

## Michelle Gregor: Art's Avatars and Angels

Maria Porges

I.

Avatar: an embodiment of a concept or philosophy: someone who represents a type of person, an idea, or a quality of some kind.

Standing in Michelle Gregor's studio is an other-worldly experience. Clay figures in various stages of completion, too many to count, perch on makeshift pedestals or half-recline, simultaneously suggesting motion and repose. Their eyes are closed; if open, they seem to be viewing distant places that one can only imagine having visited.

Something about these mysterious women (and they are all women, in the artist's recent work) suggests sirens or visionary travelers; angels, or goddesses—the kind of subjects favored by the ancient Greek sculptors Gregor admires. On a recent sabbatical, she spent three months doing research at European museums from Naples, Italy to the Louvre, closely studying the classical tradition. She has also spent time in Southeast Asia, where she had the opportunity to look at a different classical tradition: Gandhara Buddhist temple sculpture.

Echoes of these influences appear in various ways—a hairdo, a serene expression, a particular seated pose. At the same time, important aspects of Gregor's polychrome figures are clearly grounded in a much more recent practice of representation. As a graduate student at San Francisco State University, she worked with Stephen de Staebler, whose raw, elemental blend of figure and abstraction was influential in her development. Works by Bay Area Figurative artists Richard Diebenkorn, David Park and Manuel Neri provide additional context for the genesis of Gregor's approach to making work. By deliberately applying the free, intuitive impulses of Abstract Expressionism to representation, these pioneers brought the figure back as a valid form of cutting-edge artistic expression.

Intuition is Gregor's comfort zone. Confident in her impulses, she works from her imagination, rather than from a model—though, from time to time, she has to prove to herself that she can make something that is proportioned 'correctly.' (Even then the project she embarks on can be guided by a kind of fantasy. How else are we to comprehend realistically-modeled hands as large as figures, fingers curved as if in conversation with each other? ) In general, she begins with an idea about exploring a particular pose, usually developing it through working on several pieces at the same time. Each sculpture, though, is conceived of as a solitary figure, rather than being part of a group.

As she works, thick slabs of buff-colored clay come together into the body's basic forms—a torso and head, sometimes with all four limbs and sometimes not, often placed onto a

platform or table to bring it to a convenient height (Gregor is 6' 1"). If her first attempt at realizing a particular gesture does not succeed the way she wants it to, she simply "pushes the clay where it needs to go," as she has put it-- cutting into the heavy, hollow shape fearlessly and moving its parts until it reaches a satisfactory resolution. Gregor describes this as the moment when the figure *breathes*, having developed an essence of vitality.

The face, left for much of the sculpting process as a relatively blank area, is usually the last part completed, though it can take many work sessions. Earlier in her career, these faces suggested self portraits; now, a more generalized, simplified set of features invokes a blend of the influences and sources that she has drawn upon over the past thirty years.

Gregor's smoothly-modeled figures have a streamlined quality, reminiscent of the female bodies created by Modernists Elie Nadelman and Gaston Lachaise. Sometimes, a simplified abstracted drapery serves as a kind of flowing base for a taut torso, as in Cordova or Sevilla (both 2013). Unlike Viola Frey's massive ceramic sculptures of men and women in boxy suits and dresses, however, Gregor's full, fleshy forms are clothed more in color than any realistic suggestion of garments.

The vivid, multi-hued surfaces of these pieces are achieved entirely with glazes and usually require multiple firings. Still, there is no suggestion of laboriousness in the end result. Gregor, a self-taught colorist, describes the process as a conversation with the surface through mark-making. (Paintings tacked to the wall of her studio—described by Gregor as research—show the same kind of free-spirited give and take with color and gesture, and create a kind of theatrical backdrop for her figures. Two of these are included in this exhibition, #11 and #14)

Before the glaze is applied, parts of each piece are brushed with a layer of white liquid clay, or slip, creating a luminous surface on which the brilliant hues are enhanced. In Girl with Birds (2010), bands of slip wrap the figure's hair and torso, suggesting lines of movement or tension, their diagonals offering a counterpoint to the level, outward thrust of the arms-- folded at the shoulders-- that provide a perch for three tiny birds. In Walking Angel (2013), patches of white suggest light falling on the figure's half-turned face and smooth torso, surrounded by areas of a golden yellow and red. And in Scout (2011), complicated patterns of color on the figure's face and chest are a combination of slip and glaze, drawing the viewer's eye in multiple directions.

Both Walking Angel and Scout's poses suggest motion. Improbably, there is a feeling of buoyancy in Gregor's sometimes- massive sculptures; some seem to be stopped in mid-stride, or they have been captured as they turn a head or arm to listen or touch. This sense of movement is all the more extraordinary since, like the fragments of ancient sculpture she has studied, many of her figures lack arms, like Walking Angel, or perhaps—like Scout—stop at thigh level. Some are carrying a small knapsack, as if they

are setting out on a quest of some kind. We might know more from descriptive titles, but Gregor chooses simple, evocative names that indicate only a place or a time of day (Adriatic 2012; Nocturn 2013). Just the same, there is a story here. These women are messengers, guides, protectors, muses, friends—in other, words, angels, in the broadest, most pantheistic sense.

## II.

55 % of Americans...believe that they have been protected by a guardian angel during their life... 68 % of Americans believe that "angels and demons are active in the world", and according to four different polls conducted in 2009, a greater percentage of Americans believe in angels (55%) than those who believe in global warming. —*Gallup poll, cited on Wikipedia*

A belief in angels is common ground for many religions, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Ba’Hai, and Sikhism, among others. In a way, Gregor’s figures suggest that the question we might be asking is not *why* so many believe that angels are active in the world in one way or another, but *how* that belief might look. Her ageless, timeless women remind us that we have few ways to talk about such convictions—or, indeed, to represent them-- that fit into the context of contemporary life. Made of clay (earth) and transformed by water, air and fire, Gregor’s sculptures offer us a chance to believe in the redemptive qualities of beautiful things: in our own resiliency, as we travel through life, and the possibility of transcendence.

Maria Porges is a writer and artist based in the San Francisco Bay area. For over two decades, her writings on art, artists, culture, and contemporary life have appeared in numerous publications, and she is the author of over seventy catalogue essays.

Porges, who teaches in the Graduate Fine Arts program at California College of the Arts, has sororal twin daughters and likes to topiarize shrubs.