

From Cynics to Celebrants

Bonnie Kemske offers some thoughts on the place of the figurine in today's ceramics.





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HISTORICAL DIVERSITY In this late postmodern era there is no single aesthetic; everything and anything is up for grabs – ceramists can pick and choose their influences, pay homage to a particular past, rebel against it, or choose to ignore it entirely. And so it is with figurative ceramics. In the latter part of the twentieth century the figurine was allowed back into the artistic fold, initially re-emerging as a subversive element that challenged the dominance of the vessel. Now it is an accepted subset within contemporary figurative ceramics and has become a strong and potent genre, embracing everything from representation to gesture, cuteness to the disturbing, the ironic to the haunting, and more.

This diversity is not surprising. The art world has always absorbed influences from history or other cultures. Chinoiserie of the seventeenth century and beyond, Exoticism of the late nineteenth century, and the Primitivism of the twentieth-century Expressionists and Cubists are examples. In ceramics today the figure looks back to numerous historical examples: the Paleolithic Venus of Dolní Vestonice, the Minoan Snake Goddess, the many Tang Sancai figures,

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the Mesoamerican figures of South and Central America; and from more recent times, the figurines of Meissen, Sèvres, and Staffordshire.

THE FIGURE AS A MEDIUM The new figurine, however, has a different message than its antecedents'. There is still narrative, but it is less likely to be about worship, mythology, or pastoral or social gatherings, and more likely to be about the artists themselves or social or political commentary. Just as the willow pattern has presented a tidy and accessible motif for those working on flatware to comment on contemporary issues, so the figurine has supplied



artists with a ready trope on which to load social criticism. For instance, in his intervention at the Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery entitled *Queering the Museum* Matt Smith challenged historical conventions about sexuality. *Civil Partnership Figure Group* features a Meissen-like sculpture of two men in a wedding pose. *The Ladies of Llangollen* celebrates the relationship of Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, who lived together openly in Wales and entertained guests such as the Duke of Wellington and William Wordsworth. These works use the traditional figurine to make a positive statement about today's world, reinforcing our contemporary position on sexual orientation and identity.

Barnaby Barford also uses the Meissen-like figurine, but in a cynical voice of attack. In one well-known piece, *Come on you Lightweight, Down It!*, two elegant eighteenth-century women sit at a table covered in a chaotic collection of spirit bottles and glasses. In

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this incongruous scene, the women, from whom we would expect only poise and refinement, are stand-ins for conventionality. Hypocrisy seems to be Barford's main target.

As we can see in Smith and Barford's works, current narrative is more likely to admonish us through satire and subversion, and to question the status quo in areas such as political thought and opinion, gender issues, and acceptance of individual lifestyle decisions, but always as an expression of the artist's worldview.

3 Barnaby Barford – *Come on you Lightweight, Down It!*, porcelain, enamel paint, other media, 2007, H29cm 4 Kerry Jameson – *Baby Doll*, ceramic and mixed media, 2010, H70cm. Courtesy Marsden Woo Gallery, London 5 Jenny Southam – *Making the Bed*, terracotta with slip and oxide decoration, 2008, H15cm



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ALLEGORY AND METAPHOR Smith and Barford's work are direct in their messages. A less explicit approach can be seen in the *Disfigure* series by Justin Novak. These pieces resonate with references to historical ceramic figures, particularly from the Rococo period, and some of the imagery can be compared to the more gruesome religious iconography of past centuries. Novak states that the wounds suffered by the figures serve as metaphors for injury to self-esteem, certainly a contemporary pre-occupation. The figurines are hard to look at, yet at the same time, hard to look away from. A dainty lady slides the blade of scissors under the skin of her wrist. Another sews her open wound, using a huge and threatening needle. With a look of innocence and curiosity, a man and a woman explore gruesome cuts on the other. Unlike Smith and Barford's social commentary, these works are visceral, and appeal to the deeply personal.

THE UNCANNY AND GROTESQUE It is not surprising that work that is characteristically self-referential has found a place in contemporary figuration. The rise of the importance of the individual within our culture seems to ensure it. The use of the uncanny and/or the grotesque has been a good vehicle for this expression. An example is Kerry Jameson's eerie, desperate figures from her *Childhood* series, for instance. In *Baby Doll* Jameson shows us a disturbed young girl, arms extended uselessly, head cocked with an expression that is inscrutable. Is she a girl or a doll (Jameson often creates grotesque 'toys')? Or is she a hybrid of both? Jameson's view of the world seems dark indeed.

The grotesque often leads to the hybrid, another form often exploited by figurists. Many use the hybrid to confuse, baffle, or disconcert the viewer, often venturing into the frightening and surreal, but Alessandro Gallo's works seem to celebrate humanness, amplifying everyday human gestures by granting them to his animal hybrids. Gallo's creatures have less corporal integration than many, having distinct animal heads on discrete, well-modelled human bodies.

6 Alessandro Gallo – *Metro (London Underground)*, ceramic and mixed media, W300cm **7** Alessandro Gallo – *Blackbird*, clay, acrylics, and iron, 2011, H40cm
8 Michael Flynn – *A Sofa for the Gods*, stoneware with porcelain slip, H49cm


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Book *Ceramics and the Human Figure* by Edith Garcia, will be published by A&C Black in May 2012. It includes a chapter on historical influences on contemporary figuration by Bonnie Kemske



CELEBRATION We live in a time that is characterised by cynicism and negativity, but not all artists' work reflects this. Gallo's works give a sense of the small pleasures in life; the work of Michael Flynn shouts a celebration of life. His small sculptures appear to be quickly and effortlessly modelled, but are, in fact, carefully composed, with clear historical references to classic artwork. In his series *A Sofa for the Gods*, we could be looking at a re-enactment of Auguste Leveque's *A Bacchanalia Scene* or perhaps an orgy scene from an ancient Greek amphora. The *Sofa* series uses multiple figures, but many of Flynn's works are of two, invoking a much more intimate and sensual interplay. His poses and the relationships he creates between his often entwined and connected figures are dance-like and carnal, conflicted and tender, mythic and commonplace, and often humorous.

Whereas Flynn's figures seem to be captured mid-orgy, Jenny Southam's are often quietly, but rather absurdly, posed. Where Flynn's work is about unbound lust and lack of restraint, Southam's figures are about reflection and affection. It is not hard to imagine the love between the man and woman in *Making the Bed* or the affection between the woman and her dog in *Woman holding a large dog under her arm*.

It is a great pleasure in the twenty-first century to find that the human form has such a strong presence in ceramics. As a genre it has rightfully stepped up to the podium and is declaring positions from the many strands of our contemporary lives. Artists through the millennia have used the figure and the figurine to portray the positives and negatives in human experience, and contemporary ceramists, from cynics to celebrants, continue to build on this strong tradition. 





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