vase with yellow roses sits on the table behind her. In the corner there is a shrouded ghost-like figure. The linoleum floor is slanted so that the figure and the furniture should slide to their dooms. All appear to defy gravity. Many questions come to mind. What news did the woman receive? Why is the figure or statue covered/hidden from view? What interests me so much about these works is the ambiguity merged with a subtle tension. Something is amiss but we are not privy to the outcome.

Subversion or the abject appears to be a recurring theme in contemporary figurative sculpture at the moment. I am not convinced that it is the only conceptual direction that ceramics artists are exploring,

however. I am not sure if that was the curatorial intention. If so, having a statement that framed the theme within a larger context would have enhanced the exhibition.

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Left: Christina West. *Untitled Sculpture*.
Top: Pattie Chalmers. *Constant Vigilance*. 2011.
Above: Pattie Chalmers. *Yellow Roses*. 2011.