PERMISSION TO STARE: CHRISTINA WEST’S SCULPTURAL DIMENSION

LORI-ANN TOUCHE TET

Sleep of Reason, MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2006, painted ceramic, standing male figure is 48” tall, female figures are life-size.

The figural objects and installations that I make begin with questions about the relationship of the exterior to the interior, the limits of what we can know about other people given that we never have direct access to their interiority, and how our physical encounters with representations of bodies can affect perceptions of our selves. The resulting figures exist at strange scales, often exhibit unnatural colours, and merge notions of the private with the public while overlaying the serious with the playful.

Christina West is one of the most original artists in America for her level of invention combined with an extraordinary ability to simulate reality. Her hyper-realistic figures enter space and inhabit it in a manner that recalls the primal state and projects a profound dimension of life. The expressiveness of the vivid material of the sculpture is replaced by complete conceptualism. At same time her work demonstrates an extraordinary manual ability, almost a unique virtuosity. The figures as well as their titles are enigmatic, engaging the viewer in their self-consciousness, their uncomfortableness in their own skin.

West was first attracted to the expressive possibilities of clay figuration through early exposure to the realistic sculpture of Judy Fox and Doug Jeck. According to West “seeing their work opened my eyes to the awesome potential of the medium, which allowed me to think ambitiously early on in my education with the material. The seriousness of their work, with its studied realism and distinct reference to history, appealed to me in contrast to the often cute or caricatured figuration that I had seen in ceramics before then.” Other role models include the Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz, noted for his monochrome figures in various scales, ambiguous narratives and mise-en-scènes and Sandy Skoglund, who transforms the mundane into the extraordinary through the use of un-naturalistic colours.
Modelled in clay using the technique most associated with pinch pots. West's sculptures are painstakingly constructed from the bottom upwards, adding small bits of clay to the form as it progresses upwards. This method allows her to adjust the figure in progress. Rather than work directly from live models, West prefers to use photographs of models, both for pragmatic reasons and to allow for greater expressive freedom to idealise the figures or modify gestures and poses. Once completed, the hollow form is fired and normally painted. Since 2012, West has begun to make rubber moulds of the ceramic originals which then serve to cast multiples in Aqua Resin and Hydrocal.

Many of the salient characteristics of West's sculpture are found already in her 2006 installation Sleep of Reason. Reclining female nudes in ambiguous poses circle the central figure of a pot-bellied middle-aged man. Not only is the differentiation in scale jarring with the man in miniature whereas the women are life-size, but no physical or psychological connection seems to exist between the figures. The viewer is challenged to construct a narrative to explain their co-existence in the shared space.

In the immersive installation Misfits of 2013, the bare exterior of a wooden construction within the gallery first greets the spectator. A gap at the base of the wall tillitates with glimpses of the ceramic figures within and encourages a first approach through 'peep-holes' in the wall. It is only once inside that the viewer realises that in their gaze into the box, they were unwittingly integrated into the composition on the interior wall with its painted nude and semi-nude figures.

in shocking pink. Was their head on the nude female embraced/ grabbed from behind by a standing male or the seated middle-aged figure clad only in his underpants? Who is the ‘misfit’ here? Under life-sized ceramic painted figures in the same shocking pink of divergent scales confront each other and the viewer, their un-naturalistic colour transforming the entire scene into a surrealistic fantasy. A visibly excited crouching nude male stares at an even smaller standing woman who struggles with her panties. Another figure is depicted in the awkward moment of putting on his shirt.

If West cites the Greek and Roman tradition in defence of full or partial nudity in her work, nudity in ancient sculpture served to represent an ideal, whether a divinity or the perfect male athlete. Perhaps closer in
concept to West’s work is the Hellenistic period’s emphasis on characterization and the realistic representation of different ages. Crows’ feet, premature balding, sagging breasts are represented as well as the pudgy flesh of an overweight adolescent. Their harsh realism is ameliorated by West’s choice to paint them in unrealistic colours: often bright primary colours as well as white. The figures are sometimes painted the same colour as the wall or a portion of it, as if traversed by the same paint brush or dipped.

In some sculptures, the face is obscured by elements such as sunglasses, a hat, hair or clothing, engendering a greater freedom in the spectator to hold their gaze longer. If these works grant ‘permission to stare’, others with their fixed gaze or uncanny inset artificial eyes, encourage the viewer to avert their own eyes. In the over-life-size figure in the Zuckerman Museum of Art, Pause, a video of West’s eyes are projected onto the empty hollows of the eyes. In a twist of the Pygmalion myth, the artist animates a statue with her own ‘anima’. Her most recent series, Unmet, are portrait busts that negate the face sliding into it diagonally to expose a series of coloured layers within. In West’s words: “They highlight the alienation that I inevitably feel with others because their thoughts and feelings are inaccessible; I never can be in another’s head as completely as I am in my own.”

Lori-Anne Touchette is an art historian and critic based in Rome where she co-directs the international ceramic center c.e.t.a. Rome. www.cerarome.com

www.cwestsculpture.com
Photography: Eddie Ing except Sleep of Reason, courtesy of the artist.

INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY OF CERAMICS COLLECTION AT RATHFARNHAM CASTLE, RATHFARNHAM, DUBLIN

Rathfarnham Castle recently reopened after renovations, and included in their enhanced space are 18 pieces from the International Academy of Ceramics Collection. Over 100 pieces were kindly donated by the artists last year after the IAC General Assembly in Dublin Castle to the Office of Public Works, with a geographical reach as far as Asia, Australia, Europe and the USA. In the image above you see the Cabinet of Curiosities, featuring work from Elaine O' Henry, Marc Louthold, Anna Calluori Holcombe and many more.

For visitor information www.heritageireland.ie/en/rathfarnhamcastle/

2016 TAIWAN CERAMICS BIENNALE

Congratulations to Eleanor Swan who has been selected for the 2016 Taiwan Ceramics Bienalle and awarded the Bronze Medal. The Biennale will open July 2016.

Ode To A Not Too Distant Past consists of 2 stoneware torsos and 45 small houses and some taller buildings. “We had lived through a phenomenal period of growth but suddenly, a booming construction industry collapsed and employment reached an all time low. As a nation, we have seen the devastating effects this has had on families, we learned a lesson that excess and greed do not contribute to a healthy economy. Eight years have passed and we have had to re-assess and re-evaluate how we live our lives, but we are on the road to recovery with a more stable and healthy environment to live in. The golden crow...a symbol of creativity and growth...guides us to a more positive future.”