

PERSONIFIED: Deborah Potter, Anita Rocamora

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ART GALLERY OF REGINA

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Anita Rocamora, "Dream #1", Clay, wood, metal, 2010



Deborah Potter, "Juggling Act", Clay, 2009

Cover:
On left: Deborah Potter "Façade", Clay, 2009
On right: Anita Rocamora "Mothership II", Clay, 2010

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Clay as a medium holds tremendous communicative potential. A pliant material before firing, it is a highly workable and expressive medium. These qualities lend it favourably to the needs of artists working with the human form as subject matter. The ability to manipulate the position of a shoulder or hip changes posture, placement of hands and facial features create gestures – all of which can convey emotion, disposition and humour. The malleability of clay also allows for both actual textured surfaces and visual “textures” suggestive of tactile sensation. Modeled clay can evoke the physicality of yielding flesh or draping fabric, whether these are supple or loose, smooth or wrinkled. With skilful formation, the ceramic figure serves as a vehicle through which the scope of human experiences and emotions can be expressed.

Personified features the figurative work of Deborah Potter and Anita Rocamora, artists who expertly utilize the expressive qualities of clay. These artists have each worked in ceramics for more than three decades. The work exhibited indicates influences from Feminist Art and Funk Art of the 1960s and 70s. These movements advanced figurative and ceramic art into new directions, imparting personal narrative and social political outlooks in the work. Potter and Rocamora employ narrative and themes of aging, mortality and regeneration in their work. Focusing on the female experience, both Potter and Rocamora are interested in aging and the body. In a society obsessed with youth and beauty, in which women often feel compelled to conceal rather than celebrate age, their work puts focus on the facades and masks that women use in order to manage anxieties and body image. Void of the patriarchal “male gaze” this work undermines the generally accepted media representation of the objectified female form. Here, clay is modeled to simulate slack skin, rounded contours, and creased flesh. Time leaves its signature on the body, and these artists acknowledge life experience as the exchange. Feminist author and journalist Germaine Greer has described the art of the 20th century as the revelation of the self as body, stating that embodiment is a crucial issue for all women, and particularly for creative women.¹

Deborah Potter’s ceramic figures convey narratives specific to women. Although Potter’s work is at times autobiographical, her aim is to present common female perspectives related to the internal psyche. Potter draws on her own life experiences as well as the experiences of women friends to build identifiable narratives in the work. There are several groups of figures in Potter’s production, each with distinctive formal qualities and each using different materials or modeling methods. Although each group of figures has a different focus, all address the social and personal pressures experienced by women. The group of multi-coloured underglazed porcelain figures display more individual characteristics through details such as facial expressions, apparel or other trappings. Using humour and gentle satire, Potter sets up a vignette

in each of these pieces. The women are seen performing rigorously to maintain the appearance of youthful beauty and the perception of “doing it all” with ease. Another set of figures includes attire embossed with nature motifs such as leaves and flowers – suggesting the natural cycle of growth, change and mortality inherent to all life. A group of figures without heads or facial identity places attention directly on the body speaking to the pervasiveness of body image angst in our culture. These forms exhibit physical cracks signifying aged skin, but also are indicative of stress fractures in the veneers employed to hide age. Ever present in contemporary culture is the pressure of unattainable standards of beauty. Youthful beauty is usually placed as the feminine ideal trumping the developed qualities of strength and wisdom that come with age. Women’s bodies change with age, stress, child bearing, and illness. Acknowledging this, bodies in Potter’s work are presented with frankness; displaying un-idealized proportions, large thighs, sagging breasts, and furrowed surfaces. The figures also possess a sense of strength, dignity, and at times sensuality, calling into question the standard conventions regarding beauty and femininity.

Anita Rocamora’s work uses the figure to examine issues of body perception, sexuality, maternity and mortality. Rocamora’s work originates from a personal place, responding to childhood memories, life experience and dreams. Again aging is a principal subject in the work, and like Potter, Rocamora creates figures that imitate “real” bodies. We see drooping stomachs and breasts along with rounded thighs and rumps. However, this work is not as focused on the body, the interest here is the human spirit. The body is viewed as the vessel in which we travel through life. Some of the pieces examine particular stages of life – a set of three figures reveal, through portals in the torsos, either full or empty nests. Passing from one stage of life to another is the human journey; the vessel changes along the journey as does the emotional terrain. Rocamora’s work presents this with humour and acceptance. There is symbolic buoyancy in many of the figures. Although fleshy and curvy they possess a visual nimbleness. The posture, pose, and line of the body create a vertical emphasis, visually lifting the figure from the base. In some pieces the figure is physically suspended above the base of the sculpture, and in one work the figure possesses paper wings. These reoccurring themes of weightlessness and flight suggest transcendence, a lightness of spirit and triumph over psychological obstacles or social restraints.

Overall the work presented in **Personified** is about the beauty, individuality and dignity in every person regardless of stature, age or gender. Working adeptly with clay these artists imbue the body with cultural, political and personal significance, creating work that encourages self acceptance and celebrates the individual.

1. Greer, Germaine. “Germaine Greer on what makes a naked portrait.” *The Guardian*. 13 October 2007. Web. 3 June 2010.

Holly Fay
2010



Deborah Potter, “Tradition”, Clay, 2009



Anita Rocamora, “Life Circle, Adult”, Clay, 2010