

# CLAYBODIES: REINTERPRETING THE FIGURE

Hildreth York



Photo: Hunterdon Art Museum



On the bank of the scenic Raritan River in Clinton NJ sits a beautiful old stone mill. This historic building houses the Hunterdon Art Museum, an exhibition venue and educational institution that shows some of the most edgy and interesting contemporary art, craft and design to be seen in New Jersey. The exhibition *Claybodies: Reinterpreting the Figure* had its inception more than two years ago when Ingrid Renard and I, curators of the exhibition, saw the work of Paola Borgatta in a ceramic studio in Brooklyn. Although we were there to see functional work for another exhibit, we were impressed by the natural postures and implied interactions of the small figures in Borgatta's unglazed vignettes. Thus began two years of gathering materials for *Claybodies*, **on view at the Hunterdon Art Museum from February 27 to June 12, 2011.**

We are witnessing an extraordinary flourishing of ceramic art today, but there has never been a hiatus in the imaging of the body. As old as man's prehistory, it has always been replete with references to the physical, spiritual, psychological and iconic significance of the human form. Perhaps in an era defined by technology it is deeply satisfying to be so connected to our humanity through a material that is essentially earth. *Claybodies* has tried to stay relatively close to the human figure; the art ranges from life-like to semi-abstract. The human body, so mobile in life, becomes immobilized in fired clay. Unfired clay, however, malleable and capable of both additive and subtractive manipulation, allows the sculptor to explore infinite variations of form and surface, ultimately made solid and durable in the heat of the kiln.

Within the thematic parameter of "the figure," the work in *Claybodies* is individualistic and idiosyncratic. Some are sculptures of entire bodies; others use a part of the body – often, but not inevitably – the head, to essentialize the human presence. Surface textures may be gritty or smooth; some retain the matte, earthen colours of clay while others present colourful glazed surfaces and elaborate imagery. All require extraordinary technical skill and personal vision for the artist to realize his or her response to this complicated body we all share.

The curators of *Claybodies* deliberately sought a mix of artists and art. The participating artists range widely in style and in age. Helen Frank's *Split Head* is by an artist whose disassembled clay bodies were an early forecast (in the 1970s) of the diversity within the figurative ceramic renaissance. Etta Winograd has similarly been a long-noted presence with her smoke-fired, generic yet surreal sculptures. An early large plate (1978) by Viola Frey (d. 2004) already exhibits the boisterous expressionism of her large works. Akio Takamori and Kukuli Velarde each currently bring their personal heritage to their work. Takamori's sculptures, even *Venus* and her accompanying tiny island, somehow resonate with a Japanese sensibility; Velarde incorporates the forms and spirit of her Peruvian heritage into the mischievous duo looking down on visitors to the exhibition. Sergei Isupov is renowned for the magically detailed surreal narratives and technical virtuosity of his sculptures.

Photo: Barry Friedman

Photo: Steve Paszt



Tom Bartel's limbless figures generate a shiver of malaise in spite of their bright colors and patterns, while Mike Prather's figures present ironic comments on human behavior. The complex, semi-abstract sandblasted constructions of Bruce Dehnert

reference mythological and biblical narratives, e.g., "Ishmael Sent Away," as metaphors for the human condition, while Rob Kirsch's openwork "Rememberer" and "Reflection" ponder memory and the mind with added epigrams. "Touch Portraits," porce-

lain heads by Judy Moonelis allude to the intimacy of our senses, especially touch; while the casts of Judy Fox's two infants, Friar Tuck and Jaguar Knight, are convincingly life-like and exemplify that artist's extraordinary figurative work.



Photo: K. Burnley



Photo: Hunterdon Art Museum

It is a given that the style of each of these artists emerges from knowledge of the figure and mastery of process and technique. However, far more is required. Adrian Arleo, sculptor of "Gathering" offers a *raison d'être* for her work that would apply to all the artists and art in *Claybodies*: "What continues to absorb me is how, by rendering the physical body, one can convey, or at least suggest, a remarkable array of nonphysical, internal, ephemeral, spiritual, emotional, or psychological experiences."<sup>1</sup>

The recent spate of exhibitions of figurative ceramics certainly illuminates an innate need to examine and contemplate our human condition – even its shortcomings – in art. The writer and poet Kim Stafford touches on the universality of our relationship to the human form and its deep resonance:

A figure in clay is not a shape but a bundle of spirit reaching outward from the artist's hand. The sculptural figure [...] affords an encounter somewhere between direct human interaction and the more abstract though also visceral experiences of painting, music, words or other forms and materials.<sup>2</sup>

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#### NOTES TO THE TEXT

1. "Adrian Arleo: Body Language" in Susan J. E. Tortillot, ed., *The Figure in Clay* (New York: Lark Books, 2005), p. 22.
2. Kim Stafford, Keynote Lecture, "Clay in the Writer's Mind, Words in the Sculptor's Hand", *Figurative Association: The Human Form in Clay, Symposium*, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts (Gatlinburg, TN), October 27, 2010.

#### ILLUSTRATIONS -

opposite page top -  
**Akio Takamori**, *Venus and Island 4*, 2009, stoneware with underglazes, 40 x 12 x 8 inches

opposite page below left -  
**Sergei Isupov**, *Warning*, 2000, porcelain  
11 1/2 x 12 1/2 x 8 inches  
Courtesy Marge Brown Kalodner and Philip Kalodner

opposite page below right -  
**Tom Bartel**, *Blue Fertility Figure*, 2010  
ceramic, 20 x 12 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist

top left -  
**Paola Borgatta**, *Oh, No! (No. 84)*, 2007  
Hand-built stoneware, 11 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 6 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

top right -  
**Bruce Dehnert**, *Hades Revisitant*, 2009,  
Earthenware, 23 x 13 x 12 inches  
Courtesy of the artist