

The forms are empathic, almost cute, the gestures are graphic and disturbing. The porcelain face holds a weathered expression much like the tired white washed formalist approach. The strong form gives testimony to the militant stance of the figure's fiery legs. They reject the boy blanketed inside, quietly desiring love and sympathy. He is helpless. His arms curl into his fragile body. Only his hands rest free. Or are they hands of a woman, limply denying him sexual pleasure? The skirt divides this humble spirit, while owl-like eyes on his keens stand watch, protecting the androgynous ballerina tattooed on its back. Here, modern man shows his frailty, confusion and his imperfections. *The Dreamer* is the personification of modernity<sup>[1]</sup>.

Russian born Sergei Isupov (b. 1963) uses ironic gestures to critique the modernist approach while attempting to find a new metaphor for truth. The ironic appeal of this series lies in the juxtaposition of the humble to the existential. Here irony is not simply an aesthetic tool, but a system of structured communication, invented out of the relationship between the immediate social situation and wider international culture.<sup>[2]</sup> Symbols like sex, the nude figure and the male/female relationships hold universal attraction. Allowing Isupov to structure an iconographic system that communicates and transcends international borders, while making unique artistic statements. For Isupov, art is meant to communicate, to tell a story. These compelling symbols '...make faster story telling. I start with a man and a woman, add a third person, then already you have a conflict - there's the story!'<sup>[3]</sup> This tale is timeless, simultaneously referencing biblical myths such as Adam and Eve and pop culture hits like the New York TV series 'Sex in the City' - it is as benign as it is shocking.

This series of work, *the Statuettes*, are characterized by a dialectic vocabulary dedicated to social documentation, straddled between funk and formalism. The irony here is pushed into the realm of the surreal, as each human form fashions figures on its surface.

Compelled by our fascination with the body and self-reflection the figure has appeared on ceramic vessels for more than five thousand years.<sup>[4]</sup> In 1950, the figurative genre came to the forefront of the ceramics known as the funk movement. Led by artists Robert Arneson, Howard Kottler and Patti Warashina the figure served as a vehicle for communicating concepts of self-portraiture, politics and social consequence. Warashina has described her work as an exploration of the 'idiosyncrasies and foibles of human nature'<sup>[5]</sup>. Following in a similar vein Isupov negotiates between the funk tradition and the formalist education he received in Russia. These mediations influence the ironic conflicts in his work.

*Darling* is riddled by this ironic discourse. Every detail - the puppy-dog eyes framed in glasses, the quivering posture and meek frame - draw sympathy and pathos, even the simple human form. However, this empathy is quickly replaced by discomfort. In place of genitalia there lies an image of an axe. How could an innocent possess such violent thoughts? Why are you looking?

The power of Isupov work is the penetrating detail in which he is able to describe the shortcomings of humanity.

...the only way you can describe a human being is by describing his imperfections. The perfect human being is uninteresting...It is the imperfections of life that are lovable.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Ferrin Gallery introduced this series of fifteen *Statuettes* at SOFA New York, May 30 through June 5, 2001. It is the first time Isupov has created an autonomous body of work. The forms reference ancient Chinese warriors; the characters reflect personal trials. These soldiers are in combat – with themselves. The dialectic tension, mediated by sexual discourse, holds the groups together. It is their oddities compel us to look further but etiquette begs us to look away. Isupov's use of irony builds on the traditions established by the funk movement while establishing a visual vocabulary of his own. As a group, the *Statuettes* characterize the reality we inhabit in his imagination.

Postscript:

Sergei Isupov was born in Stavropol, Russia to parents Vladimir and Nellia, both artists. Since age 11 he has been studying art almost exclusively. In 1992 he moved to the United States where he now lives and works in the Richmond, Virginia.

Publications (selected):

Flynn, Michael (2001): *Ceramic Figures*. A&C Black, London.

Douglas, Mary F. (2000): *Allan Chasanoff Ceramic Collection*. Mint Museum of Craft + Design, Charlotte.

Laurie, Jo (ed.) (2000): *Color and Fire: Defining Moments in Studio Ceramics, 1950-2000*. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.

Chambers, Karen (1999): 'Sergei Isupov'. *American Craft Magazine*, February 1999

Chambers, Karen (1998): 'Sergei Isupov: From Stavropol to Louisville'.

*Kerameiki Techni - International Ceramic Art Review*, December 1998, Issue 30.

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<sup>[1]</sup> When modernity is defined by progress in the present tense.

<sup>[2]</sup> Linda Hutcheon (1994): *Irony's Edge: Theory and Politics of Irony*. Routledge, London, p. 94.

<sup>[3]</sup> Sergei Isupov (2001): *unpublished interview*. July 17, 2001

<sup>[4]</sup> Paul Scott (2000): *Painted Clay: Graphic Art and the Ceramic Surface*. A&C Black, London, p. 14.

<sup>[5]</sup> Patti Warashina, 1998 in, Paul Scott (2000): p. 136

<sup>[6]</sup> Joseph Campbell in, Betty Sue Flowers (1988): *The Power of Myth*. Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York, p. 3.