



Under the Table

*A Review by
Colette Copeland*

UNDER THE TABLE features nine artists who work with clay. Yet many of them would not self-identify as ceramists. As curator Margaret Meehan states, "I support artists who don't want to be defined by one camp and instead use clay as part of a wider conversation." The exhibition's title is a reference to artists Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy's video *Heidi* (1992), in which two puppets discuss the theories of subversion by using the expressions "on the table" and "under the table". Meehan's point of origin for the exhibition was to examine artists who work with clay

in a manner that is "under the table" or suggests perversion.

Perversion is a loaded word. Most people immediately think of perversion as an amoral action or an act of sexual deviance. Stepping away from the sexual connotation, perversion means to misconstrue, to misinterpret and to distort. All the artists in the exhibition subvert the traditional uses of clay, which allows for a dialogue about clay's potential outside of the narrow confines of its discipline.

The exhibiting artists employ various



Facing page: Kate Gilmore. *Sudden as a Massacre*. 2011. Video looped with a one minute break in-between. 00:30:50 min. Courtesy of the artist. Monitor courtesy of Brand 10 Art Space.

Above left: Thomas Müller. *Boy*. 2010. Clay, glaze and unfired porcelain. 36 x 36 x 5 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Above right: Kristen Morgin. *Space Invader*. 2012. Unfired clay, paint, ink, marker, wire, thumbtack and graphite. 14 x 16 x .5 in. Courtesy of the artist.

subversive strategies in their work. Ben Brandt, Kate Gilmore and Thomas Muller engage in acts of destruction as a form of creation. Brandt's video *Apoxyomenos II* depicts an older man dressed in black briefs (whom Meehan describes as a hybrid Picasso/Richard Serra character) putting clay slip on the body of a younger man, also dressed in black briefs. The older man then squirts powdered pigment on the younger man. The younger man scrapes off the debris and then the two men wrestle. Inspired by the ancient Greek sculptures of *Apoxyomenos* (picture an idealised, nude, male athlete carved in marble) the video is absurd, yet filled with tender desire and sexual tension.

Performance video artist Gilmore also uses clay as a medium of destruction. She is best known for her humorous performances, engaging in manual labour as a metaphor for overcoming gender obstacles. In *Buster*, the artist aggressively smashes and stomps clay vessels during the eight-minute video. The pristine room quickly becomes a site of demolition, filled with the scattered shards and splinters of the once functional clay objects. *Sudden As a Massacre* represents a departure for Gilmore. Rather than her typical solo performance, five identically dressed women attack a huge mound of clay. They grab, heave and launch pieces of clay to the floor and wall. In 30 minutes, the monumental slab is reduced to flotsam. Both videos serve as acts of defiance; the repeated action becomes one of liberation, as if shedding the constraints of clay's history.

Muller's work also involves destruction, but on a more subtle level. He creates slipcast ceramic

text sculptures using 1000 point Helvetica font. The objects are not fired and the artist installs them in an unstable manner, allowing for possible breakage and decay. In the Ft Worth gallery, three 'vulture' text sculptures were perched precariously on wooden ledges near the ceiling. The gallery director informed me that the letters were unsecured and could fall at any moment. Conceptually, I like the idea that the vulture could fall to its death at any time. It might however, not bode well for whomever the vulture hits on its way down. I kept my distance. While Muller smartly shies away from giving interpretations of his word choices, I could not help but make the connection between the vulture and those unscrupulous and greedy folks who sometimes rule the art world.

Artists Kristen Morgin, Mathew McConnell and duo Tom Lauerman/Fabio Fernandez pervert clay's traditions by eschewing the formal utilitarian, ornamentation and functionality of ceramics. Instead these artists reference popular culture in their work. From afar, Morgin's work looks like doodles and assembled scraps of detritus – an old playing card, a piece of cardboard, monopoly cards and a vintage *Casper the Friendly Ghost* comic book. Upon closer inspection, Morgin has meticulously crafted these insignificant objects out of clay, painting and drawing on them, so that they closely resemble their referent materials. The play on material combined with the funny titles – *Stickmanwerewolf Runs Away with Princessstormtrooper*, *Magritte McGrape* and *Stickman with Upside Down Heart Pants* – makes me smile. It is understated brilliance at its best.



Top: Mathew McConnell. *Many Things New and More of the Same*. 2010. Raku-fired red earthenware, plywood with India ink. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.
 Above and inset: Tom Lauerman and Fabio J Fernandez. *Selections from Sculptures in Love with Architecture*. 2009–2012.

McConnell's raku-fired red earthenware elevates ordinary objects to the status of high art. A 35mm slide projector, work boots, beer bottles, a chain, a pinch pot ashtray, a legless *Venus de Willendorf*, kiln bricks, taco sauce bottles, as well as many other sculptures co-exist on a plywood table. What ties them all together? The artist glazes all the objects black. Even the plywood table is painted black with India ink. The black on black seduces like an Ad Reinhardt painting – coy at first, but then captivating the viewer.

Lauerman/Fernandez' collaborative project *Sculptures in Love with Architecture (SiLwA)* includes miniature porcelain works that refer to architecture and design. The small pieces remind me of fragile children's toys; objects that beg to be touched, but are kept out of reach on a high shelf or in a glass case. By reducing what would ordinarily be a massive, domineering (dare I say patriarchal) structure to a diminutive scale as well as using porcelain that has domestic and feminine connotations, the artist duo subverts the notion of architecture as inherently masculine.

Of the nine artists in the exhibition, both Jeffry Mitchell and Akio Takamori's work looks the most like traditional ceramics. Yet both artists challenge the convention in their mode of presentation. Mitchell examines themes of gender identity and



Above and inset: Jeffrey Mitchell. *Jesus Kissing Judas*. 2012. Glazed earthenware and plywood. 9.5 x 6.5 x 5.5 in. Courtesy of Ambach & Rice, Los Angeles.

Below: Akio Takamori. *Parisian Woman*. 2012. Porcelain figure with underglazes, framed archival pigmented ink print on Hahnemuhle sugar cane paper. 15 x 4.5 x 4.5 and 36 x 23.5 in. Courtesy of James Harris Gallery, Seattle.



faith. In *Jesus Kissing Judas*, two bears embrace. As a gay man who self-identifies as a bear, Mitchell grew up in the Catholic Church. In his work he embraces his personal biography, examining the contradictions inherent in his faith. Yet he also speaks of our collective culture, especially given the current politics surrounding gay marriage and gay rights. The other displayed work *St Christopher* sits on a plywood pedestal. By using plywood, an everyday building material, the saint is brought down to human level. Some might say that this act of subversion is sacrilegious, but I find it comforting. After all, the saints were once real people.

Takamori's *Parisian Woman* features a porcelain female figure accompanied by a large digital print of the figure's face. The photographic portrait reveals details that could be easily overlooked in the unassuming ceramic figure. The woman appears to be bleeding. Perhaps she was beaten. Her features are painted on, rather than sculpted; this effect makes her resemble a courtesan. Arms crossed, with a

firm look of resignation, the figure and photograph unnerve me. By juxtaposing the photograph with the ceramic object, it encourages the viewer to re-examine the figure and question the untold narrative.

In Meehan's curatorial essay, she states that all the artists make work under the table; they are all subversive perverts in one way or another. I would suggest that by claiming subversion as a tactic, Meehan allows for the artists' work to come out from under the table and take a seat at the table. While this might make for a tense dinner party, it allows the space for a larger dialogue about ceramics within contemporary art.

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