

If we are to discuss the rather surprising resurgence of the figurine in contemporary ceramics, it is necessary first to look back into the past and analyze some historical precedents for this relatively recent phenomenon. It may also be necessary to define distinctions between various genres, notably the differences between a figure and a figurine, but also between sculptural ceramics and ceramic sculpture, between figurative ceramics and figurative sculpture. I will argue here, as illustrated by the example of the figurine, that ceramics is an independent, specific and autonomous art form. Ceramics, in whatever form it takes, a pot, a vessel, a building, a figure or a figurine, operates around shared and specific conceptual premises, like any other art.

#### Figurative Ceramics:

A figurative ceramic object is totally different, conceptually, from a figurative sculpture in another material. To confuse the two as similar, or even worse as identical, is to misunderstand both. Whether they are making figures or vessels, people working in ceramics are **thinking** differently than sculptors and other artists. No sculptor **thinks** like an artist working in ceramics (like a potter, for example), a maker of hollow forms with a distinct surface, the basic conceptual premises for ceramics. Some sculpture may be made with clay (rarely actually), some sculpture may be volumetric (in fact, quite common and popular right now, Tony Cragg is a great example) but no sculpture is ever made as a volumetric form with a distinct surface. When that happens in a work made with fired clay, the artwork is ceramics, altogether part of another conceptual category. This difference between ceramics and sculpture is very radical at the conceptual level and that is especially true and significant with sculptural ceramics. To analyze such artworks and objects as if they were sculpture is a grave mistake, which shows not only a

deep misunderstanding of ceramics itself but of sculpture as well. Of course, this difference is not absolute and both share common conceptual ground, but ceramics and sculpture nonetheless remain radically distinct and autonomous. It is this radical autonomy of ceramics that I investigate here, using the figurine as example.

A bit of history:

The earliest ceramic objects we have in the historical record are small, modeled and fired clay figures from the Neolithic, about 30,000 years ago. Pottery itself is much more recent, about 12,000 years old and wheel-thrown forms even younger at 8000 years of age.

Among some examples of figurative ceramic modeling in Greek art, the city of Tanagra near Athens specialized in elegant, miniature (up to 30 cm. tall) feminine figures made by pressing clay into fired clay molds. Large quantities were made and are found as votive offerings in local shrines and tombs. While somewhat crudely made and meant to be cheap and accessible to the population at large, their modeling and gesture can be quite elegant and the drapery flowing over the standing figures efficiently describes the female form. These unassuming figures tell us a lot about Greek culture, about the role of women in society and their depiction in art.

We are all familiar by now with the Terracotta Army of Emperor Qin, excavated in Xian, China in the mid 1970's. At the site today, in numerous gift shops, fired clay reproductions can be purchased in all sizes, from miniature to even larger than the originals. Actual factories nearby are endlessly producing these more or less factual copies of dubious esthetic quality, at times. They are produced using molds and unlike the originals, which are all unique, these are all identical from being made with a few stock molds, and their surface bears a faux antiquing finish

that adds even more to their debased kitschiness, which in some way connects them to some aspects of the figurine. These terracotta warriors reproductions can now be found in all the Chinatowns of the world and it is likely that many more of these figures have been produced, as of today, since the 1970's, than were originally made for the 8000 strong army of Emperor Qin, the unifier of China and the first builder of the Great Wall. This is one of the ironies of contemporary consumer culture and world tourism and it is as emblematic of our time and culture, as the original ceramic objects were in their times. Recently, three life size copies were made, sporting the facial likeness of tennis players, for a tournament in Shanghai. The three tennis stars are seen in the full body armor of the original Qin soldiers, but holding tennis rackets. Now that their image has been translated into ceramics, their fame and glory, probably unknowingly and unwillingly, is assured for the distant future. Norwegian artist Marian Heyerdahl has made feminist versions of these warriors, with female attributes which contest and critique the original intent of the figures and subvert them for a potent, efficient commentary on our present culture, as it connects to history, through time.

During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the best figurative ceramic work consists of small Buddhist deities in creamy, white porcelain (called blanc-de-chine or Te-Hua, by connoisseurs). This type of monochrome Te-Hua ware (after the town where the best were produced) was extremely influential in subsequent developments in porcelain figurines in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, and it was much imitated and is still made today. Few imitators, even Chinese ones, achieve the quiet, serene implied vitality and translucent beauty of the originals. Their main aesthetic quality comes not only from the real and specific beauty of the material used, a creamy, luminous, white porcelain covered with a soft, fat, whitish yet translucent glaze, but most

importantly from the sensitive modeling. The best examples are all hand modeled and constructed with a limited use of molds, which takes full advantage of the pneumatic potential of plastic clay. This fluidity and softness is retained nonetheless in the hard, unyielding fired material, to communicate and transmit the impression of internal pressure that can simulate breathing flesh very effectively.

Tang Dynasty “Fat Ladies”, so charming and surprisingly elegant, are also emblematic of this pneumatic, bloated quality so specific to volumetric forms in ceramics, whether they are pots or figures. They feel soft and malleable still, as if their form could be modified through touch, and their shape is so pressurized that they appear ready to explode if pricked with a needle.

More recently, Ghanzou figures are also easily found in all the Chinatowns of the world. They are more detailed and refined in both their modeling and their colorful glazing than the multitude of Maos and other Gods made in Jingdezhen (who hasn't been to Jingdezhen yet?) since the Cultural Revolution and before, and quoted endlessly by various contemporary artists, Chinese or otherwise, as icons of recent history and the human cost of political, ideological revolutions.

#### The Rococo Figurine:

The figurine has always been the subject of a rather intense love/hate relationship, adored and revered by some while rejected and despised by others. This extreme relation is in itself symptomatic of its great power, to seduce and to repel, as it leaves no one indifferent. The great classicist J.J. Winkelmann (1717-1769) who lived at the height of the golden age of the figurine, said of these very popular objects, at the time: “Porcelain is almost always made into idiotic puppets.” A common reaction from authorities when confronted with a phenomenon beyond their

understanding is to be dismissive. This makes them feel powerful and even more authoritative. Such “intelligent” reactions are still well spread today.

Johan Joachin Kandler (1706-1775) is the more prolific modeler working at Meissen in Germany. His work is ambitious and polyvalent and he is justly considered the greatest porcelain figurine modeler ever. He specialized in *commedia del’arte* groups as well as elaborate, multiple character scenes, hunting tableaux and mythological or religious set-ups, highly dramatic and theatrical. Kandler’s monkey orchestra, representing in animal caricature various members of the court, is one of his many masterpieces, despite the miniature, diminutive nature of each musicians, 15 cm. high. Animals, like pots but even more so, also provide a direct formal association with human forms but most importantly, animals and their activities are metaphorical for human behaviors and human situations and there are countless examples of animal representations acting as substitutes for humans in all their follies.

On the other hand, Anton Bustelli (1723-1763) is at his best in single, animated, torqued and twisted figures of *commedia del’arte* characters, and of mythological allegories of the seasons or the muses. His sensibility is more gracious, elegant and lyrical than Kandler yet both are masters at modeling the form in a manner that will create completion only once it receives the added coating of the clear glaze, adding its slim, transparent yet perceptive layer to the overall shape. The over-glaze enamels painted on the fired glaze surface and fused in another low temperature firing, complete the rich, ornate, sumptuous and ostentatious visual effects. The painters nonetheless make full use of the lush, translucent, luminous whiteness of the paste, as seen through a clear glaze, especially for the faces, hands and any exposed skin which all receive minimal yet very fine painting of soft blushes of pink colors on cheeks.

I also recommend Bruce Chatwin's book "Utz", as well as the excellent movie of the same name, for a deeper experience of these otherwise inaccessible objects.

Staffordshire flat backs are also very charming in their naivety and they will serve as inspiration to many contemporary makers, so keep them in mind.

Today, debased versions that do much harm by association to the extraordinarily complex (formally and culturally) refined Rococo originals, have subverted in our mind much of their inherent potency to reduce them to the level of knick-knacks and brick-a-brack in display showcases in homes and even in museum collections. Royal Doulton figurines as sold on the Shopping Channel, are particularly vapid and degenerate examples. They are the very embodiment of kitsch in their denial of the disagreeable physicality of the world, in a nostalgic idealization of a past that bears no resemblance to its reality. I much rather prefer the high quality porcelain tableaux featuring the celebrated and familiar characters, that Walt Disney markets in its various playgrounds.

Like photography, figurines nonetheless provide for the efficient capture and release of a moment in time, even if often tainted with sugary nostalgia and romantic, sentimental overtones.

#### Conceptualization: Making and Experience

When a tri-dimensional representation is volumetric as tends to be the case in ceramics, the plastic, formal identity of the object is provided by its hollow interior. Its physical presence is not so much communicated by the impress of external forces as by internal ones. At the same time, these forms produced by the implied pressure of inner volumes are also articulated further by external modeling or painting that serves to complete the necessary descriptive detail but at the same time acts as a counter pressure to reestablish balance and equilibrium between interior

and exterior forces. In figurative ceramics, the sculptural form is obviously expanded from the inside out, like a pot would be, with the energy and directional expansion of the form created by a force operating from the core center to the outer skin in a process that is specific to ceramics in its use of a plastic material that is ideally suited for this kind of making, for forms and objects that are metaphorically full, pregnant even.

Only modeled clay has the capacity to flow and bend, to move and freeze simultaneously, to capture volume and mass so convincingly. Any other material, wood, marble, even bronze which could have been used by creating molds from the original modeled figures then casting them, would not provide the same, efficient, direct, spontaneous experience that permits and offers instant identification. Clay, even when fired, retains a visual memory of its former softness and malleability and is for this reason perfect to represent bodies and flesh, following the example set in the Garden of Eden and in so many other creation myths worldwide, where the first humans were fashioned from plastic, responsive, malleable, living clay.

Clay may play such a significant part in creation myths worldwide since, like fire technology, pottery making differentiates humans from animals. Like gods, humans literally transform the earth when we model and fire clay to create new forms.

The Figurine:

What is the difference between a figure and a figurine? Is the difference a question of scale exclusively, of size only? Not necessarily. Of course, what we call the figurine is as a rule, if not a law, much smaller in size than these other works we would call a figure or a figurative work in the visual arts. Yet, much figurative sculpture is small in scale without being classified and categorized as “figurine”. Figurative Renaissance bronzes for example are often miniature,

scaled-down representations of bodies and human forms yet they are logically and rightfully understood and explained, as would be full or even larger than life size sculptures. The very term “figurine” implies a diminution not only in size but also in inherent status compared with the figure, and the figurine occupies a lowlier position in the (still) existing hierarchy of three-dimensional images, in the domain of sculpture within the visual arts. If the difference is not one of scale, could it be one of material? Is ceramics as a material integral to the status and classification conferred on certain objects like figurines? Possibly. The figurine is largely if not exclusively a ceramics category, although much figurine is now produced industrially using plastics, which has replaced ceramics in other spheres as well, historically reserved for clay and its derivatives. Is the difference between a figure (what is also called a statue) and a figurine, only one of size and material? I would argue that although size and material are important factors in defining the genre, there are also, more importantly, conceptual and contextual differences at work. It seems important here to question and define the differences between a figure and a figurine since both play such an important and seminal role in defining an essential aspect of the contributions of ceramics as a radically autonomous, specific and independent art form.

In fact, there are **three aspects** that distinguish the figurine from the figure:

The **first** is **scale**, the figurine is usually smaller. Yet I would argue that the life-size self-portraits, grandmothers and even larger businessmen of Viola Frey belong more specifically to the category of the figurine than any other, while also contesting such a category, expectedly. They are aesthetically, stylistically and thematically related to the figurine and they often directly make references, especially the larger groupings of figures, to the format of the figurine. Despite their at times extreme size, they demand to be understood and analyzed as figurines and certainly

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as well, as sculptural ceramics. It may appear strange if not altogether inappropriate to some who are familiar with her work that I would single out Viola Frey as a figurine artist, since her work is recognized and emblematic for over life-size, large scale, ambitious and impressive figurative works. Yet her work remains deeply informed by the figurine as a particular genre, at all levels, esthetically, stylistically and thematically. Her work often includes direct references to figurines, junk store found objects, knick-knacks as well as pottery forms (her original training in ceramics was as a potter). But it is also important here to remember that small (miniature even), scale is not an essential or even important aspect of the figurine as a specifically ceramics genre. What is characteristic of the figurine as an art form and which constitutes its specificity is its relation to context, as well as the fact that form generated by volume receives a surface that remains distinct from the form, all aspects obviously present in the work of Viola Frey.

The **second** is **surface** as structure, since the figurine as a specific ceramics genre, is usually glazed, with a polychrome, naturalistic, descriptive surface, something in itself rather rare for figurative sculpture, especially when other materials than clay are used, which is usually the case. Polychromy of surface is one of the distinctive formal aspects of ceramics in relation to sculpture, along with volumetric form, of course. The use of patterns and colors on figurines is not exclusively descriptive as well, as tend to be the case with painted sculpture. The all over decorative surfaces of the figurine imply an absence of central focus and carry the eye all over the form, and the all over decoration is as much a structural aspect of the work as the form itself.

The **third** aspect is that the figurine is **volumetric**, it is hollow and the process of its making (casting, molding, coiling, etc.) implies the formation of a hollow shell and it is this empty interior that defines the formal qualities of the work. One can tell or feel that the form is

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hollow. Within figurative sculpture, the form reads as mass and the directional pressure of the work is from the exterior toward the core, whether it is made with a reductive process (say, carved from marble) or an additive process (say, modeled in clay), while the reverse is true for hollow forms. A lot of Modernist sculpture is more informed by plane than by mass. Sculpture is rarely volumetric and when it is (I mentioned Tony Cragg, earlier), the surface of the sculpture remains integral to the form and not distinct from it, as it would be for ceramics. Solid, massive forms are imploding in their making, while hollow forms are exploding, figuratively speaking, and their directional energy is in direct opposition to sculpture made and experienced as mass or as plane. A Rodin bronze, for example, may also be hollow, but the form of the Rodin, although it may even had been modeled in clay originally, has been generated by mass, by piling up material on top of material, in a very different additive process than the coiled figures of Viola Frey or Akio Takamori. The void inside the cast bronze by Rodin is empty. It is not significant, in itself. On the other hand, the space inside a Viola Frey (or a Takamori, a Philip Eglin, a Kaneko also), or other figurative and sculptural ceramics similarly made, is pregnant and conceptually relevant since it is that void that articulates the form. It is not empty but full, meaningful, significant, like the air keeping a balloon under pressure.

This is even true when the figurine is not actually hollow but instead modeled solid, as often happens for objects of such small scale. To state it again, since it is such a crucial, important point, ceramics as a material has the particular property to often retain after firing, the pneumatic, plastic and malleable aspect of the original material, clay. When this material is used to represent figures or bodies made of flesh, this effect is even more noticeable and efficient. This is not the case when clay is used to create forms to be cast in another material, the

pneumatic sensation is lost in the material transfer. Cast bronze sculpture, for example, is often made from a modeled (massive) clay original, yet the final artwork loses most of the visual qualities of clay (which are largely and easily retained when clay is fired), although some aspects of tactility, finger and tool marks, may still be present. Clay itself, if we make exception for the transitional use of the material in casting, is rarely used, relative to other materials, to create large size figurative sculpture.

The experience of a work of art is also in direct opposition to its making. If the work is made from the outside in (paintings, sculptures), it is then experienced from the inside out. It projects itself into the world. Pottery, ceramics (and volumetric, expansive forms) are all made from the inside out, so they are by necessity experienced from the outside in. They suck the world and concentrate our experience of space, like a vortex or a black hole would do. They do not project like images do; instead, they absorb and condense. That is where their power and efficiency resides. As such, they operate directionally in opposition to images (2D or 3D), whose power into the ambient world is more readily perceptible as it engages with its surroundings, and with us, more dramatically.

The role of **context**:

The figure, within sculpture (to make a broad yet workable generalization), is basically independent of its surrounding context. It creates, embodies and contains its own context in a conceptual fashion, internally, intrinsically. It has what art historians call “independent life”. The environment in which the figure, the statue, the sculpture is placed only reinforces that implied, internalized context. This physical, external context is not necessary for meaning to operate. The work remains independent and complete in itself. Even outside a church or religion even, a

crucifix remains a crucifix, for example. This historical aspect of sculpture has been, of course, greatly challenged and contested by much contemporary art and it is not a tenable argument anymore. Today, most art is not only totally dependent on context but basically doesn't exist outside that (institutional) context.

On the other hand, the figurine is always in relation to an actual, physical context and operates effectively only within that context. It doesn't remain independent of its environment but becomes permeable. For example, the base of a sculpture, a figure, a statue, is there basically for structural reasons and if it carries information about the nature of the space occupied by the figure, the base remains nonetheless independent from the surrounding space, like the ground on which I stand is independent from myself. The base or the plinth on which a figure stands is like a frame for an image, a picture. It creates a distinct border between two separate, irreconcilable entities, the world of the image and the real world, each operating in a completely different manner. With the figurine, on the other hand, the base operates in a completely different way. Even without such a distinction, the sculptural figure, the statue, remains framed by its external context. For the figure, the base or support or the plinth, all act as framing devices that are independent to the work and it is this division that makes it possible for the sculpture to relate to the larger world, with little to no transition. Likewise, the energy of the sculpture is directed from the outside toward the core (the operative nature of mass), while the energy of the figurine (and the volume) is directed from its center to the exterior, the outside, to the larger world. The figure, the sculpture is separate from the world, independent from it, and it emerges into reality as "a proclamation of what was previously undefined", to paraphrase Philip Rawson here. While the figurine (like the pot) is integral to the world, a part of it, in continuity with it. The base for

the figurine is like “a condensation of the ground to which it connects”, Rawson again. The figurine operates in a fluid, permeable environment that embraces its surroundings, while remaining mysterious, as a reductive image.

The figurine (like the pot) is also positioned in a vertical axis in relation to the ground, like bodies standing in space. The base of the figurine is not only there to support the image, it also provides a context, an environment that is integral to the visual, esthetic experience as well as the meaning of the work. This is particularly true for the Rococo figurine of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (the golden age of the genre) in Europe. The figurine is nonetheless also dependent on its external context and is greatly modified by the environment in which it operates. Moving from the showcase to the table to the museum, in each context the object acquires a new function and a new identity. In fact, for this reason alone, it works much more like an object does, acquiring a new meaning depending on context while retaining the same identity. A figurine, while being clearly a representation, is nonetheless more an object, conceptually and phenomenologically (how it is experienced) and epistemologically (how it is understood), than it is an image. This is what makes the figurine a ceramic trope instead of a specifically sculptural one. A cup is always a cup independent of where it finds itself but its meaning changes depending on context. Images (sculptures, etc.) reverse that proposition by operating exclusively and retaining their intent and meaning only within a specific context, basically institutional. Outside such a context for art, especially contemporary art, meaning is lost or greatly diminished.

The figurine is one of the great contributions of ceramics to art history and to culture, along with the pot and the brick. It doesn't do so in such a practical, functional way, like the other two, but as a poetic, metaphorical reflection of society, in its hybrid nature between image

and object, combining the two, as do containers. Figurines are basically materialized similarly to other ceramic objects, but that is also true conceptually, and I could go as far as to state that they operate like pots, vessels and any other ceramic containers in such a way, as well. The figurine is a typically specific ceramics genre, like pottery, and both are basically identical, conceptually. Thus a ceramic figure is much closer to pottery, conceptually, than it is to sculpture. No sculptor would conceptualize a figure and even less a figurine, the way a ceramist would. This is even true whether the work is representational or abstract.

It is not sufficient to remove the superior opening giving access to the interior, to make any ceramics into a sculpture. Conceptually, even a closed ceramic form remains a pot since it operates conceptually like a pot. A potter thinks differently than a sculptor, the way a painter thinks differently than a photographer, for example. This has less to do with differences of materials or even processes, than with radically different ways to conceptualize space(s).

The material nature of the figurine as ceramics is not altogether irrelevant. It is important to keep in mind that what differentiates ceramics from other art forms and provides its specificity (again!) is not only the use of clay as a basic, formative substance, but much more importantly the fact that the form is almost universally volumetric, hollow and materialized from the inside-out, while its surface remains distinct from the form itself. These aspects are also present in the figurine, even if less obviously as far as volume is concerned, than they are with clay pots and buildings made with bricks and tiles. Nonetheless, the figurine remains a ceramic trope in the materialization of a volumetric space, in the representation of human and animal bodies (themselves volumetric containers), in its use of clay as a transformable, plastic, pneumatic material and in its use of molds (themselves hollow, volumetric containers used to make other

hollow, volumetric forms). And the surface of the figurine is generally painted, decorated with colors, patterns and images that may describe and reference the form, yet remain independent from it, procedurally, visually and conceptually. This surface is another layer of information added to the form. The all over decoration of the figurine implies a lack of central focus and the animated, excessive surface carries the eye, almost indiscriminately, all over the form. This renders the decoration itself structural, and as a structural element of the work, it is as important, possibly more than the structural aspects of the form. The surface of the painted sculpture, on the other hand, remains purely descriptive and implies a clear focus, a hierarchical system for the eye to experience and appreciate the work.

The **base** and the **plinth**:

The Rococo swirls and curlicues of the base, which seem to gather the ground around the figure in the conceptualization of context and physical space, permit a psychological and physical transition between the represented scene and the world. They provide in their continuous, connected curves a sinuous, uninterrupted flow between the two, in a combination of line and surface that reaffirms and bridges the seeming contradiction, between continuity and disruption. As such, they offer us an ideal, valid space for contemplation and rêverie (Rawson). The object then belongs to an un-determinate, all embracing and fluid environment and the figures realistically appear as if transforming the vague, ambiguous and formless nature of the decorative space. The base, however stylized and abstracted is never a frame, another separate element. It never operates a break, like a frame or a plinth would, but a **transition** instead, like the lip on a bowl. The complexity of these seemingly light, fanciful, frivolous, superficial and dismissible objects is far greater than usually realized. Indeed, they constellate early childhood

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psychologist Donald Winnicott's "transitional space", the liminal realm between this and that, a space that collapses and dissolves the dichotomy between continuity and disruption, between internal and external, on both a psychological and physical level. Like other objects, this engages us in "transitional" phenomena not unlike the event horizon of theoretical physics, when the laws of physics are changed at the periphery of black holes and inside them.

The Contemporary Ceramics **figure**:

Working today and following in the footsteps of Viols Frey, Akio Takamori re-imagines the figurative potential of ceramics in his seminal vessels and more recently, in his simplified, abstracted forms that are then more descriptively painted, in dripped, calligraphic brushstrokes, to define the features, the dress, the details of the overall figures. These are constructed from memories of his childhood in Japan or re-workings of figures found in representational art, notably paintings by the European masters. Their presence in space, despite their often diminutive size, is as potent as living figures.

In contrast to Takamori, whose surfaces are descriptive and to a degree illustrative, as they provide information directly related to the figure itself, Philip Eglin's surfaces on his figurative works (totally and absolutely sculptural ceramics), are contesting and challenging the supremacy of form over surface, in a fight between the two that greatly adds to the dynamism and power of his work. In a very bold and gutsy mixture of the two, Eglin takes significant risks. These "messy" and disruptive surfaces could easily destroy the work and a less brave maker would not dare to add such layers of information to these elegant and deftly made figures. Yet, without their bold and exciting surfaces, Philip Eglin's figures would lose their main operative

and singular aspect and their significance and contribution, to art and to ceramics, would be greatly diminished.

In the work of all these artists, the audacity consists in articulating so convincingly the tensions and at times even the contradictions and structural differences between form/surface that are so essential to potent ceramic works.

The Contemporary **figurine**:

If figurative ceramics is its own particular genre within ceramics, in my opinion the most interesting contemporary work is nonetheless done within the category of the figurine, which has seen a revival of importance lately, all over the world. Much figurative ceramics seems invested in a stylistic approach to form where personal expression and sensibility is still central, at a time when all visual arts are moving away from such focus on individuality (so endemic within Modernism). If there is a return to skill in art, and to technique in making, it remains nonetheless subservient to a deeper connection to the realities of contemporary life, to the world beyond the limited viewpoint of the individual. It is in the contemporary figurine in ceramics that can be found works that investigate this connection with the realities of contemporary life, with the most efficiency.

Among hundred of practitioners worldwide right now, something in itself remarkable, since no one would have wanted to be associated with the genre as early as twenty years ago or so, I will single out a few.

Ann Agee is one of the earliest to have explored the potential of the figurine to illustrate and comment on various aspects of contemporary society and its morality (or lack of) with

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seriousness and intent. Her seminal work, varied and impressive, may at times appear superficial, like her fashion victims, but this is also superficial a reading.

Russel Biles surveys, if differently, a similar territory, also commenting on popular culture and current events. His work is at times less descriptive and more cryptic, referencing biblical themes and at other times more illustrative, around political events and situations. His particular sensibility is well suited to the schizophrenic balance between lightness and seriousness so emblematic of the genre.

Justin Novak with his “Disfigurines” is another re-explorer of the history of the figurine, with direct, if stylized references to the rococo formal vocabulary. Here again, a reexamination of the psychological mood of contemporary culture is at work, with his nude figures engaging in various forms of self or communal torture and violence. His paranoid bunnies, with bulging eyes looking in all directions and sporting impotent toy guns are iconic of our terrorist infused world. His Abu Ghraib figures, based on the familiar photographs, may survive the originals and serve one day as witness and reminders of recent political events.

Shari Boyle, from Toronto, Canada, has achieved notoriety in the art world with her surreal and fantastic re-workings and re-quoting of historical precedents, both stylistically and formally. The specific yet imaginary world she creates is infused with femininity while contesting (and to a certain degree critiquing) the role played by gender in contemporary society. She positions her figure ambiguously yet effectively, in both time and space, despite at times clear references to culture now. Their function is more psychological than esthetic despite their great decorative and seductive appeal.

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Stephen Bird, like many others similarly, also investigated the historical genre through references to the formal vocabulary of the figurine. Since he was born and raised in Staffordshire, England, his attraction and predilection for the genre may be partly explained. His consummate skill with form and color, usually descriptive, is well served by his humorous yet still serious intent, making fun and taking down various sacred cows, including himself at times.

Barnaby Barford follows effectively similar references and conventions, which produces an effect of seduction and attraction, possibly even of initial dismissiveness. They quickly takes us further into a less pleasant, comfortable and innocent world where nothing is quite as our first impression may have implied. His work presents yet another subtly effective critique of various contemporary phenomena and unexpected situations.

In China, artist Liu Jianhua makes highly decorated and decorative large porcelain plates, holding in their visually functional space images of women, in various states of dress and undress, new types of Goddesses, with deliberately missing body parts, like broken Antique marbles. In Liu's work, while being realistic and believable reproductions of actual dinner plates, their extreme size reinforces their effectiveness as images, and the plate here is an image of a plate the way the figure is the image of a female body. A first, superficial reading could imply a rather sexist viewpoint on the representation and objectification of female bodies, dismembered, passive, in various states of undress. But the intent of these critical choices is actually political and social commentary. The absence of arms and heads is not just a metaphor for passivity and powerlessness but acts also as a strategy to de-personalize the figure, to deliberately efface the self.

## Paul Mathieu, Go Figure! The Contemporary Figurine, NCECA 2012

In contemporary Cuba, artist Esterio Segura uses the naked, sexualized female figure as a substitute for his own beleaguered and repeatedly vanquished country. His figurine groups are modeled in white earthenware, a more common, more readily available material in Cuba and less prized, more proletarian and egalitarian than porcelain. If porcelain is a particularly aristocratic material, originally anyway, the figurine, as familiarly understood and experienced, has now become a particularly petit bourgeois genre. Segura's still clearly reference 18<sup>th</sup> Century European Rococo porcelain models and the white earthenware is semiotically referencing porcelain. The female figure represents Cuba as a "mulatta", a hybrid combining the black and white races, whose dark skin is contested and denied by the whiteness of the material. In itself, this color reversal implies obvious commentary around skin, race, and social position. The mulatta is engaged in graphic copulation with a male father figure clearly recognizable as Karl Marx.

In the 1980's, Jeff Koons commissioned large, figurative porcelain sculptures (at Capodimonte, in Italy) that were made by expert modelers in the factory, under his guidance and his precise specifications and exacting standards. These large-scale figurines (for their referent and their aesthetic is clearly that of the figurine) often include reference to nakedness and sexual situations and fetishes, but never blatantly graphic as his other work in glass and photography. His "Michael Jackson and Bubbles" is said to be the largest porcelain sculpture in the world. Porcelain, we all know, is the highest ranking material in the hierarchy of ceramics, much as terracotta is perceived as superior to plaster in the sculpture genre. Since porcelain is considered the material of the highest echelon for ceramics, by making the largest porcelain sculpture in the world, Koons was also therefore, by extension making the best ceramic sculpture in the world,

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which may explain, partly its phenomenal monetary value. The problem is that the object suffers from the obfuscation of truth in art institutions in order to maintain its status and confer legitimacy by ignoring embarrassing facts, as is so often the case in the obfuscating art context. When exhibited or catalogued, “Michael Jackson and Bubbles” (there is an edition of three) is listed as being made of porcelain. This is only partially true. It is almost impossible to fabricate, dry and fire such a large porcelain object and avoid warping and cracking in the process. When J. J. Kandler, at Meissen in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, tried with his menagerie of life size animals, the pieces cracked, warped and deformed substantially and logically. The same happened at Capodimonte with Koons’s work, of course. Anyone familiar and sensitive to ceramics surfaces can see clearly that the object had been spray painted with white and gold paint and covered with a clear plastic coating that imitates a glaze, rather poorly in fact. All of this maquillage is necessary to cover repaired cracks that were unavoidable in these circumstances. In fact, the thing has been camouflaged to such a degree that it could actually be made with any other materials, than porcelain. Only the roses stuck on the base retain any ceramic quality whatsoever. So the label for the object while exhibited should read not only “porcelain” as has always been the case exclusively and presently, but also: “epoxy bonding, white and gold paint and clear acrylic coating”. Of course, this would destroy the aura and mysticism implied by “porcelain” as the embodiment of rarity, of purity and preciousness, so essential to the perception as well as the monetary value of the work. I doubt that this necessary correction will ever be made by museum curators, considering their lack of rigor and the depth of their ignorance. Anyway, I am probably the only one who cares.

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The figurine is alive and well and will continue to operate its insidious effect. Due to the resilience and permanency of ceramics, it will continue to pass on the information, humorous or serious, or even often both simultaneously, it so naively and unpretentiously contains, down history and into the future. In many instances, figurines may remain as the only manifestation of a sensibility, a state of mind, as the memory of various events even, and their puzzling expression may be all that is left one day of the times we now live in....

Going beyond this superficial impression of funniness and lightness, the figurine demonstrates a critical intelligence and reveals a subversive vision of contemporary culture second to none. Novelist Milan Kundera wrote, I paraphrase, that lightness in art is misunderstood and non-appreciated, that the joining together of important subject matter to a light form (be it a novel, a figurine or any ceramic object) makes manifest the drama of our existence in all its terrible insignificance.

Paul Mathieu

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