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Massachusetts's Fuller Craft Museum's Powerful Ceramic Figurine Exhibit

Fresh Figurines: Politically Provocative and Deeply Personal, Universal Themes Explored in Clay

Posted on 15 December 2011 | By Richard Fritswell



Nothing becomes immediately clear upon entering the Fuller Craft Museum's current exhibition, *Fresh Figurines*—these works, gathered from wide-ranging sources under the skillful eye of curator, Gail Brown, will redefine your notion of figurative porcelain. This is NOT your grandmother's safe and sentimental collection, sitting behind glass in the corner hutch! While not quite a send-up of a centuries-old tradition of three-dimensional image making, the porcelain pieces on display are politically and socially edgy—part satire, part provocation, part self-reflection—while all the time referencing their historic vocabulary in 18th and 19th century European romanticism and 20th century middle-American kitsch.

Left: Chris Antemann (detail), *A Tea Party* (2010), porcelain, decals, luster. Kamm Trust Foundation Collection, artes fine arts magazine



Fuller Crafts Museum, Brockton, MA

When figurines succeed in pushing the envelope of our assumptions, they do so because the radical social narrative staked out by much of today's contemporary art has not typically considered the artist working in clay, particularly on a diminutive scale. But, this exhibit challenges that premise, doing so in ways that opens doors for a powerful body of work from figurative artists working in the ceramic medium. According to Gail Brown, with a long history of curating in the crafts world, "the work of these contemporary artists features diverse ideas, arresting forms, and provocative subjects [which] illustrate the continually-evolving tradition of figurative ceramics. These monumental and meaningful statements in small formats hold a fascinating disproportionate power—adding dramatic resonance and a sense of intimate communication."

Ronna Neuschwander, an artist exhibiting in the show (*below, left*), provides a prospective on mankind's long-standing fascination with the creation of figurative talismans: "Humans have had the urge to create and possess figurines since prehistoric times. The *Venus of Hobls Fels*, the first of the venus figurines was made approximately 40,000 years ago, and is the oldest example of figurative prehistoric art. This figure was presumed to be an amulet related to sexuality and fertility. Likewise, the *Venus of Willendorf*, created in 22,000 BCE holds a power mysterious and intriguing. It is believed that people created and carried or wore figurines to



to give protection or the powers they desired. The attraction of figurines then and now tends to be one of identifying with certain

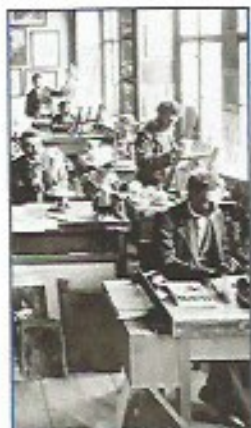


attributes one wants to acquire. Today we create and collect these figurines to identify with their qualities—be they elite, genteel and refined, or exotic and provocative—they are powerful and desirable. By taking the garb of these images, and disassembling them, we may get a fresh look at who we are and what we yearn to be."

Left: (far) Ronna Neuschwander, *Breaking the Mold I* (2011), ceramic mosaic, goul. Courtesy of the artist; (near) *Venus of Willendorf* (24-22,000 BCE, stone. Collection Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Inspired by the past, yet distanced from it, *Fresh Figurines* is redolent with contemporary political and popular cultural messaging, intent on recasting gender roles, social mores and self image; re-worked with a generous infusion of traditional glazes, early-familiar motifs (for those of us who remember that knick-knack shelf of our childhood) and re-appropriated classical themes. Curator, Brown, makes the point in her overview of the exhibition that, "Throughout history, small-scale, self-contained articles endure: from artifacts, effigies and tomb objects to exquisitely-crafted handmade figures and scenarios referencing life style and social mores, the pop culture of the day and the celebration of tribal figures, in situ. From European porcelain houses, Chinese export porcelain, and English folk ceramics, to the glut of manufactured collectibles with retail goals focused on the mantle piece and, since the days of the Grand Tour, the unrelenting, international plethora of tawdry and ubiquitous tourist souvenirs, figurines reign. The presence and persistence of these formats—from *objet d'art* to the commodities of the day—inspire and/or provoke."

In its historical context, the name 'china' is a direct reference to the origins of porcelain in China over 3000 years ago. In the seventeenth century, trading routes were established between the Far East and Europe introducing this refined and translucent ceramic to a new continent.



The Painting Room, Meissen
Factory, ca. late 19th C.

Europeans were fascinated by the beauty and mystery of porcelain. The tremendous demand for porcelain as well as the inherent difficulty in transport inspired many Europeans to attempt to replicate its qualities. Unlike cruder forms of earthenware, porcelain is industrially made, specifically with the fine, white clay of decomposed granite rock. This white clay is what gives porcelain its beautiful translucency. It was not until 1709 that German chemist, Johann Friedrich Böttger, in collaboration with two other chemists, devised a formula for porcelain. The following year, production commenced in the small town of Dresden. The factory was later moved to the more metropolitan city of Meissen as insulation from the political turmoil that was taking place in the European countries, east of Germany.

In its first few decades, the Meissen factory manufactured mostly table service. It wasn't until the late 1730's that a talented young sculptor by the name of Johann Joachim Kändler created small figurines in porcelain. Soon, the entire royal court community had their likenesses reproduced as delicate figurines. For many generations to follow, these intricately-executed porcelain figures served as a principle mainstay for the original Meissen Company, inspiring many other manufacturers on the Continent and in England to follow suit.



Chris Antemann (detail), *A Tea Party* (2010), porcelain, decals, luster. Karin Teapot Foundation Collection

Among the forty-two artists whose sculpture makes up the eye-opening *Fresh Figurines* exhibit, certain pieces garnered particular attention. The show's *pièce de résistance* is a multi-figure work, clearly informed by the Meissen legacy: Chris Antemann's *A Tea Party*. In a cleverly-conceived display of overstatement, a banquet table is heaped with confections of every imaginable variety. This is action-central for a gathering of naked men and barely-clothed, coquettish women, languishing over tea and titillation, reminiscent of the salacious dinner-seduction scene from Thomas Fielding's 1749 fictional narrative, *Tom Jones*. The drama and sexual energy being played out between party guests is skillfully captured by Antemann's deft manipulation of clay at the subtlest level. The "fourth wall" is clandestinely breached by an alluring seductress, who invites the viewer into the party. She sits astride her chair, semi-concealed from her naked courtier by a fan, making sly eye contact with museum-goers, as we vicariously—if only momentarily—become part of the festivities. The artist summarizes the work when he writes, "I am expanding upon my previous parodies of decorative figurines by delving into the darker side of relationships and domestic rites: twisted tales of master and servant, the innocence of the maid, the dominance of patriarchal desire. Tricked out in frilly camouflage, these characters disregard tradition, exposing society's custom of unmentionables."



Pavel Amromin, *The Photographer* (2008), porcelain, glaze, underglaze, luster. Courtesy, the artist.

Another work that addresses the curatorial observation of "added drama and inverse power to the diminution of size by the material prowess, complexity of narrative, uninhibited natures and significant social comment," is *The Photographer*, one of a series of works on display by Pavel Amromin. Benign-looking, floppy-eared domesticated creatures, depicted in soft, earth-tone pastel glaze, play out their small dramas on Baroque gold-trimmed stands, lush with delicate beds of grass and fanciful flowers. On closer examination, though, they are strangely hybridized human figures with dog-like heads, engaged in acts of atrocity and inhumanity. In one scene, a weapon-bearing creature, naked except for black combat boots, blithely photographs another naked, dead body—thoughtless and insensitive, perhaps; but symptomatic of our "war breaks out, details at 11" cultural ethic.

For Amromin, the artist, "There is a long tradition in art, literature and film by which the act of war is venerated and integrated into the social fabric. Gore and terror of combat are transformed into a bittersweet adventure of shared courage, sacrifice and nobility. Chaos is turned into order and the senseless gains meaning. The same transformation occurs in the work, however while some things are sanitized and glazed over, some are left in plain sight. The figurine has long been an object representing the jubilant self-image of the patron. It asks: 'Is this glory? Is this the dignity, purity and beauty of a soldier's mission?'"



Cynthia Consentino, *Virgin II* (2011), commercial figurine, dolls legs, mixed media. Courtesy, the artist.

Fresh Figurines brings home the message of the sacred, as well as the profane. A piece by Cynthia Consentino offers a gently humanizing perspective on a familiar icon; although the artist expressed a concern at the show's opening that it might offend some. Her *Virgin II* invites a reconsideration of the classic, prayerful pose of Mary, mother of the Christ Child, with parting blue robes and oversized legs in plain view. This theanthropic interpretation is designed to shed light on our humanity, as well as on the subject, herself. It calls the question of idealizing our New Testament heroine and invites a more immediate (and perhaps genuine) connection to universal motherhood—someone without the trappings of myth, and capable of 'standing on her own two feet.'

Consentino notes, "*Virgin II* is part of a new series of sculptures incorporating commercial figurines with sculpted parts. Taking the ubiquitous knick knack, or religious statue and altering it allows for new meaning and a broadened role for the familiar. Originally a white porcelain figurine (stopping below elbows) her lower body was sculpted and commercial doll legs were added to complete her figure. It is not meant to be irreverent but rather be a playful re-examination of an influential figure."



Jeremy R. Brooks, *Form-Form* (2011), cast plaster, paint. Courtesy, the artist.

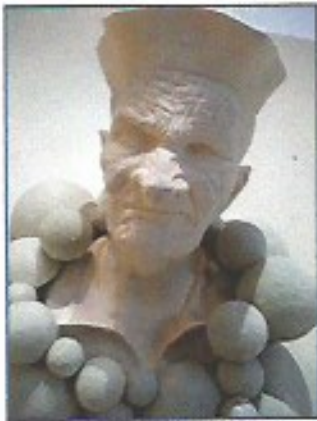
Equally as compelling as *Virgin II*, but for different reasons, is Jeremy Brooks's *Form-Form*, an enigmatic work whose flowing organic, blue-gray painted form stands out in marked contrast to other more figurative pieces in the exhibit. Perhaps informed by Edward Tufte's *Negative Space* studies or Rachael Whitbread's 1993 groundbreaking, *House*, *Form-Form* explores a hidden construct that undergirds a familiar object: the space beneath a garden statue of Jesus. Denatured through transformation, this subtly-conceived form of rolling contours and intriguing shifts of light and dark becomes a discourse on one of many hidden structural underpinnings, forever unnoticed in our daily rituals (imagine: bridge girders beneath your commuter route; the shapes on the underside of your dining room table, the dark tunnel complex beneath a steam-emitting manhole cover).



Rachael Whitbread, *House* (1993), concrete.

Brooks challenges the viewer to find beauty in the mundane, in the same way that the visible Jesus that inspired his work—an iconic all-weather figure of Christian salvation—is slip-cast in Hydrocal and painted to achieve mimetic value as a model for beauty, truth and salvation. By virtue of its ubiquity, it then becomes a numbingly-familiar fixture in the landscape. What is hidden, and subsequently revealed, he believes, can also achieve renewed relevance and aesthetic appeal. He describes it this way: "*Form-Form* is a cast interior space of a slip-cast figurine (Jesus in the Garden). It testifies to a shifted use of material, form and concept.

The work is categorized by a search for the tension that exists between an initial iconographic source [...] and a related abstract form—the cast interior space of the figurine.”



Hide Sadohara, *Untitled* (2011).
Recycled Stoneware. Courtesy, the
artist.

Mortality may be the message of Hide Sadohara's wall sculptures, *Untitled*: Images of an aging Popeye and Olive Oyle, constructed of recycled stoneware. Reminiscent of animated cartoon shorts from the 1950s and 60s, we are asked to recall a pre-pubescent time when notions of immortality and invincibility went unexamined; a pre-politically correct period in our history when villains with black hats and curly mustaches could pummel the hero with impunity, only to then see him miraculously return to normal and save the girl! Sadohara stares into the faces of these mythic figures and imagines their humanity. No slick airbrush or forgiving artist's hand here. In defiance of the once-heroic gods and goddesses of ancient Olympus, the tribulations of aging can be seen extracting a toll on our contemporary version of a muscle-bound, spirit-guzzling Zeus and demurring Aphrodite.

Abraham Lincoln said, "By age forty, you get the face you deserve." For Sadohara's once-ageless Popeye character, a hard life, fear and conflict—a roadmap of furrows, wrinkles and contorted features—seem writ large on the face of the figure. More a metaphor for the human condition than a caricature, Sadohara's work reminds the viewer (who is compelled to make eye contact because of the way the piece is hung), that Popeye (and Olive, also on display) may have been heroes for another, simpler time; and that for each of us, the passage of time brings us closer to confronting our own frailties and demise. As the artist describes it, "My intention for this particular piece is to provoke the sense of irony by making them life size, especially when the (Invited) artists were asked to execute their work within the context of the figurine format/size. I also decided to finish my work with the realistic rendition of the human anatomy. There is something unnerving about seeing cartoon characters brought to life when those same features are stuck on the face of a realistic depiction of that character."



Paul Delaroche, *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey* (1833), o/c. National Gallery, London.

I am reminded of Paul Delaroche's monumental 1833 narrative painting, *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*—a poignant study of adolescent innocence and courage in the face of royal predatory ambition—when I view Jessica Stoller's *Untitled*, in the exhibit. For generations of National Gallery visitors, the work has served as reminder of the expendable role of women at the dawn of an age when enlightened thinking would not-quite-soon-enough redefine gender and social roles, as

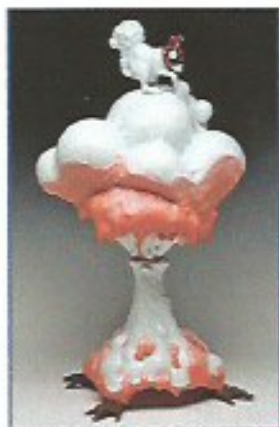
Western Europe inched toward modernism. Stoller evokes tales of risk and mortality linked to beauty and social station in her figurative representation of a severed head resting beneath the frivolous adornments of privilege. Vibrant and attractive women gone missing, later to be found dead and dismembered, could be story ripped from today's headlines, and then rendered here in clay.



Jessica Stoller, *Untitled* (2010), porcelain, china paint, luster. Courtesy, the artist.

And so, Stoller applies the modeling techniques of another, more romantic era, to weave a tale of death and perverted ambition, proffering a dose of irony in the process. Deceptively charming and initially perplexing, it is only with more careful study of the piece does the realization dawn that something is amiss here.

Stoller's oeuvre, as she describes it (only one piece appeared in *Fresh Figurines*), would likely resonate with the London crowds often found studying Delaroche's *Jane Grey*—a painting with appeal to generations of museum-goers—as a study in the fine line between virtuous innocence and feminine ambition, power and its perversion. As she puts it, "The figures in my work range from Rococo nobility and adolescent girls in petticoats and bows, to women evoking religious martyrs of the past. The notion of these collected objects as predominantly decorative, weak and inherently female are subverted as the figures depicted are purposely innocent and sexual, self-sacrificing and violent, powerful and unaware of the power they possess. Through figures with contorted facialists, bound feet with miniature dimensions and oddities which inspire imitation and awe, I examine cultural ideas of perfected beauty and its relationship to the grotesque. Through seemingly benign in content and size, my figurines hint at an alternate world of intricate perversion."



Linda Cordell, *Jolie Laide Masquerade* (2011), porcelain, bronze, foam. Courtesy, the artist.

With just a partial sampling of the wide variety of works on display at the Fuller Craft Museum's *Fresh Figurines* reviewed here, it is well worth the trip to discover, in Gail Brown's curated show, the enduring power of small-scale works to enthrall in the world where the focus is often on *BIG*. Figurative ceramics appeal, for reasons linked to our collective unconscious as a symbol-rich civilization, for their effigic properties, their paired-association to childhood memories and comforting domiciles long-vanished, as well as to our instinctive propensity to collect. This last point ushers in a connection to the work in *Fresh Figurines* worth underscoring. With many of the companies producing figurines for decades, if not hundreds of years (i.e.—Messen, Hummel, Nymphenburg, Della Robbia, Chinese traditional porcelain, to name a few), links to a contemporary audience are well-established and well-known. But, once again, these are not your grandmother's porcelains.

While glazing and firing techniques have remained largely unchanged over the years, contemporary works imagined and executed by ceramicists are extending the boundaries of the art form to new frontiers. Politically and socially informed, technically agile and heaped with narrative purpose, today's *Fresh Figurines* are not merely anchored in the past, but act as powerful and compelling messengers about a post-modern world-in-flux. I believe exhibiting artist, Linda Cordell (*above left*), summarizes the agenda of the contemporary ceramicist best when she says, "Figurines are social propaganda; carefully displayed vignettes announce beliefs, ideals and desires of the owners. The artifice of portraying an animal in an idealized setting defies our unease and contentious relationship with nature. The distortion and abstraction of the platform contrasts with the diminished masked object—nothing is what it seems."

By Richard Friswell, Managing Editor

Fresh Figurines: A New Look at an Historic Art Form

Fuller Crafts Museum, Brockton, MA

Now through February 5, 2012