

Erotica in Ceramic Art  
Sexual, Sensual & Suggestive



*Article by Leon Nigrosh*

*Chris Gustin, Vessel, 50 x 57.5 x 52.5 cm.*



Drina Zaytceva. *He Said, She Said. Teapot.* 30 x 27.5 cm.



Lee Stoliar. *One of the Ways XIV.* Waxed terracotta and wood. 27.5 x 40 x 37.5 cm.



Jack Thompson. *Barco con Espiritus Animales.* 1995. 27.5 x 97.5 x 17.5 cm.

THE 1999 EXHIBIT OF CERAMIC WORKS BY NEARLY 40 contemporary artists from all around the United States on display at the Ferrin Gallery in Northampton, Massachusetts, continues a centuries-long tradition of creating erotica in clay. As far back as 6000 BC, ancient Turks and Romanians designed baked clay fertility goddesses to help stimulate the proliferation of their cultures. The BC 6th century Greeks decorated their magnificent black-figured vases with images of satyrs and nymphs cavorting provocatively about on the shimmering surfaces. Alas, many of these anatomically empowered images have been painted over to shield the eyes of contemporary museum-goers.

Some of the most provocative clay objects still in existence were made by the Mochica artisans of Peru, and date back nearly 2000 years before Columbus' arrival in the New World. These clayworkers sculpted explicit images of sexual positions and carnal acts in the forms of vessels such as their cups, water jars, and whistles, in an unimpassioned, matter-of-fact manner. Whether they were designed strictly for the sake of novelty, as medical studies, or as teaching aids is still under debate by scholars today.

The works included in *Erotica in Ceramic Art* easily stirred debate of their own. All were expertly crafted, superbly finished, and acutely individual artistic statements. The show, curated by Leslie Ferrin and Donald Clark, was both invitational and juried from a

call for entries. The only pieces not included were those which were blatantly prurient and "had no socially redeeming value". We were left, however, with a wide range of divergent objects which covered almost every aspect of erotic art.

Humour played a key role in Pelham, Massachusetts, potter Michael Cohen's boxed sets of 'penises'. Each was shaped much like an elongated swizzle stick with appropriate shapes and colourful markings which related directly to titles such as *Golden Shaft*, *Long Rifle* and *All Day Sucker*.

Also simple in construction, but considerably more elegant, were Amherst, Massachusetts, clayworker Angela Fina's unmistakable portrayals of male organs. Using her mastery of wheel-throwing skills, she has fashioned delicate celadon-glazed porcelain into a large upright candlestick holder and a set of wheel-thrown mugs with handles that are quite unique, and apparently a pleasure to hold.

Chico, California artist Paul DiPasqua's entry also brought a smile. This 1.3 m (4 ft) tall sculpture was made up completely of objects purchased from yard sales and second-hand stores. Bottles, vases, bronzed baby shoes, and a bright yellow quarter-moon piggy bank, all artfully assembled and glued together, became a jolly character bedecked with silk flowers. The upwardly aimed ewer spout provided the impetus for the humorous title *No, I'm Just Happy*.

Several of the artists chose to depict various coital



Deborah Kate Groover. *Kudzu Lovers*. 42.5 x 37.5 x 15 cm.

positions, but none so sensuously as New York sculptor, Lee Stoliar. One of the *Ways XIV* was a terracotta sculpture of a nude male and female so completely and passionately intertwined that their extremities were nearly indistinguishable one from another. Deborah Kate Groover, from Monticello, Florida, camouflaged her representation of a couple in *flagrante delicto* by covering them with a forest of china-painted leaves in *Kudzu Lovers*.

Sex objects themselves appeared in several different guises throughout the exhibit. Seattle, Washington clay sculptor, Geo Lastomirsky, presented us with a group of small rock-like objects that look vaguely familiar. Carefully chiselled from unglazed, fired porcelain, these pleurably tactile shapes look much like the male organ in various states of repose or arousal. Urbana, Illinois clay artist, Ron Kovatch, glorified the mundane condom by sculpting it in clay, glazing it blue, mounting it on a large, yellow glazed ceramic cross, calling the piece: *Hero*. His assortment of oddly shaped dildos were glazed in a wild array of exotic colours and textures. Yet his works were more than just sexual novelties because, through them, he injected slightly veiled religious commentary regarding the direction our society is headed.

From his studio in Greenville, South Carolina, Russell Biles pointedly asked questions about this country's moral compass through his three charming Kewpie-like ceramic dolls – each highly detailed and



Ron Kovatch. *Hero*. 47.5 cm/ht.

Russell Biles. *Daddy's Pistil. (JonBenet)*. 32.5 cm/ht.





Michael Sherrill. *Love is a Fiery Dance*. 50 x 47.5 x 17.5 cm

gaily coloured. The 40 cm (16 in) tall *Dollbaby* was presented in a dainty pink frock, *Daddy' Pistol* was a cute gun-toting cowgirl. The images are portrayals of a truly innocent little role-playing child – who just so happens to look like JonBenet Ramsey, the Colorado child beauty contest winner – whose murder still remains unsolved.

Perhaps the most enigmatic works included in this mix were the containers by Plainsboro, New Jersey artist, Irina Zaytceva. Her formal Russian training was evident in the skillful manner she combined china paints and lustre glazes to accent the highly decorated faces that people her porcelain. Both the

hermaphroditic *Chinese Tea Box* and conflict of good and evil, *Self Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* were filled with a riot of colourful snakes, tongues, flowers, and demons, all of which created an unnerving feeling that we were witness to some things that we should not be seeing.

While the majority of the works shown in this exhibition were awash with vibrant, and sometimes lurid, colour, Chalfont, Pennsylvania sculptor, Jack Thompson, added mystery to his offerings by finishing them in an overall grey pewter glaze. His 45 cm (18 in) long *Amantes Animales en Barco* was an articulate, if jarring, rendition of his title, *Animal Lovers in a Boat*.



Sergei Isupov. *He*. 1999. 40 x 20 x 11 cm.



Michael Cohen. *Penises V. Set of six*. 33 x 49 x 3 cm framed.



Geo Lastimirsky. *Male Rock Forms #s 1-8*. 1999. Porcelain, unglazed. 7.5 x 5 to 21 x 7 cm.

Rather than intimating something of a moral or a lascivious quality, South Dartmouth, Massachusetts sculptor and teacher, Chris Gustin, presented us with a large hand-built *Vessel*, a curvilinear mix of hard and soft-edged forms combined to create a container that implies the elements of birth and growth which occur in our natural surroundings. Michael Sherrill, from Hendersonville, South Carolina, also works in the abstract, producing *Love is a Fiery Dance*, an energetic, red-tinged, multi-pointed yellow form delicately playing with the surrounding space. He too, like Gustin, suggests the simple, sensual nature of his material – and our own being.

The overflow of original objects in this show might have caused visitors to chuckle, flinch, or just scratch their heads in wonderment. But whatever the reaction, the works were certain to arouse one's interest if nothing else.

Leon Nigrosh is a ceramic artist whose home/studio is in Worcester, Massachusetts, USA. He holds both a BFA and an MFA in ceramics. He is the author of *Clayworks: form and idea in ceramic design*; *Low Fire: other ways to work in clay and Sculpting Clay*. A version of this article was published in the *Worcester Phoenix*.