
NICOLE CHERUBINI: *LIBERACE OR LIL' WAYNE?*

GASSER & GRUNERT, NEW YORK, 2006



“Are ceramicists to bother about being put down as potters or hailed as sculptors? Should they, or we, care about nomenclature? Opinion changes, achievement stays. Achievement also erases the difference between utilitarian (the vessel) and fine art (the sculpture). Once again, results—experienced not discussed or debated—are all that count when it comes to art as art....but let the vessel maker not despair. There’s nothing to say that a great pot can’t match a great statue in value. Let the vessel maker show us that. There are no rules or prescriptions laid down in advance categories in art.”

— Clement Greenberg, “The Status of Clay” *The Shards Newsletter*, no. 2, (Winter 1980-1981)

Back in 1500 B.C., Hittite potters fashioned simple jugs decorated with terracotta checkerboard patterns and stove-pipe tops. Each squat vessel had functional handles, flat, stabilizing bases, and fluted spouts where—one presumes—the water or wine flowed. Though their utility was obvious—and, no doubt, absolutely necessary for survival—the sheer idiosyncratic variation from pot to pot made them appear “artistic” if not original works of art to our modern sensibilities. Evidence of the maker’s unique hand was everywhere. No two

pots looked alike. The inscriptions read like Gnostic treasure maps of the pre-conscious imagination. And thankfully, the decorator with the bright idea to place ferns or bamboo stalks or a single wild orchid in them had yet to be born.

3,500 years ago, they were arrayed on the ground next to wells and not on lacquered white consoles or in neat clusters of three in modular shelving units sold online. Pottery Barn, it goes without saying, was a faint glimmer in the mind's eye of some urban émigré with a latent jones for marketable rustic charm. Ironically, then, before pots or urns or vases became commodified as decorator baubles, their use-value was what made them timeless, important, transcendent. Art-like. I mention this because today's sculptors working in ceramics labor under a twin burden: how to make a classical form older than Grecian statuary look original, timely, needed and—more pressingly—how to squelch the cynical jeers sure to attend their use of clay.



Where did this hierarchical prejudice begin and how does one set the historical record straight? Surely, the diaphanous ghost of Patrick Swayze hovering over Demi Moore's trembling shoulder as she sits at the potter's wheel doesn't help. Throwing pots on a pedal-driven wheel as therapy for the recently bereaved is but one annoying New Age stereotype that clings to the potter's trade. Paint splattered jeans and cold-water flats may be an enduring—though faintly corny—central casting Ab-Ex prop trotted out by Miramax for street-cred points, but would-be Martha Stewart types with soiled hands hitching up their overalls and straightening their yellow bandanas as they blow an errant forelock from their eyes to better view the haystacks from their newly renovated barns is quite another.

Though Pollock was a potter and is said to have stumbled on the drips of his action painting through ceramic glazing techniques, the pots themselves are never reproduced in monographs or biographies. Their womb-like bodies and labial spouts are too at odds with the phallic projection of his painter's brush. Too at odds, in other words, with the masculine thrusts and parries of the tortured genius locked in hand to hand combat with his canvas adversary in a crowded garret.

Nicole Cherubini, who graduated from RISD in 1993 with a degree in ceramics, is both hyper-aware of these popular misconceptions, but sculpts pots as if she were hyper-oblivious of them, too. Really, is there any other way to move the discourse forward? Each of her pots is festooned with barnacles, adhesions, and mutations in polyhedron forms that look like alien spoors attacking the mother ship. The surfaces appear kneaded, dimpled and pocked in a way that streamlined “thrown” pots on a wheel could never be. This is no accident. Long, snake-like coils are stacked upon each other in circles building the piece from the bottom up, giving them the rough-hewn feel of objects dredged up from a quagmire. And historically, marshy bogs, fetid sinkholes, and gaseous swamps are the amniotic medium from which Cherubini’s



constantly morphing, miniature barrier reefs are derived. It’s a specifically American tradition, equally oblivious to ancient Sumerians and Brancusi alike, that dates back to the 1870s, when the Brothers Kirkpatrick fired their first whisky jugs at the juncture of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers in an area that came to be known as “Little Egypt.” Born on the bayou, indeed.

The Brothers Kirkpatrick made slyly subversive, though strictly utilitarian objects like matchesafes, drainage tiles, pig flasks, and stoneware bowls for reed-stemmed smoking pipes.

Their Rabelaisian outsider “art” took the form of puns and double-entendres incised on their goods, and grotesque parables of entwined snakes understood as cautionary morality plays railing against demon whiskey. Still, their vulvular banks accepted actual coins, and smoke plumed effortlessly out of their pipes. Cherubini, on the other hand, is their distant cousin only in the sense that she takes deformity and impurity as a first principle. Like the Brothers, she rejects the enameled Japanoiserie of scarab vases as decorative kitsch, but she takes her pots further by eliminating their bottoms, arraying their lips in Pantone colored faux-fur, and puncturing holes in their sides as if shot up by crude gatling guns. Each pot is both literally and figuratively porous. Unity of form, after all, which generally takes on the aspect of smoothly taut skin with a poreless sheen, always stumps for the iconic silhouette—a holdover from retrograde Modernism and its Fischer Price toolbox of archetypes. Cherubini’s vessels are bruised, scabbed and cancerous; your hands don’t glide over them appraisingly as one would stroke a porcelain vase, but appear molten, volcanic—in advance of a burned finger.



Gold and silver chains of various thicknesses vomit out of lions’ mouths, in a burlesque of a true gargoyle’s original function. The word “gargoyle,” it’s worth noting, is etymologically derived from “gargle,” and once upon a time, before gargoyles became decorative talismans guarding entryways, or forbidding doorknockers making solicitors think twice, their actual function was to expel water from stone pipes. Not anymore. Cherubini’s gargoyles discharge

the blinged out accoutrements of a self-appointed ghetto-fabulous culture itself in a decadent phase of decline. Liberace or Lil' Wayne? "G'd up from the feet up," but why should we care, Cherubini seems to ask. Locked and loaded with ridiculous amounts of what in the end amounts to chain link, the ghetto fabulous aesthetic becomes, in the final accounting, about as ruinous and decayed as a cement drainage ditch. *The Monuments of Passaic* become, in the hands of Cherubini, the *Monuments of the Marcy Projects*.

When biomorphic table-top blobjects rest on their tentacular pods in tidy vitrines like estranged starfish, and working class transvestites illustrate Hogarthian narratives in a Dargeresque mode on what appear to be mail-order pots, I think it's time that a sculptor like Cherubini is taken seriously as both potter, vessel-maker, ceramicist, and sculptor. To the uninitiated, the nomenclature is confusing, but what are not are Cherubini's dripping gestation machines. As the crust swirls like angry genies around her glazed hives in turquoise or blood red, one begins to set aside clichéd creation myths like "Promethean Breath" in favor of a completely sui generis new myth: "The Total Exhalation."



David C. Hunt