

Abbe, Mary, "Art: Pottery or Potty?", STARTRIBUNE, 23 July 2009.

StarTribune.com

Art: Pottery or potty?

Walker Art Center's new show of ceramic art has a weird obsession with the scatological.

By **Mary Abbe**, Star Tribune Last update: July 23, 2009 - 10:30 PM

Figurines are anathema in contemporary art, nasty little excrescences of kitsch that no modern aesthete would deign to acknowledge. So what a surprise to find a show of them at that epicenter of chic, Walker Art Center. There, through Nov. 29, are dozens of ceramic whatnots -- and some big, brawny clay sculptures -- that push the figurine envelope in some unexpected directions. While the show includes some smart new talent and important historic figures, it's also an intellectually shoddy

and psychologically twisted disappointment.

Called "Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay," the show is not strictly about figurines, those diminutive ornaments typically made of colored porcelain. It aspires to offer a quick overview of a century of ceramics with samples of work by 22 artists ranging from the experimental outsider George Ohr (1857-1918) to such influential iconoclasts as Robert Arneson (1930-92) and contemporary talents as Ann Agee and Jane Irish.

Still, while it includes some robust free-standing sculptures and vases, the majority of the work is tiny and plays off the figurine tradition. Agee, for instance, cleverly updates European porcelain conventions with white statuettes and vases garnished with 3-D flowers. Instead of plump shepherdesses and musicians, she sculpts anorexic modern types in shorts and halter tops snapping photos, climbing trees, fixing dinner and even slaughtering a hog. Irish mimics the refined elegance of Sevres vases, but substitutes contemporary scenes and characters for the dainty cherubs and lovers that populated the 18th-century originals. On the bellies of her colorful vases she depicts wounded soldiers, a heroin addict shooting up, the artists Joseph Beuys and Vito Acconci in transgressive performances.

Other artists give new and sometimes satirical spin to the clutter and glitz so typical of figurines. Jeffry Mitchell festoons his modern centerpieces with 3-D chains, flowers and critters (monkeys, frogs, squirrels) and then glazes them with bronze lustre or blue-and-white spots. Adrian Saxe combines incongruous glazes and materials, painting blue flies on a yellow porcelain vase with gilded handles atop a rude stoneware base. Kathy Butterly makes tiny, cup-sized whimsies with pretty glazes, crushed forms and sexually suggestive protrusions.

These and other objects are inherently interesting, or at least curious enough to attract fleeting attention from casual viewers. But as an exhibition, "Dirt on Delight" is an ill-focused mess. Organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, the show sets out to do too much -- span generations, embrace skilled artisans, untutored outsiders and contemporary hotties -- and delivers too little, all of it incoherently. History and influence are ignored; living and dead are muddled together; refined craftsmanship is juxtaposed with lumpen ineptitude (see Jessica Jackson Hutchins' installation, Beverly Semmes' childish pots and Sterling Ruby's hapless sculptures).

As a further insult to both art and common sense, curators Ingrid Schaffner and Jenelle Porter have a bizarre obsession with excrement, which they equate with clay and all things made of clay. Some of this is vulgarly obvious. Arneson's "John Figure," of 1965, is an androgynous toilet with a sagging female tank perched atop a gaping orifice. Ken Price's "Zyko" may be euphemistically interpreted as a pile of sausage, and all of Arlene Shechet's blob sculptures sport curiously erect appendages.

As Schaffner explains in the truly strange, and not at all recommended, exhibition catalog, "Psychoanalysts may find much to read into all of the sculptural pieces of s--- and fecal matter that dot this exhibition."

No. Psychoanalysts and ordinary people alike will conclude that the curators have unresolved issues that would be better sorted out in therapy than in a museum gallery. Anyone even slightly aware of the long and distinguished history of clay (think ancient Greek vase, Ming dynasty bowls, contemporary ceramic sculpture and pottery) will know that this show's poop problem is a curatorial hangup, not an accurate reflection of ceramic's past or present.

Mary Abbe • 612-673-4431