

INTERLINKED THEMES, MULTIPLE MEANINGS - THE OEUVRE OF THE CANADIAN CERAMIST DEBRA SLOAN

ARTICLE BY RONNIE WATT, VANCOUVER (PH.D STUDENT, UNISA)

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE ARTIST AND OTHERS



My very first encounter with figurative ceramic art was in 1979 and flowed from a chance meeting with the Austrian ceramist Gundi Dietz. At that time, Dietz was already a leading figure in European ceramics. She had been creating one-off and series of porcelain figurines ranging from the near-realistic to the semi-cartoon but each work with a distinctive individuality. I visited her studio in Mödling outside Vienna where I watched as she added to or subtracted from the mould-cast figurines – mostly female, some full-figure or otherwise heads or torsos – leaving large areas of surface unfinished, other areas defined with gestural scratches and elsewhere adding delicate finishes with the use of dentistry tools. Dietz subsequently garnered international acclaim.

Another chance meeting in Vancouver in 2018 with the Canadian ceramist Debra Sloan prompted me to revisit figurative ceramic art which falls outside of my primary interest of studio pottery. Sloan is a BFA graduate of the Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver, a recipient of multiple awards and grants, a researcher and author of the ceramics of British Columbia. In recent times she has been an artist-in-residence at the Leach Pottery and Museum at St. Ives, the International Ceramics Studio in Kecskemét in Hungary, the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology (UBCMA) in Vancouver and in Shigaraki, Japan. The residency at St. Ives focused on equestrian finials (roof-ridge tiles) of which Bernard Leach (1887 – 1979) created a few and which in her own versions did not represent allegories but reflected on the characters who had founded the Leach Pottery. One such figurine shows a naked Shōji Hamada (1894 – 1978) - the earliest collaborator of Leach - astride a horse coming to the pottery¹ and another depicts Leach himself (Leach's Backward Glance). The stint at the UBCMA was for the purpose of studying and interpreting the non-figurative decorated Anabaptist ceramics in the museum's Koerner Collection. She also gained references for her work from her exposure to European ceramics, notably of "putti".

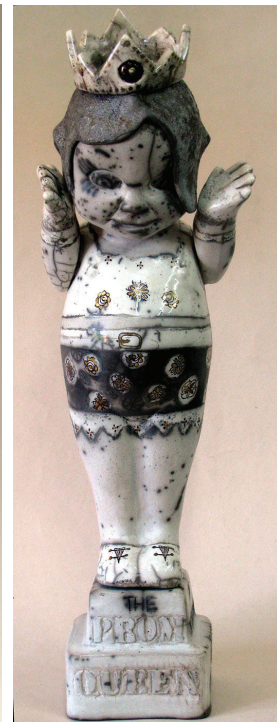
What piques my interest in Sloan's porcelain slip-cast work (as was the case with Dietz's figurines) is that though the figures are created with a persona



Top: Debra Sloan, figurative ceramic artist, Vancouver, Canada
Above: *The pony tale*. Debra Sloan. 2017

(a character or emotion, never cute nor whimsical), the artist also intends for them to evoke responses guided by the viewer's own reference world. Sloan explained that though she creates the pieces in a very resolved (representational) manner and suggests an interpretation via the figurine's gaze or gesture, she nevertheless leaves the door open to interpretation. The figures do not dictate how they should be received but they invite meaning.²

Her oeuvre includes several themes including dogs, horses, truncated female torsos and babies. A theme is never exhausted nor concluded but archived to be revisited later. The baby figures that evolved from the cherubic putti figures later developed into standing figures, then into equestrian figures and later into interlinked multiples resembling Greek caryatids. Putti originally represented sacredness but later came to serve as popularized symbols of love. Though Sloan's baby figures adopt the forms and poses of putti, their gestures and expressions suggest an engagement with the issues of contemporary times, simultaneously recording and reflecting what they witness and share. For Sloan, contemporary times equate with worry and anxiety. Babies lack in the control of emotions and hence Sloan's baby figures communicate direct, undisguised and unmitigated. (By comparison, Dietz's figures, often in languid repose, typically have an inward gaze.)³ Traditionally the horse finials would be displayed on an elevated position.



Sloan came to interpret this as the horses having agency 'to project commentary on our tumultuous world' and 'for good or ill ... act as an instrument of change'.⁴ The fusion of the horse and putto themes is not a forced marriage of forms and meanings for the sake of novelty but rather the confluence of embedded meanings and an extension of the original narratives.

There is some semblance both in form and meaning in Sloan's standing baby figures with that of Rae Goosen's Kewpie Dolls which Goosen created as repetitive and altered components of installations. In Goosen's artist's statement she explains that 'the space of childhood is marked by open-endedness, a freedom of discovery with unfixed meaning'.⁵ She further acknowledges that separated from the installation, the individual figures 'disregard the initial story that I tell in order to celebrate and find a new "use"'. On the other hand, the ceramic babies in Wilma Cruise's Cradle installation (1 000 slip-cast figurines, all armless, eyeless and no ears and individually altered) that denotes a 'nihilistic implosion of life on earth',⁶ would have no validity as individual figurines. It is their collective mutilation rather than their individual deformities that makes for maximum impact.

There is a twofold purpose to this discussion. Firstly, to encourage collectors to familiarise themselves with both the practice and theory of the ceramic artist whose work is being collected... figuratively speaking, to scratch the surface... to not just own the object, but to possess the meaning thereof. Secondly, to urge South African ceramists to write artist statements for their websites, or blog entries or articles for the CSA Magazine in which they position their oeuvres and themes, supported with explanatory notes beyond technical details and vague mutterings. Fail to do so and you risk your work being taken at face value.

Ronnie Watt is based in Vancouver, Canada. He is a Ph.D student at Unisa and the focus of his thesis research is the contextualised history of 20th and 21st century South African pottery and ceramics. He is a recipient of a 2019 research grant of the S.A. Arts and Culture Trust.

TOP LEFT: Leach's Backward Glance. Debra Sloan. 2015
 TOP RIGHT: The Prom Queen. Rae Goosen. Raku. H: 48.5 cm X W: 14.6 cm. (Photo: William Humphreys Art Gallery)
 ABOVE: Twin Binary Road Warriors. Debra Sloan. 2015



TOP: Cradle. Wilma Cruise. Installation. (As in CSA Magazine No 11, p 21)

MIDDLE: Caryatid trio. Debra Sloan. 2017

ABOVE: Girl with red socks. Gundi Dietz. 2016. Porcelain. L 80 cm.
Photo: Tina Dietz)

References

- 1 Sloan, Debra. 2018. Up on the roof – The role of equestrian ridge tiles as historical narrative. Vancouver: Sassamatt, p 28.
- 2 Sloan, Debra. 2019. Personal interview, Vancouver.
- 3 Musée Ariana. 2016. [Sv] Gundi Dietz – Essentials. Accessed 28 February 2019. Available at <http://institutions.ville-geneve.ch>
- 4 Sloan 2018, pp 25 and 29
- 5 Goosen, Rae. [Sa] Bio/About (Artist's website). Accessed 28 February 2019. Available at <https://raegoosen.weebly.com/>
- 6 Marais, Ann. A review of socio-political expression in contemporary South African ceramic figuration in the work of fifteen artists, in Ceramics Southern Africa Magazine, Issue 11, Autumn 2018, p 21.



REINDERS

Kilns and Clay Specialists & Supplier

TRUSTED SUPPLIER FOR OVER THIRTY YEARS

Suppliers of

- Kilns, kiln furniture, controllers, thermocouples and kiln accessories.
- Potters wheels, all pottery wheel accessories.
- Decorating and sculpture tools.
- Slabrollers.
- A wide variety of earthenware, stoneware and sculpture clay.
- Both liquid and powder casting slips.

PO Box 1175
Cape Gate
7562

Tel: 021 839 3309
Cell : 084 5855022
Fax: 086 237 3214

<http://kilnsandclay.com>

<https://www.facebook.com/ReindersPotterySuppliers>

email us at news@kilnsandclay.com
to receive a price list

image: Ann Marais, WS1 s/w casting slip