



A Review by Nancy M Servis

FIGURATIVE CERAMICS HAS AN EXTENSIVE HISTORY. In the US, especially in Northern California, this practice flourishes. Vessel-based work dominated much of studio ceramics prior to the 1960s. This direction was redressed by many artists especially Robert Arneson at the University of California, Davis.¹ His efforts, as well as those of Viola Frey and select others, broadened the field of clay and its figural interpretations; with the evocative abstract personas of Stephen De Staebler as an example. Many artists creating figures with clay have emerged in the region, some achieving notoriety due to invention, artistry and technical accomplishment.

Paralleling this rise of ceramics iconography is an expanding exhibition practice. Today exhibition venues range from mixed-use setups and art halls, to high-end galleries and museums.² Some venues offer informed written contexts that support curatorial

premises. Others casually display works in a less controlled setting. This variety, while broadening public exposure of contemporary art, poses questions regarding exhibition concept, artistic messaging and success. Does having a 'show' itself do enough to advance a creative idea, artist, or his or her work? Does displaying artwork in accessible venues offer viewer enrichment beyond exposure? What effect do careful object selections have over less structured art arrangement? Do true artistic opportunity and professional validation come only from established art institutions? What transpired with the exhibition, *Figuratively Speaking* at the two year-old SMAart Gallery in San Francisco was an illustrative exhibition of Northern California figurative sculpture featuring acclaimed and aspiring ceramics artists in an accessible urban venue.

Figuratively Speaking was the gallery's first invitational exhibition that was on view in August, 2013. It featured the work of 11 artists whose ceramic forms rendered the figure in various interpretations, investigating the complexity of the human experience through the metaphor of the human body. They were: Bill Abright, Steve Allen, Arthur González, Michelle Gregor, Susannah Israel, Margaret Keelan, Marc Lancet, Lisa Reinertson, Richard Shaw, Fred Yokel, and Wanxin Zhang. Twenty-five works were displayed in the gallery's intimate 'store-front' exhibition space preceding the open studios that dominate the available square footage. Included in this grouping were some of Northern California's noted figurative ceramics artists,



such as Richard Shaw, whose career and innovations serve as a touchstone for ceramic sculpture that is done today. The stated intent of the show was to illustrate the presence and continued relevance of the figure in Bay Area contemporary ceramics. While this roster would indicate a more formal exhibition, its actual presentation was at ease, dissuading those who might be looking for something more. Accomplished works by skilled and acclaimed artists were pleasantly accessible devoid of celebrity. The show's parallel message, artistic merit and heritage aside, is that ceramics and clay making can be a celebrated community experience.

The SMAart Gallery comprises a ceramics workshop with a gallery. The display area is partially separated from the studios by partitions that can not fully restrain its overflow into the exhibition space. This recently established art centre is owned by sculptor, Steve Allen, who is an adept ceramics artist rendering wheel thrown components into figurative structure. His foray as a gallerist is unfolding.

While it can be questionable to include one's own work in a rigorously curated exhibition, Allen's piece *Stag Automaton* is central to this show. Its inclusion sets the stage for the exhibition's variety while also activating a dialogue between sometimes surprisingly related works. His 30 inch tall piece introduces a successful new body of work composed of volumetric gear shifts, thrown forms and animal features – all previously distinct foci for the artist. While exploration into these earlier realms proved solid, his realisation



Facing page, top: Steve Allen. *Stag Automaton*. 2013.
30 x 14 x 11 in. Photo by Steve Allen.

Facing page, below: Richard Shaw. *ABC and Sketchbook*. 2009.
38 x 21 x 12 in. Photo by Alice Shaw.

Left: Michelle Gregor. *Adriatic*. 2012. 12 x 14 x 17 in. Photo by J Jones.

Above: Lisa Reinertson. *Woman with Ermine*. 2011. 31 x 21 x 9 in.
and Margaret Keelan. *Little Dancer with Big Dog*. 2012.
31 x 13 x 14 in. Photo by Nancy M Servis.



here is a confident direction that belies assemblage. The figure's internal clock (set at quitting time of 5:00 pm) is based on the 100 year old clock in Grand Central Terminal, New York which, like the timepiece in Allen's sculpture, is multiple. Further associations infer that time management and clock watching are what drive society, but basic instinct, portrayed by the closed-eyed stag, suggests self-preservation. While this piece is one of three sibling works, *Stag Automaton* was the only one officially on view in the show with the other two sculptures visible on worktables in the studio area. With its surface finish and integrated presentation, Steve Allen's work is relational to the three near-by sculptures by Richard Shaw, regarded as one of today's leading ceramics sculptors.

ABC and Sketchbook by Shaw was among the first works encountered in the exhibition; displayed in the platform window vestibule visible from the busy San Francisco street. As a ceramics sculptor who has been active in the field for 50 years, Shaw's work brings contextual assuredness to the show while garnering attention for his innovative vision and execution of cast porcelain forms with noteworthy fetish finish. This reasonably large piece measuring 38 inches in height embodies the stylistic elements and artistry for which he is internationally known: humour, wit, *trompe l'oeil*



Above: Arthur González. *Book of Whispers (Detail)*. 2002.

30 x 25 x 19 in. Photo by Nancy M. Servis.

Below: Fred Yokel. *A Fish Story*. 2012.

25 x 28 x 18 in. Photo by Fred Yokel.

Facing page: Wanxin Zhang. *Bi-Polar II (Detail)*. 2012.

28 x 15 x 11 in. Photo by Steve Allen.

imagery and pioneering use of decals. Shaw's ability to make sculpture that retains freshness and pertinence is a testament to his technological innovation, skilful building, and cavalier approach to art and life. His seasoned capacity to render these disparate components of paint can, branches, crayons, palette and book in refined porcelain loosely references his origins as a sculptor during the California Funk movement of the 1960s. Much has changed since those irreverent times of aesthetic boundary pushing. Shaw has navigated beyond that breakthrough era to attain an enduring and rich body of work that is marked by artistic originality and structural accomplishment, broadening the canon of ceramic form. For the viewing public, the inclusion of three Richard Shaw pieces in the show provides an engaging touchstone of figurative innovation spawned from this region.

Also, notable in this exhibition is Michelle Gregor's sculpture, *Adriatic*, depicting a kneeling female form. Gregor, who heads the ceramics department at San Jose Community College, has exclusively featured women as her subjects for many years. During her recent European sabbatical, she studied the diversity of ancient female figuration in a variety of media. This inquiry has clarified her sculptural output. Gregor's *femmes* embody a countenance that is suggestive of ancient votive portrayals, echoing sculptures she viewed in Paestum, Italy. Her rounded figures balance confident form with veiled colorations attaining psychological depth in the

work. The duality of her clay handling and selective stains result in quietly powerful pieces, whose features are enlivened through posture and expressionist use of colour and clay. Though informed by ancient sculpture, Michelle Gregor's ceramic sculptures attain a contemporary status while fostering an ethereal emphasis.

Margaret Keelan's *Little Dancer with Big Dog* is a baby-doll form standing next to a big dog almost equal in size. This relational composition is consistent for the artist who often renders the doll-figure with a small bird, cup, flower, snake, or other symbolic accoutrement. Often outstretched arms or pointed toes express plaintive ideas of the artist. Here, a reserved figure with downcast eyes invokes resolute fondness in spite of each form's flaking and scratched surfaces that infer decay. An insightful disorientation occurs with Keelan's work; for although her sculptures portray an interpretation of the human form, the doll's worn wood-like surface with seemingly peeling paint emphasise objectification. This suggests the work to be a sculptural still-life, as dolls are universally understood as objects of affection. The tension of whether her work is a figure or still-life is a valid consideration for this piece. Is it a comment on human fragility or a reinforcement of fragility through object attachment? The relational inclusion of the dog, which further engages humanity, takes this challenge further. Keelan's artistic illusionism is often biographical as she wrestles with transitory life and loss, particularly of her mentor, Marilyn Levine, with whom she studied while attending the University of Utah in the mid 1970s. Margaret Keelan's work has attained an original level of technical and conceptual accomplishment while raising universal questions regarding perception and identity.

Whereas Keelan fetishises the surface of her work to probe meaning, Arthur González and Lisa Reinertson sculpt the life-sized human form to cultivate myth. González conveys strange narration by interlacing the figure with many symbols. His constructivist mixed-media sculpture, *Book of Whispers* is an earlier piece than



others in the show and represents this artist's ability to sculpt figuration supported by his painterly skills using velvet underglaze, slip and collage format. In González's realm, the young girl is the holder of knowledge who is close to a majolica-glazed pink flame of passion.³ Beneath is a tome opened to pages where a dying butterfly, incised and colourfully rendered, sputters onto an open three-dimensional and monochromatic hand on the opposing page. This pairing infers an alternative story to life for this young sage. Symbolic cues and material variety offer cross-currents of meaning from González's own private ideas. Recognisable symbol coupled with intentional ambiguity propels the viewer into a timeless dialogue with the work. Arthur González's sculpture is representative of his skill as a sculptor, draughtsman, builder but especially storyteller. A more current work by this seasoned artist would have strengthened the exhibition's consistency.

As both natives of nearby Sacramento, Reinertson and González experienced first hand the revolution in clay spawned by Robert Arneson, with whom they studied while attending University of California, Davis. Wanxin Zhang, on the other hand, came to California from China 20 years ago to find his footing as an artist. With no knowledge of clay's figurative tradition in the Bay Area, Zhang navigated his way to artists' studios, exhibitions and graduate school – all the while developing an expressionistic style that is distantly referential to China's terracotta warriors through the tactile language of expressionistic ceramics. *Bipolar II* measuring 28 inches in height is a comparatively small work for the artist who mostly makes life-sized ceramic figures. Though it is more manageable in size for display, it is no less powerful in its presence and illustrates this artist's energised and confident handling of both clay and glaze. Consistently he renders facial features that look into space. This work sports two faces in a Janus-like presentation looking to the future and to the past. The title emphasises Zhang's own cultural duality, especially since the alternative face is wearing glasses – a consistent biographical symbol throughout Wanxin Zhang's figurative works.⁴

Figurative groupings by artists Fred Yokel, Bill Abright and Marc Lancet provide a broader social narrative. Yokel's one work, *A Fish Story* is comprised of three stylised female figures. This animated work is energised through gesture, form, ribbon coil building and glazing. Whereas some works in this show leverage heavy meaning, Yokel's trio is refreshing especially after perceiving its innuendo. Yokel's androgynous figures emphasise his focus on a gestural moment, creating humorous vignettes playfully informed by his three word titles.

Figuratively Speaking was a success in showing a selection of noteworthy figurative ceramic sculpture to the public in a relaxed setting, uncovering some surprising relationships between works. One could directly observe the surface richness of Wanxin Zhang's



work, for example, or study Richard Shaw's hallmark accomplishments, or consider more deeply the implications of Michelle Gregor's sculpture in its relation to Susannah Israel's piece, *Cockerel* sitting nearby. Many works could be completely circled when viewing, avoiding the trap of small venues pushing everything against the wall. Such exhibitions also provide the opportunity for artists to feature new bodies of unseen work, which was true for Bill Abright and Marc Lancet. If straight forward artistic exposure was the main premise for the exhibition, Steve Allen met his goal in *Figuratively Speaking*. It was refreshing to view freely the work of these 11 artists without pretence. For a deeper inquiry, however, an imbalance of selection existed. While this may not have been obvious to many who visited the exhibition, it affected the overall presentation from a curatorial perspective, illustrating the conundrum of present-day exhibition venues. In essence, the first invitational figurative display at the SMAart Gallery in San Francisco was an assembly of a rewarding cross-section of figurative ceramic sculpture, touching on the region's artistic depth and stylistic richness using clay. I look forward to next year's selection.

ENDNOTES

1. Together Robert Arneson and gallerist, John Natsoulas, founded the annual California Conference for the Advancement of Ceramic Art in Davis, California, with an emphasis in figuration. It celebrated its 25th year in 2013.

2. This discussion does not include online exhibitions or digital media.

3. The artist provided this explanation while the exhibition was on view.

4. Zhang's sculpture, *California Artist, Too*, 2006–2007 pays direct homage to Robert Arneson and his sculpture, *California Artist*, 1982.

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