

Ceramics

Art and Perception

2010
ISSUE 81

INTERNATIONAL
US\$20 UK £9 CAN\$22 €15





Sculpture by Barbara Balzer

Timeless World of Intellect and Beauty

Article by Cindy Miller

THE CERAMIC FIGURATIVE SCULPTURES OF BARBARA Balzer occupy a world of timeless intellect, dizzying beauty and distracting intrigue. Her recent works, which she describes as “incarnations of playfulness”, depict stray characters from *Alice in Wonderland*, *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, Western classical mythology and early Renaissance painting. Slab-built from low-fire clay and treated with what she describes as “abused glazes and mason stains”, her work has regularly won national awards, been exhibited throughout the US, earned her two State of Florida Artist Enhancement Grants and, most recently, has been selected for inclusion in the Florida Museum of Women Artists’ Inaugural Exhibition in Deland, Florida.

Balzer’s quirky wit and high intellect show up most clearly in her juxtaposition of haiku-like phrases and words either inscribed on or entitling many of the pieces. A large white female head, for instance, referring to the mind-numbing patience of the queen in Homer’s *Odyssey*, is entitled *Penelope/ Desire is a Legitimate Form of Consciousness*. Similarly, a large black male head, referring to Penelope’s wide travelling and absent spouse, is entitled, “*Odysseus/ Unbewildered by the Museum of Forms*. After seeing the word “float” tattooed on the back of a model’s neck in an Italian *Vogue* magazine, Balzer scratched the word on the white lace-like blistered and cratered bust of the figure of *Leda* who additionally has an elegant but menacing swan propped precariously on her head.

Top: The Lady and the Owl (detail).

Left: Leda and the Swan. 2008. Stoneware, glazes and

mason stains 78.7 x 27.9 x 24.1 cm.



While script and words are an important element of Balzer's work, it is, however, the edgy figures themselves that draw in the viewers. Thomas Eads, former owner/director of Thomas Eads Fine Art Gallery in Tallahassee, wrote, "[S]he crafts her figures with loveliness. They have complex personalities revealed by nuanced gestures, articulated digits, graceful necks and conspiratorial glances." In galleries and exhibitions, people routinely circle her work with delight and laughter and linger on her novel take on familiar characters they thought they knew. This was evidenced at a recent solo exhibition of her work at the stately Turner Center for the Arts in Valdosta, Georgia, US, *Anatomy, Attraction and Allegory*. A wife waved to her husband, "Come here, dear, she has teeth." The life-size heads of *Hansel and Gretel* may wear blank, preoccupied stares evidencing empty bellies and their temporary disorientation, but their mouths are filled with plenty of tiny medieval teeth. Their faces, speckled from a manganese wash that suggests an aged patina, are clearly those of co-travellers, who, having made it to the forest's edge, await the next ancient incongruity, outrage, inequity.

Another work, *The Princess and the Pea*/*Power Knows Sensitivity* features a lovely, languid female figure sitting atop four huge fluffy intricately decorated multi-fired ceramic pillows. Her feet dirty, her shoulders slouched, her expression exhausted, she has passed an apparently intrinsically meaningless test. She looks directly at the viewer as if he must be responsible. Or can perhaps offer an explanation. *Three Graces* features three half size busts whose white matte faces evince a quiet, if not severe, purity. The green and white striped bust of one *Grace, Mirth*, is inscribed in silver ink with knock-knock jokes.

Still another work, *Gabrielle et Sa Soeur* references the famous anonymous French Renaissance painting from the School of Fontainebleau, *Two Ladies Bathing*. The painting depicts two nude female half-figures at their bath, Gabrielle d'Estrees, King Henry IV's mistress and her sister. Both look at the viewer; Gabrielle holds a small gold ring in one hand while her sister

Top: *Princess and the Pea*. 2008. Stoneware, glazes and mason stains. 55.9 x 45.7 x 35.6 cm.

Right: *Three Graces*. 2007. Stoneware, glazes and mason stains. 39.4 x 45.7 x 25.4 cm.





Top: *Gabrielle et Sa Soeur*. 2009. Stoneware, glazes and mason stains. 45.7 x 45.7 x 30.5 cm.

Above: *Tweedledum and Tweedledee/Let's Fight Till Six and Then Dine, He Said*. 2008. Stoneware, glazes, mason stains and resin. 53.3 x 137.2 x 53.3 cm.

delicately pinches one of Gabrielle's nipples. The painting is a coded message: Gabrielle's gold ring reveals the King's intention to divorce the Queen and marry Gabrielle. The sister's gesture is intended to induce

lactation revealing that Gabrielle is pregnant with the King's child. Balzer learned from *What Great Paintings Say*, by Marie and Rainer Hagin, that outsiders were originally forced to wear a striped mantle to alert villagers that an outsider was among them. Later, prisoners and pirates wore stripes. Accordingly, Balzer not only drew and crossed out tiny churches in silver ink on them, she etched scarlet stripes on the busts of her two ceramic sisters. Thus, she added yet more code to the already laden image. Balzer says the work indicates that at some time, some place, everyone experiences alienation, even the ostensibly most lucky among us, royalty. Balzer reports she is attracted to the concept of putting a magnifying glass on typically minor characters to not only explore balance, but to thwart expectations.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee/Let's Fight Till Six and Then Dine, He Said, also in the exhibition, is comprised of two androgynous half figures, who appear to be guffawing at some

shared joke. Their laughter borders on the painful, causing their teeth to be bared and their eyes to squeeze shut. Their delicate fingers point at each other. One has dimples. Dean Poling, in his article, "Watching You Watching Them, The Art of Barbara Balzer" wrote, "Balzer creates ceramic busts which touch upon the ancient imagery of the human race and the human face with touches of the harlequin and the Elizabethan....There is something uncomfortably familiar about Balzer's ceramic figures and

something terribly fascinating.”¹ Balzer depicts her characters not in predictable ways but, instead, with humour, complexity and patience from some slowly evolving, deep and unchastened reservoir.

Although Balzer was awarded an MFA in Sculpture from the Florida State University College of Dance and Art in 2001, she has been working in clay since the 1970s while a European Literature and Thought major at the University of Iowa. There, she took a summer wheel-throwing course from internationally renowned wood-fire expert Chuck Lindes. Later, while earning a law degree there, even making *Law Review*, she still worked in clay on her own. And while practicing law, marrying and raising her son, Cullen, she continued working with clay in the evenings, on the week-ends, at workshops.

Now a full-time studio artist, some of Balzer’s most recent works reference the strange minor characters in the triptychs of Heironymous Bosch. *The Lady and the Owl*, for instance, was inspired by the tiny male figure embracing a giant owl in waist-deep water in the centre panel of Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Balzer has replaced Bosch’s primitive nude male figure with an elegant female figure who sports a red-speckled acid-etched lavender bodice and white bubble-covered glazed tights. Atop a green and pale orange striped undulating pillow, she appears to be proudly presenting the owl to the viewer. The owl, in turn, encrusted in a delicate white heavily beaded glaze, seems, with his huge resin covered brown eyes, to look indifferently past the viewer.

Another recent work, *Smile on a Stick*, similarly references a European painting, Goya’s carnival painting, *The Burial of a Sardine*. Balzer read that once a year in Spain, at Carnival, the masquerade allows everyone to be somebody else, to reverse roles, to invert society. The strangely titled painting shows masked people dancing gaily under a banner depicting a large smiling male face. In *Smile on a Stick*, Balzer has isolated the smile on the banner and reduced it to a ceramic smile atop a long metal pole. A seemingly wistful, if not melancholy, female half-figure tentatively holds the overdetermined smile in front of her own ambiguous lips. Balzer says the image reflects how all of us are, at one time or another, wanting to please others while simultaneously wanting to honestly experience our own feelings.

Barbara Balzer considers herself as one in a long line of figurative sculptors beginning with the humble potters who, almost 30,000 years ago, fashioned the in the forests of what is now Austria. She, like them, intends to continue her struggle with the human form, always in service of an idea.

Note

1. Dean Poling, “Watching You Watch Them, the Art of Barbara Balzer,” *Valdosta Daily News*, Oct. 5, 2008, p. 8E.



Top: *The Lady and the Owl*. 2009. Stoneware, glazes, mason stains and resin. 45.7 x 45.7 x 30.5 cm.

Above: *Smile on a Stick III*. 2009. Stoneware, glazes, mason stains and metal. 53.3 x 30.5 x 25.4 cm.

Cindy Miller is a freelance writer, former Miami Herald journalist and a photographer.