

Clay's Good Humour

A Review by Judy Seckler

HUMOUR IS THE GUIDING FORCE AT THE 67TH SCRIPPS College Ceramic Annual *Making Fun*, guest curated by Tim Berg, assistant professor of Art at Pitzer College. Twenty-nine works by Barnaby Barford, Pattie Chalmers, Gerit Grimm, Ayumi Horie & Sara Varon, Janice Jakielski, Mathew McConnell, Peter Morgan, Thomas Müller, Brendan Tang and Matt Wedel flirt with satire, absurdity, fantasy, irony or just simply poke fun at life's complexities.

Morgan's fast food-inspired sculptures set the tone for the 2011 *Annual*. Following in the footsteps of sculptor Claes Oldenburg and his magnification of everyday objects, Morgan sprinkles his work with a healthy dose of satire and hilarity for good measure. His *Icecream-burrgr Slurptastic Titanic Disaster of 2008* is a four-foot Slurpee cup with a replica of the Titanic sinking into an electric-blue mound of slushee. In his restaging of the event, the Titanic is put out of commission by an impenetrable ice cream sandwich. The garish colour scheme adds a layer of vulgarity to Titanic's tragic story and hints at the nutritional emptiness that compounds the ship's dark tragedy.

Vulgarity is a theme Morgan embraces enthusiastically



Above: Peter Morgan. *The Icecream-burrgr Slurptastic Titanic Disaster of 2008*. 2005–2008.

Low-fire ceramic, glaze, plastic model of the HMS Titanic, wood and epoxy. 45 x 22 x 20 in.

Top left: *The Hypothetical Prehistoric Giant Wolverine Battling a Polar Bear over a Dead Beluga Whale on Top of a Glazed Huckleberry Jelly Doughnut*. 2009. Low-fire ceramic and glaze. 11 x 20 x 20 in. Photos by Brent Blair.

Below left: Barnaby Barford. *Damaged Goods*. 2008. Animated film.



in *The Hypothetical Prehistoric Giant Wolverine Battling a Polar Bear...*, *The Voyage of the H.M.S. Frankfurter* and *The Nacho-mess Monster*. The wolverine and the polar bear's fight for food and survival is played out on a pink-glazed jelly doughnut. We are left to wonder if nature will win out over commercialism. Nevertheless, Morgan's work leaves room to cozy up to these voluptuous images for their surface appeal alone.

A combination of clay figures and stop-motion animation by Barford introduce the exhibition's next dazzling moment in *Damaged Goods*. The grouping of sculpture can be judged on its own merits but, by creating an animated film where the statuettes are characters in a filmed passion play, Barford opens up the work to another dimension. The film reveals the subtleties of personality, attitudes and posture of his clay figures.

The statuettes are dressed in aristocratic Rococo splendour with all its social constraints. A courtship unfolds between the young couple on a top shelf surrounded by bric-a-brac. A menacing circus ringleader and his aggressive poodles interrupt their





Above and insert: Mathew McConnell. *Brighter than Real*. 2009. Slipcast ceramic with enamel paint, polyester fibre, fluorescent lights, steel, mdf, gold leaf, plaster with paper pulp and dye, found end table. 72 x 120 x 40 in. Photo by Mathew McConnell.

Right: Pattie Chalmers. Top: *When you're not paying attention*. 2010. Clay and mixed media. 59 x 48 x 24 in. Below: *Brownie meets Mudman (the Lonely Rock)*. 2010. Clay and mixed media. 55 x 24 x 18 in. Photos by Pattie Chalmers.

dancing and kissing. The couple leaps to safety. The man lands intact but the woman shatters to pieces. She is reborn when she is glued back together as damaged goods.

Passions run high as Barford captures the theatricality of a silent movie. On their own, the statuettes are less relatable in their period garb but given an animated stage, the story bridges the gap between the antique and the contemporary.

In contrast, McConnell anchors his mixed-media sculpture *Brighter than Real* in pop culture references: Four Mickey Mouses lie flat on their backs with steam escaping from their bellies against a backdrop of guilty artifice. Mickey has never been portrayed in a more compromising position, which is half of the fun.

Behind the assorted Mickeys, an immense lava-looking rock sits on a Plexiglas pedestal like a deity in front of a wall decorated with a gold crystalline pattern amidst a jumble of fluorescent tubes elevated unevenly off the ground by thin metal rods. These Mickeys have Xs for eyes, in comic book style that appears crushed by the onslaught of this artificial world. Dissonance is the end result in the clash between the primary-coloured cartoon icons, brushing up against the surrounding earthy, plastic and glitzy elements of the installation.

Taking its inspiration from the natural world, Grimm's *Souvenir Booth 2010* exists as a curious nautical burlesque. The looming vertical tower is dedicated to the merchandising of bad taste à la Jeff Koons. While Grimm's work never approaches the level of ostentation achieved by Koons, her androgynous, whimsical figures reject an idealised world.

Her pale, nude figures bear looks of surprise, elation or innocence while embracing inflatable

tubes or straddling plump fish with rouged lips. In Grimm's universe, it is OK to be seen in public wearing one's fish head, lounging erotically on the edge of a cocktail glass or drawing inspiration from the Venus de Milo with a strategically placed seashell.

Grimm wants her audience to share the wink with details such as *Catch of the Day*. Here a nude blonde female is kneeling on a pedestal with her hand resting

on her catch. The fish in question resembles anything but an enormous fish. The way Grimm has designed it, it looks more like an upright vacuum cleaner than a sea creature from the natural world.

Chalmers also turns the natural world on its end with her Felliniesque touches to a series of diorama constructions, using clay and mixed media. In her work, 1972, *When You're Not Paying Attention* and *Brownie Meets Mudman (The Lonely Rock)*, she creates dreamlike vignettes that invite numerous interpretations.

In 1972, the setting appears to be outdoors. There is a school? prison? in the background, a picnic table next to a parked car, a Canadian Mountie, a mailbox and an oversized beaver. Yet, the green floor is not grass but, instead, it is made of the industrial tiles universally used in schools across the country. A portable

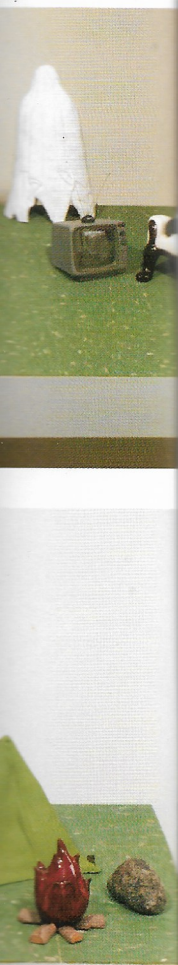


photograph
business s
scene is a
the figur
remain is
When 10

g plump fish
In Grimm's
to be seen in
e's fish head,
y on the edge
s or drawing
the Venus de
gically placed

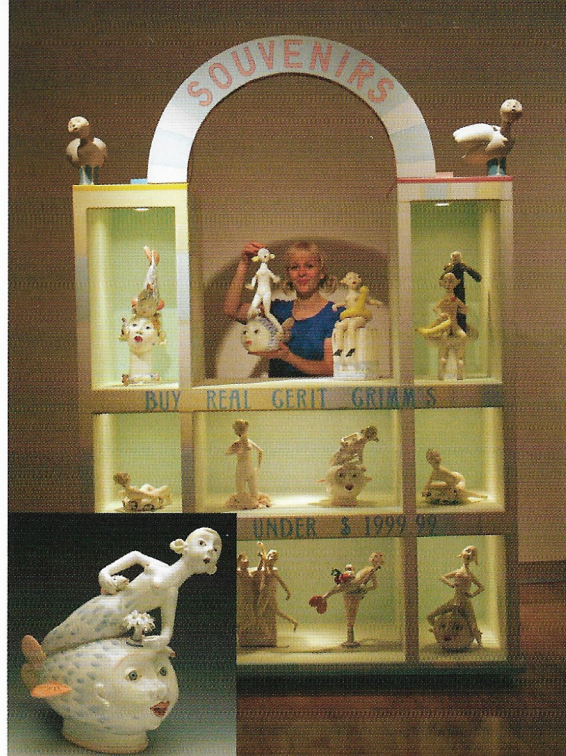
er audience to
h details such
Here a nude
kneeling on a
hand resting
bles anything
as designed it,
ner than a sea

n its end with
diorama con-
In her work,
and *Brownie*
tes dreamlike
tions.
doors. There
a picnic table
ie, a mailbox
n floor is not
trial tiles uni-
ry. A portable



phonograph sits on the ground next to the man in a business suit seated at the picnic table. The sunny scene is actually clouded because it is soon clear that the figures in this psychological drama are together but remain isolated from one another.

When You're Not Paying Attention has the same green



Above: Gerit Grimm. *Souvenir Booth*. 2010. Wheel thrown porcelain and mixed media. 95 x 62 x 25 in. Photo by Kirk Delman.
Insert: *Whale Rider*. 2010. Wheel thrown porcelain. Photo by Ryan LaBar.
Left: Matt Wedel. *Flower Tree*. 2007. Fired clay and glaze. 73 x 40 x 35 in.
Below: *Poodle*. 2010. Fired clay and glaze and lustre. 42 x 32 x 24 in. Photos by Matt Wedel.

floor and a slightly more hopeful message. A woman and a man sit at a table enjoying tea indoors with a parked car nearby and a ghost-like apparition in the corner. Items of domesticity abound: a table with a telephone off the hook, a window with draperies, an unplugged portable TV on the floor whose screen is still televising images next to an arm chair with a sleeping dog. Chalmers has set up a moment just before a collapse because things happen when people are oblivious to their surroundings, the artist seems to be saying.

Brownie Meets Mudman is Chalmers at her most playful. A camper with a sickly smile dressed in a Brownie Troop uniform stands side by side with a Big Foot creature covered in mud. They survey the campsite complete with tent, burning fire and token rock. Chalmers has draw upon childhood memories, rearranging fragments to create a new narrative.

Bolder acts of distortion and exaggeration prevail in two works by Wedel. The first, *Poodle*, a larger than life clay confection covered in gold lustre, is Wedel's idea of a poodle. On its head sits an enormous helmet of hair that looks as though it has been inflated like a beach ball. Puffed and bloated, the animal is all about excess.

Wedel takes on another view of nature with *Flower Tree*, a succulent guarding its turf on an abstracted pile of rock. With his choice of orange glaze, the rock



Above: Janice Jakielski. *Distelfink*. 2010. Porcelain, silk and mixed media. 18 x 32 x 9 in. Photo by Janice Jakielski.
 Below and insert: Thomas Müller. *Majestic Diptych*. 2010. Unfired clay, porcelain, tomato, photo, wood and Plexiglas. 10 x 10 x 10 ft. Photo by Allen King.

becomes a sickly and alien expression of nature. The gaudy colour palette lifts the sculpture out of the natural world in to a surreal one.

In *Majestic*, decomposition is another toxic force that Müller explores in a series of photographs and Plexiglas encased boxes that depict before and after moments. Large mounted colour prints reveal clay elephants balanced precariously on top of real tomatoes. Once the mind dispenses with the rules of the physical world and the reality of an elephant crushing the fruit or losing its balance, it becomes a clever exercise in composition and texture. The follow up becomes the mouldy remains locked up in each Plexiglas display, representing that much in life is ephemeral, even the absurdities.

In a second work titled *Flower*, Müller's material of choice is a series of blue balloons that swell like an open parachute. The massive, billowing form rests near the ceiling until individual balloons lose air and drop to the floor. Without the counterpoint of a clay element, the sculpture has little of the power of the former. The work is accompanied by a series of framed watercolours, showing under-whelming couplings of balloons.

Colour and texture define Jakielski's *Distelfink*, an ode to women that mixes clay, silk fashion elements and mixed media in a satisfying textural dance. A cloth bonnet with embroidery and an exaggerated bow tied under a woman's chin reads at first as a benign salute to the fashion world. But it quickly devolves into something more complex since the accessory is attached by threads to an embroidered piece of fabric mounted in a round embroidery

frame on the wall. The umbilical cord association can not be ignored. The clay bust of the woman is sleek and modern but Jakielski's use of textiles, embroidery and colour ties its identity to the unyielding past.

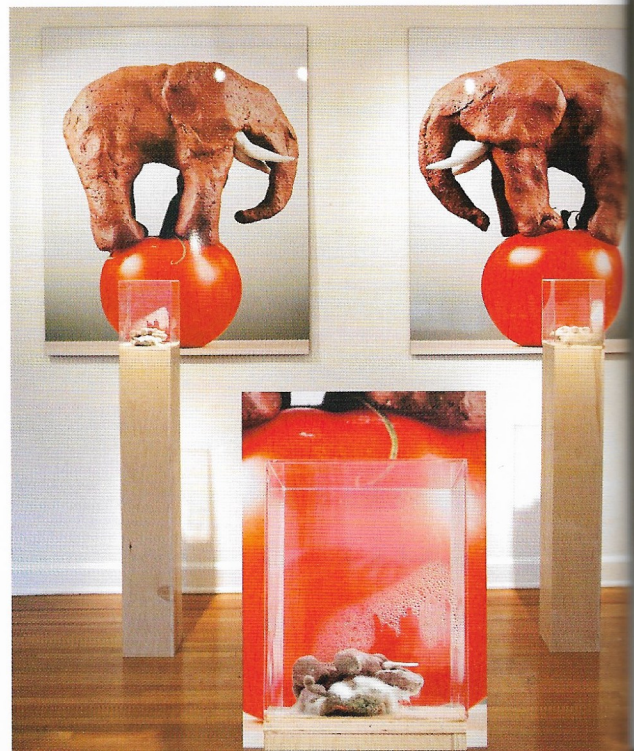
Field, a wooden shelf rimmed in crown moulding with an alternating green-striped top that continues on to the wall, is a less successful rumination on the surreal by Jakielski. Clay stalks of corn erupt from the striped surface. Off to the side, cloth covered binoculars are a reminder of the intrusion of man on the natural world. At best, the sculpture resonates with the head but not much with the heart.

A few artists in the exhibition tap in to their ceramics roots and use recognizable facets of functional ware to ground their sculptures. With *Manga Ormolu 5.0-b*, Tang starts with a jug

covered in blue line illustrations. The pleasing form is pierced at the bottom by a series of red and green cylinders of varying sizes over which the clay body sags and slumps. The fusing of the opposing materials explains what might occur in the wake of a nuclear melt down. Still, the end product is a jaunty man-made octopus that elicits a smile.

The distorted form of *Manga Ormolu 4.0-c* continues the theme of nuclear meltdown. Tang's sculpture is a lopsided microscope, where clay, glass and metal parts come together in unexpected ways. The sensuous curves of the collaged pieces exude a ripeness, where the functional and the practical give way to a bacchanalian joy.

A series of plates and jars by Ayumi Horie & Sara Varon are covered in line art with delightfully



The umbilical cord
not be ignored. The
woman is sleek and
ski's use of textiles,
colour ties its identity
past.

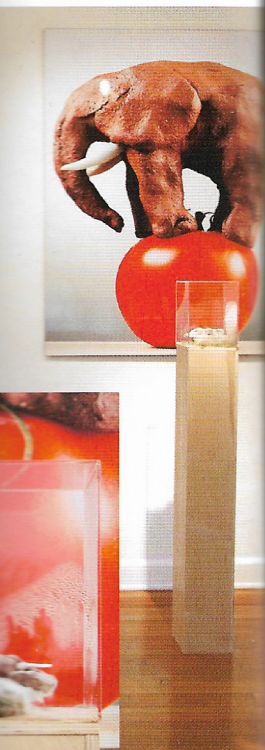
shelf rimmed in
with an alternating
that continues on to
successful rumination
Jakielski. Clay stalks
the striped surface.
both covered binocu-
er of the intrusion of
al world. At best, the
es with the head but
heart.

in the exhibition tap
s roots and use rec-
of functional ware to
ptures. With *Manga*
g starts with a jug
The pleasing form is
red and green cylin-
e clay body sags and
g materials explains
nuclear melt down.
man-made octopus

Ormolu 4.0-c contin-
on. Tang's sculpture
lay, glass and metal
d ways. The sensu-
exude a ripeness,
ctical give way to a

by Ayumi Horie &
art with delightfully

whimsical rabbits, dinosaurs, dogs, elephants and monkeys. *Hygiene Jar* and *Hygiene Plate* display domestic scenes: a lighthearted view of a rabbit soaping itself in a claw foot bathtub while, in the latter, a rabbit liberally washes his foot as soap bubbles disperse in the air. The pair has kept their technique sparse so as not to distract from the humour. The use of cartoon-like characters is a welcomed respite from functional ware with



Below left: Brendan Tang. *Manga Ormolu 4.0-c*. 2008. Ceramics, glass and metal. 16.5 x 9 x 9.5 in. Courtesy of the artist and Plus + Gallery, Denver. Photo by Brendan Tang.
Top left and above: Ayumi Horie and Sara Varon. Top left: *Hygiene Jar*. 2010. Earthenware. 9.75 x 7.5 x 7.5 in.
Above top: *Hygiene Plate*. 2010. Earthenware. 7.5 x 7.25 x 7.25 in.
Above: *Vampire Plate 1*. 2010. Earthenware. 7.5 x 7.25 x 7.25 in. Photos by Ayumi Horie.

its precious or highly decorated surfaces.

The absurdist narrative is continued on works such as *Vampire Plate 1 & 2*. In each case, the rabbit enacts a detail from vampire lore. The creature is either feasting on a dead chicken or returning to his coffin after a good night's work. It is the subject matter that lifts the plates or jars out from under any generic context.

It has been said in the performing arts that drama is easy but comedy is hard. The ceramists in the 2011 *Scripps Annual* have demonstrated a deft hand, using humour to elevate their works. Humour adds depth and, in many cases, clarity. The melding of technique and content here is worthy of our reverence not our scorn.

Judy Seckler is a Los Angeles-based magazine writer, specialising in art, design and architecture. (www.judyseckler.com) ([twitter/judyseckler](https://twitter.com/judyseckler)). Her previous two reviews for *Ceramics: Art and Perception* were *Gustavo Perez Recapitulando* and *Clay Nation Indivisible*, with *Liberty and Justice for All* (Issue 86 / 2011).