

Porcelain that's less than precious at Northern Clay Center

22 May 2014 | by Marry Abbe



Contemporary artists update traditional porcelain in a luxurious new show at Northern Clay Center.

Even without a reflective surface, porcelain mirrors history and culture. Once more precious than gold, its value has plunged over the centuries until it is now as common as the clay from which it is made.

For contemporary artists, the very ordinariness of the stuff now is a challenge — and an opportunity — that is smartly met in “A Gilded Age,” a handsome and novel show at the Northern Clay Center through June 29.

Riffling through the medium’s history, the featured artists have injected modern spin, candid sexuality and political commentary into the glitzy luxury goods and coy styles of bygone eras. The exhibit was ably organized by guest curator Ursula Hargens.

The lost world they reference seems impossibly rarefied. In the heyday of imperial Russia, for instance, the czars and their favorites ate from porcelain tableware while those of lesser rank were served on plates of gold.

In the mid-1700s the Marquise de Pompadour flattered her royal lover, French King Louis XV, by commissioning from China a set of pretty tableware on which she had his crown linked to her coded emblem (a fish). But by the 1960s, reproductions of their plates and cups were sold to aspirational brides in shops on Nicollet Mall.

I know because I have a cupboard full of them. Après moi, the next stop for those faux-royal trinkets is most likely a thrift store where, if they’re fortunate, they will be resurrected by clever artists like Shenny Cruces, whose “Community Heirloom Project” inspired my musings about the devolution of class and culture.

For a show at California’s Palo Alto Art Center, Cruces invited the public to donate items that meant a lot to them. She then cast them in porcelain and incorporated them into elaborate wall montages. Though suffused with memories, most of the things were

monetarily worthless — a plastic pineapple, toy bunny, gloves, jewelry box, toy Indian. Reinvented in porcelain, multiplied and artfully arranged, however, these mundane trinkets have a poignant elegance they never had in life — the gloves transformed into bird wings, the box into honeycomb tile, a dozen gilded bunnies affixed to beautiful Spode plates that nobody now wants.

Once artisans in Meissen, Germany, cracked the recipe for porcelain in the early 1700s, frothy figurines became all the rage among wealthy Europeans. Chris Antemann uses anatomical accuracy to update those coy Rococo confections. Naked or semi-clad, her lovers cavort in a bosky porcelain “Love Shack” and on a pretty boat sailing on porcelain waves. Aside from the saucy details, her pastel palette, expert modeling and intricate designs retain the blithe innocence of the originals.

Jane Irish injects 20th-century American politics, specifically the Vietnam War, into urns and vases inspired by luxe 18th-century French porcelain. Both presidents Nixon and Johnson are scorned with contemptuous invective and imagery in several pieces. Descriptions of severed hands, blown-out eyeballs and angry quotations from soldiers’ letters incongruously decorate pretty gold-trimmed vases designed for drawing rooms of the powerful, grim reminders of the bitterness still marking a country “destroyed by the war, rebuilt by the peace, embalmed by the dishonor,” as one letter writer put it.



Collaborators Tim Berg and Rebekah Myers take a more conceptual approach in an installation that includes “drawings” made by punching tiny holes in long sheets of paper, plus fiberglass-and-ceramic sculpture of related motifs. Wealth and good fortune are the subjects suggested by punched-hole outlines of talismans (horseshoe, rabbit’s foot) and a box of gilded ceramic charms (four-leaf clover, wishbone, horseshoe). A large fiberglass wafer hanging on the wall

looks like a gold-filled raspberry ice cream bar with a bitten-out corner. Its luscious color appears to exactly replicate the “rose Pompadour” hue that Sèvres chemists developed in 1757 in honor of their aristocratic patron, who probably would have loved such a treat.

The luxe continues in the adjacent gallery featuring a mini-retrospective of neo-baroque ceramic sculpture by Adrian Saxe, a prominent UCLA professor whom the Clay Center is honoring this year as a Regis Master, a title reserved for influential figures whose work has shaped the field. (As part of the Regis program, Saxe will discuss his work at 2 p.m. June 21 at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.)

Saxe, too, mines ceramic history by calling attention to period motifs and cultural traits. Here he demonstrates an astonishing mastery of glazes, from moss-textured lime green to polished marble, trompe l’oeil gold and lava-like raku. His tabletop sculptures often derive from teapots, with curling baroque feather handles, swirling ice cream bodies, swan necks and rocky bases. In a nod to American pop culture, he uses plastic football players as finials on a pair of gilded pots that otherwise would have been right at home in Versailles.