

WHERE THE
WILD THINGS ARE

CHRISTINA WEST



october 09 to november 05, 2009

klemm gallery, siena heights university

THESE ARE EVOCATIVE AND COMPLICATED ARTWORKS THAT ENCOURAGE US TO BECOME AWARE OF THE PLURALITY OF EXPERIENCE, THE LIMITS OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE, AND THE WORKINGS OF OUR OWN MINDS.

THE PUSH AND PULL

BY PETER BARR

OF CHRISTINA WEST'S CERAMIC SCULPTURES

THE SLEEP OF REASON
2006, PAINTED CERAMIC
GALLERY: 32' X 30'

In the middle of the twentieth century, the German-American painter Hans Hofmann spoke to his students about the “push” and “pull” of art. Emphasizing form over content, Hofmann aimed at helping his students to recognize that certain forms and colors, when placed next to each other, created visual tension that pushed some colors and forms behind and pulled others on top of the picture plane.

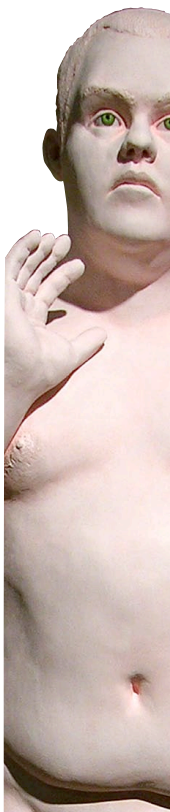
Today, Hofmann’s advice seems quaint in light of the expanded field of post-modern art where paintings themselves often seem quaint. And his concept of push and pull seems even quainter still in light of the complex tug-of-war that plays out in Christina West’s recent, painted, ceramic sculptures. West’s ambitious and ambiguous arrangements of large ceramic figures use forms and colors as well as content and context to push

and pull viewers in a variety of directions. Indeed, at the heart of West’s aesthetic is a fascination with formal and thematic complexity that leads viewers through a variety of opposing realms: the public and the private, the natural and the artificial, the social and the introspective, the familiar and the strange, the innocent and the corrupt, the fictive and the real. These are evocative and complicated artworks that encourage us to become aware of the plurality of experience, the limits of human knowledge, and the workings of our own minds.

When first approaching West’s sculptural installations, one immediately notices that the figures are presented with little or no clothing. Not surprisingly, West, Siena Heights BFA ‘03, provides a range of explanations for doing so. First, she sees herself as working with subject matter that can

be traced back through the history of art to ancient Greece and Rome by way of the French Academy and the Italian Renaissance. Although hardly conventional, her work does seem to refer to a long, academic tradition. Second, by disrobing her figures, she eliminates most references to fashion and other signs of transient culture, and thereby gains a measure of universality in her work. The naked body is, in this sense, better able to transcend a definite time or place and to have a more lasting significance and a broader audience. Third, because of pervasive cultural taboos against public displays of nudity, West is able to exploit the public’s prurient fascination with naked bodies and thereby draw attention to her installations. While nudity might repel a few prudish souls, there can be no doubt that it has the power to pull larger audiences in. For this same

ALL IN FUN AND GAMES
2007, PAINTED CERAMIC AND COTTON SOCKS
52" X 18" X 14"





NO WAY, 2007,
PAINTED CERAMIC AND DESK
38" X 24" X 43.5"

reason, the nudity in her work suggests that the figures' gestures and poses, despite being presented in a public gallery, are to be understood as taking place in private, beyond public scrutiny, where nudity is tolerated to some extent. Above all, nakedness is for West a metaphor for what the philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto has described as a removal of a layer

WEST'S... FIGURES USE FORMS AND COLORS AS WELL AS CONTENT AND CONTEXT TO PUSH AND PULL VIEWERS IN A VARIETY OF DIRECTIONS.

of deception and misunderstanding. As such, the elimination of clothing in West's work suggests the unveiling of a hidden truth.

The implied truthfulness of West's sculptures is further suggested by her masterful presentation of naturalistic forms and gestures. These are familiar-looking bodies—bodies that we recognize even if we would

rather deny them on some level. Both repulsive and strangely attractive, they do not have the perfectly proportioned physiques of Madison Avenue models or Classical Greek statuary. Instead, they might best be described as the folks who show up with the caption "before" on infomercials and reality T.V. shows. Many of them have receding hair lines of premature aging or the excessive flesh of a failed diet. And, as such, they allow most of us to feel smugly superior while at the same time filling us with a sense of anxiety about our own real or potential shortcomings.

If the naturalism, craftsmanship and attention to detail of her figures impress most viewers—drawing them in to take a closer look—the work's un-naturalistic scale, coloration and their odd social behavior must leave most viewers feeling somewhat confounded, confused and pushed around.

The surfaces of the works are unnatural and belong to the realm of the cultural, the symbolic, and the strange. Color is the most obvious way that the works reject any real connection to the familiar. Clearly disinterested in peachy flesh tones, West exploits instead a variety of colors on the surfaces of her figures that evoke broadly held associations with race, gender or state of mind. For example, she has painted some figures a dark, ashen brown color despite their Caucasian facial features; at a distance they might seem to be African or aboriginal. She has painted other figures (both male and female) pink perhaps to suggest girlish femininity. Still others are red possibly to suggest passion or lust; others are green to suggest,

perhaps, envy or greed. In addition, the surface texture of her figures seems strangely unnatural. Up close, it becomes obvious that the figures have been built by hand and lack the usual wrinkles, pores and creases of human flesh. More like a shell than a layer of skin, the outer layer of West's figures seems to present an impervious barrier or mask. This shell suggests a metaphor, perhaps for the limits of what we can know about the inner motivations of these figures—despite their being presented in ostensibly social situations. Only their glassy, naturalistic, and introspective eyes seem to provide some access to their interiors.

The scale of the figures is unnatural, too, and seems to be designed to encourage viewers to move physically in relationship to the work. West's sculptures are taller than figurines, but smaller than life-size. They are neither Lilliputians nor dwarfs, and could best be described as adults or adolescents shrunken down to the size of children. Since they are presented below the eye level of most gallery visitors, nearly everyone will have to stoop down to inspect them and thus assume the perspective of children. As a result, the scale of these works invites us to shift our point of view and to take on an uncomfortable position of equality with those beneath us.

At the same time, the painted surfaces of some of West's works pull viewers up and above the figures. In some works, West uses paint to create the illusion of a shadow that seems to have been cast from the works themselves onto their accompanying pedestal. In other works, a pattern of



two-dimensional stripes or dots warps around her figures' three-dimensional forms. West seems to know that we, as viewers, feel compelled to locate the fictive source of light that casts the shadow or the absent projector that once cast the two-dimensional design. But we can only do so by physically or mentally moving into the points of their projection and becoming the projector. In this way, West's painted figures pull viewers in several directions. While the scale encourages viewers to stoop, the painted surfaces direct them to perceive the works from an elevated point of view.

The implied behavior of the figures is perhaps where the works are most intriguing and disturbing. West has written that she seeks to create "poses and arrangements that walk the line between ordinary and unusual, innocent and corrupt, public and private." More than a few of them have

gotten stuck in their clothes while hastily dressing or undressing. Several naked and supine women roll on the floor. One young woman recoils in pain as another braids her hair too tightly.

One young man peeks through a blindfold that another young man ties too loosely. A naked school girl protects her desk from being searched. A balding man slips his hand into the opening of a woman's purse. An obese adolescent boy seems to be transfixed and confused by a pair of pink socks.

These are narratives with complex and potentially powerful psychological and social implications, although West declines to explain them. Instead, she invites viewers to do what she describes as "something we do all the time anyway": to project their own interpretations onto the behavior of others. "Viewers are required, to a certain degree, to put themselves in the characters' heads," West has written. "This activity, from which various narratives develop, reveals much about the viewers' own psychologies. The limited amount of explicit information within the installations requires that viewers engage their own ideologies,

associations, and prejudices in order to create their own narratives."

The meaning of the works, then, has less to do with the actual behaviors of the sculptured figures and more to do with the workings of viewers' minds as they project their ideologies, associations and prejudices upon them. Although this is "something that we do all the time anyway," this act of psychological projection often happens subconsciously. West's sculptures, through her unusual use of color, scale, and context, have the ability to raise viewers' consciousness.

By pushing and pulling us around and inviting us to imagine ourselves in the place of projectors, they help us to recognize that what we have accused these inanimate objects of being must originate from us and also be in us. They encourage us to recognize and tolerate multiplicity and to think critically about our tendency to project our own motivations, prejudice, and fears onto others.

Peter Barr is Professor of Art History at Siena Heights University. This essay previously appeared in *2007/08 Clay in Art International Yearbook*.

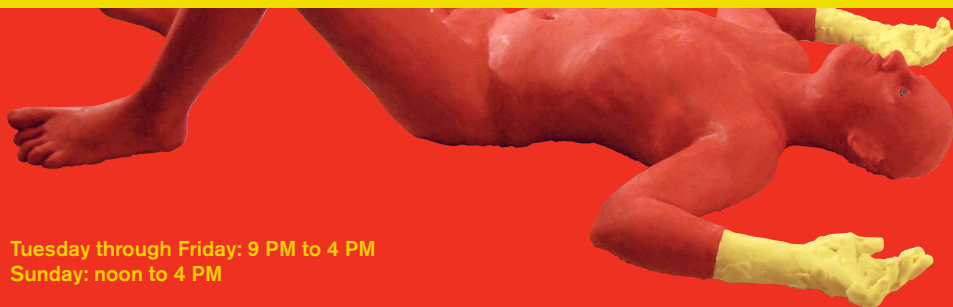
Slide Lecture: Thursday, October 8, 4 PM, Studio 11, Studio Angelico
Alumni Weekend Reception: Friday, October 9, 6 to 8 PM, Klemm Gallery



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Tuesday through Friday: 9 PM to 4 PM
Sunday: noon to 4 PM

Admission is free of charge.