



The Valency of Objects:

IRIANNA KANELLOPOULOU'S

recent artwork

Carol Schwarzman

When we dream, people and feelings, places and things assume equal valence and free themselves from the dependable hierarchies of daily waking existence. In dreams, meaning is ephemeral and shifting. Yet at the core of every dream is the self, bonding images, memories and desires inappropriate for the conscious world. By inverting everyday-ness, Irianna Kanellopoulou introduces the imaginative possibilities lurking within the objects that surround us. Her sculptures assume a sort of global-pop surrealism, and play in the underbelly of daily habit and ritual. They throw out the rules and mirror for us who we may be at present, and who we might someday become.

In three-dimensional, solid-as-reality form, her "figurines" cast a variety of characters in many roles. For example, the hare in Bertie is represented naturalistically, but in California Dreaming he will present himself as a cartoon trickster skating through palm trees. Again, a child might be a cherub, like in Judy in Disguise, or a baby doll, or the pensive prepubescent in Bertie sitting on the eye of the hare (laws of relative scale, subverted as well). A grown man dressed in a suit and tie is tiny, up to his knees in a fawn's fur (Wild Thing II), or he might have the head of a finch or wear a superhero's helmet. All of this role-playing is in the service of exploring personae that stand in for aspects of the artist's self, and for building narratives out of the deep. Formally, it all holds together through the cool rigidity of monochromatic, transparent glazes and the stillness of multi-fired clay, and the artist's building as many as five layers of colour to achieve a richer depth of hue. And there is always the precedent of the posed ceramic figure that, sitting on the

"I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see."

window ledge or in a china cabinet, captures an essential quality of life that everyone knows or wants.

So, Kanellopoulou plays with our expectations surrounding the normal uses of porcelain, pottery and earthenware. We see a butter dish as a plinth for Birdman; or in Alexander, a lion's head sticking out from the centre of a leafy, architectural quatrefoil. Are we looking at familiar things that have lost their way? Or are we transacting with beasts gone loony? The characters in her vignettes seem to inhabit parables or fables, or at the least, to follow a directive to illustrate something that's been with us forever.



opposite
"Judy in disguise", ceramic, glaze
multi-fired, h 22 x l 11 x d 8 cm
2013

opposite
"Stuck in the middle with you"
ceramic, glaze, multi-fired
h 12 x l 12 x d 8 cm, 2013

“When children think up stories, they are like theatre directors who refuse to submit to censoring by ‘sense,’” wrote the critic Walter Benjamin. The artist creates her proto-narratives in porcelain using animals as stand-ins for humanity, thus building an emotional resonance empowered to surpass reality. She sometimes adopts a remove reminiscent of the Belgian Surrealist, Magritte, in *Ode to Magritte*, a diminutive landscape of a man with a squiggled head built from scraps of clay, a bird with a man’s head, and a somewhat stumpy tree. Art-historically, Magritte, along with his fellow Surrealists and the Dadaists, combined disjunctive images and words to force ruptures of understanding and meaning. Kanellopoulou works to push past Magritte’s bourgeois stuffiness, and creates a poetic, comic dialogue with today’s shifting popular culture that brims with slippage and dissonance. She does not pull directly from advertising or film imagery or appropriate from identifiable sources, yet she does play with notions of image, object and identity as commodity. She invites us to discover the strangeness of who we are in the present moment’s cultural mix.



Still, there is definitely an Old World, domestic feeling to Kanellopoulou’s work. These pieces would sit well in a slightly off-kilter Victoria and Albert Museum, exhibited somewhere between the della Robbias’ glazed terracotta figures and roundels, and stylised, historicist Victorian pottery. She enjoys lopping off, juxtaposing and shamelessly joining together body parts, conjoining historical periods, sensibilities and species in a single work. To the practiced eye, her knowledge of 18th and 19th century traditional techniques of European figurative ceramics – in particular from the Austrian and German porcelain factories – is evident. To enrich her practice, she has travelled to Europe for research and study in forming and modelling techniques with master craftsmen and women. And so the juxtaposition of historical fine craftsmanship with wacky, cartoonish imagery results in a sense of nostalgia for a reality that cannot be: a slightly astringent longing that’s too elegant to be abject. Her love of the decorative, for poetic license and the downright capricious are refreshingly subversive. See, and in your head – hear – the titles of some of the works: old pop songs like *Wild Thing* (The Troggs), *Straighten Up and Fly Right* (The Andrews Sisters), *Leroy Brown* (Jim Croce), *A Little Less Conversation* (Elvis) and *Oh Happy Day* (Aretha Franklin).

In addition to using slip-casting and moulds, Kanellopoulou also hand builds some elements. Her touch is always nonexistent, seamless and without signs of the hand. Again, she uses the transparency and depth of her glazes, and changes in tonality and colour saturation to replicate the feeling of collectible retro figurines found in antique and secondhand shops. Monochromatic surfaces hold together visually what’s quite disparate in terms of content and form, forcing an almost rebus-like contextual leap into the unknown. But a rebus leads to an answer, and this artist makes no promises.

Kanellopoulou banks on that “something” about ceramics that is universally collectible, wantable and haveable. In a market full of commodities, it’s part of the nature of ceramics that to collect is populist and actionable for everyone. Yet Kanellopoulou’s sculptures are unique, not produced in limited editions, or endlessly manufactured as would be the case with bric-a-brac or chotchkes.

Universally, human beings work very hard to reconcile a desire for freedom with a conflicting fear they’ll be set adrift without defining limitations. Kanellopoulou’s suggestions of narrative come to life within the realm created by this conflict, mining without dampening the spirit of raw, imaginative play. Anarchic id – what Freud termed “a chaos... a seething cauldron of excitations... with no organization” – and homely domesticity coexist within her sculptures. In the end, her work suggests one owns a teacup or a vase or a figurine, but the limits of meaning we ascribe to such objects are boundless.

Carol Schwarzman is an independent arts writer based in Brisbane, Australia and Brooklyn, NY. She has written for various publications including *Sculpture*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Artlink* and *Art Monthly Australia*. Her blog on art, culture and nature can be found at <http://www.polycentrica.com>.



above

"Bertie", ceramic, glaze, multi-fired
h 33 x l 29 x d 9 cm, 2013

opposite

"Ode to Magritte", ceramic, glaze, multi-fired
h 16 x l 11 x d 11 cm, 2013

Irianna Kanellopoulou

Since graduating in 1993 from Monash University in Melbourne Australia, Kanellopoulou has had several solo shows and has exhibited extensively in Australia and in prestigious international exhibitions including Talente in Munich, Germany, SOFA in Chicago USA and Gallery Twentyfive in New Delhi, India. She was invited as Guest Artist in residence at The Clay Studio in Philadelphia, USA where she also exhibited and has completed various private & public commissions including a large public art project for All Nations Park in Melbourne. Kanellopoulou has received several grants and awards including Professional Development grant from Australian Council for the arts in 2008, Manningham Valley of the Arts Ceramic Art Award in 2009, as well as winning the Toyota Community Spirit Artist Travel Award in 2011. Recently her work was shortlisted for the Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award and the Deakin Small Sculpture Award in Melbourne.

Kanellopoulou was born in Athens Greece, and currently lives in Melbourne, Australia.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

My practice is largely involved with the creation of individual ceramic forms that create a narrative and explore issues of identity and (dis)placement. I use images and found objects that allow components to mutate and develop outside of their initial intent and purpose, to explore the persona and emotional associations with our immediate environment and memories – real and invented. I am interested in deliberately shifting relationships between human and animal qualities and using the animal and the figure as a cultural object to project a narrative of surreal reality; a super reality.

The work is infused with symbolism and it personifies imaginary dialogues, deliberately shifting relationships while drifting in and out of an augmented reality. Different characters and personalities are captured in a fleeting moment to reveal a network of masked identities, fragmented conversations and hidden emotions. Focusing on the micro the work draws our attention to the small details which are often overlooked. This microcosmos, at times humorous and bizarre, highlights the transformation and personification of such images as a means of making sense of our surroundings, our environment and ultimately ourselves. Drawing inspiration from 18th century European porcelain, the work fuses the traditional with the modern and utilizes traditional techniques that are rapidly being lost through modernization.

TECHNIQUES, FIRING & FINISHING

I use a combination of mould making, slipcasting, handbuilding and altering techniques to explore the sculptural and plastic qualities of clay in a contemporary context.

It is important for me to merge traditional handcrafted ceramic techniques with industrial methods and processes to achieve a fusion of techniques. The integration of these contrasting elements is an essential aspect of my artwork and enables me to continue to explore and push the boundaries of my artistic practice.

All of my work is multi-fired and I do a minimum of 3-5 firings. This is dependent on the work composition and also the colour I want to achieve. I have found that a "layering" technique of the glazes, each fired separately, enables me to achieve a much richer depth of colour.

