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TYLER LOTZ



DIEGO ROMERO



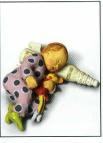
PATTI WARASHINA



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PAOLO SCHLIDLIN



**CHRISTINA WEST** 



CHRIS ANTEMANN

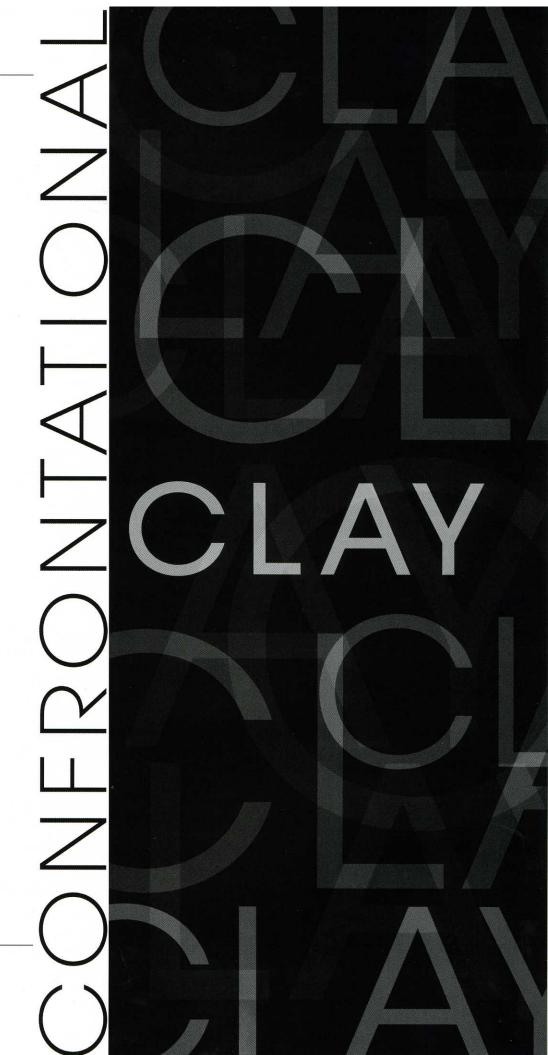


MARIAN HEYERDAHL



TOMAS OWEN

JEAN FONTAINE
NIKKI BLAIR
LEOPOLD FOULEM
NILS MARTIN
NUALA CREED
STEPHEN SCHOFIELD
JINSOO SONG
PATTI WARASHINA
RUSSEL BILES



# THE CERAMICIST AS SOCIAL CRITIC An International Perspective

by Judith S. Schwartz

Turbulent times drive artists to confront society and its manifold problems as never before. Working in styles that are aggressive, violent, disturbing, irreverent, sometimes humorous, but always passionate, artists, using the medium of clay, are now creating objects that speak to the angst of our day. In so doing, they share an emphasis on narrative content, representation and figuration, and a desire to strengthen the relationship of art to society in a manner that has here-to-fore not been displayed.

While social and political commentary is a major theme that can be found in contemporary art, it represents a rather recent development in the ceramic arts. In my forthcoming book, Confrontational Ceramics (A&C Black, London, July 2008), I identify two hundred forty-six artists from thirty-eight countries who use the medium in this fashion. The book further delineates 5 broad subject areas of inquiry, enabling the reader to more readily conceptualize the core features of the movement.

Perhaps it is a reflection of our time, but now, more than ever, artists - acting as journalists, ethicists, psychoanalysts, philosophers, but most often, as ordinary citizens - are examining and reflecting upon a society which seems to be in desperate need of repair. These artists use clay to attack, satirize and/or expose the perfidy of the human condition and its institutions. They use the devices of irony, parody, obscenity, erotica, introspection, violence, dream imagery, and the grotesque to convey their messages and are seen as continuing the tradition of critical social commentary as an intrinsic element of cultural discourse.

In this article, we limit ourselves to 9 artists selected from the total number of artists considered in the book, being fully cognizant of the fact that this small selection, representing no more that 5% of the artists identified, can only serve as an introduction.

Before, however, beginning it is important to document the beginning of this movement. It appears to have started about the time of the end of the Second World War. Genocide, the atomic bomb, and extreme shifts in social systems – were causing artists to embrace new issues and content in their work as never before. The art emerging in the second half of the 20th Century was confrontational, at times violent, obscene, disorienting and shocking. As the subject matter of art changed, so did the materials. Putting paint to canvas no longer reigned

supreme. Artists embraced whatever materials best suited their ideology. Wax, fiber, straw, glass - even animal fat and chocolate - were used.

The venue for art also changed. There was installation art, street art, performance art, multimedia "happenings" and, with the rise of technology, light and sound shows to provoke and enliven the senses by seeming to alter the very "atmosphere" of the experience. Not only had the walls of the gallery and museum been transcended, but the "great outdoors" itself had became the viewing environment - with the rise of Earthworks and site specific sculpture.

In their search for the most expressive medium for the delineation of their ideas, artists turned to clay. It was plentiful and inexpensive, had a legacy centuries old, and could be manipulated to elicit the visceral, intuitive and primitive qualities needed to support the social, political and avant-garde issues they were attempting to confront.

With this new cachet, artists such as Alexander Archipenko, Reuben Nakian, Isamu Noguchi, Elie Nadelman, and Louise Nevelson freely used the material as a viable alternative for experimentation. Pablo Picasso, Lucio Fontana and Joan Miro similarly explored clay's expressive energies without regard to the functional aspects of traditional pottery making.

Other factors contributed to the growth of a sculptural proclivity in the use of clay. Among these were the rising popularity of jazz, with its elements of spontaneity and free expression, and the development of Abstract Expressionism, as exemplified by Jackson Pollack's emotional and gestural action paintings.

The time was ripe for a breakthrough as university-based art departments began to embrace clay as a viable material for the training of artists. This use of clay as a sculptural medium seemed congruent with the plasticity of the cultural changes taking place across America: the Free speech movement, the Civil Rights movement, the Feminists movement, the use of mind altering drugs, political assassinations and the Viet Nam War - all were seen as viable subject matter as artists, using clay, found their 'voice' in mid-century America.

As these artists developed and were starting to be shown by galleries, it began to be understood that a new movement was forming. A genre within the field of ceramics, related to mainstream art, separate from it, but becoming part of it was developing. These artists were emerging from a pottery

tradition, had mastered their craft, and were now, given their cultural milieu, exploring confrontational ideas that truly reflected the multiplicity of events going on in the world around them.

In a previous writing, I explored the use of satire in contemporary American ceramics and focused on three artists Robert Arneson, David Gilhooly and Howard Kottler. I identified these artists as successful employers of satire as a confrontational tool. Satire is a method of confrontation that focuses upon the treachery of some aspect of the human condition - using the genre of humor as the flux within which to mix conscious and unconscious feelings - to reveal a concern for some social, environmental, or political injustice.

Because of its humorous orientation, satire can often provoke change more readily than the direct confrontational style of aggressive reformers. Because of the humor, the message, though bitter, somehow seems more palatable.

As the movement evolved further, I began the task of discovering the artists and assembling their images. It soon became clear that some sort of organizing process had to be created. Defining categories had to be developed. This proved difficult because the work was often too complex, too multifaceted to be arbitrarily "filed" under one category or another. However, with such a large number of artists evolving, it seemed imperative that some form of grouping, in spite of its arbitrary nature, had to be developed. With that caveat in mind, and fully recognizing that counter arguments can be offered in support of placing any artist in any group, the following categories were delineated in my book:

War and Politics: Societies Run Amok

The artists in this category explore the perfidy of war and its brother, politics. Some works treat the concept of war in general, without specific reference. Others look at weapons as a source of evil that creeps into lives making fear and desperation a common occurrence.

The Social and Human Condition: internal and external realities. Clay, traditionally a medium for decoration, historically tied with positive emotions and pleasant experiences becomes in the largest category, a tool for revealing artists' complex emotional reactions to negative aspects of the social condition. It is, for want of a better term, the existential category - for in it, artists reveal personal turmoil as they try to resolve inner conflicts. The questions asked are the ones asked for centuries: Who am I? What am I? And how do I function in this world? In other words: What is a meaningful existence in the 21st Century?

### **Gender Issues**

Clay is probably the sexiest material around. It can be worked soft but made to look hard, and, when hard, can be made to

look soft. Its surface can be shiny, wet and glistening or coated with a "skin" to resemble flesh. Its malleability can lead to organic shapes with voluptuous curves, or it can be worked with sand paper and woodworking tools to yield the sharpest edges. Clay can be dark brown to exploit its scatological association, or it can be the purest luminescent white to rival the gossamer wings of angels. There is no better material to act as metaphor for the human body, to speak to gender issues or to conjure up bodily functions than clay.

### Pop Culture

The broad and instant appeal of popular and material culture makes it possible for the "new" to be experienced by us all. Daily, young and old, urban and rural, people from all backgrounds and geographic regions are assaulted by armies of promoters whose single aim is to encourage us to support the marketplace. The artists, in this category, challenge these consumer-oriented imposed cultural values. Within this context, power, publicity, money, glamour, greed, fame, shopping, and morality are all seen as grist for their mill.

### **Environment**

While this category is not represented by one of the 9 artists selected for this article, I do want to mention the last issue of concern in Confrontational Ceramics which makes visual comment about the fears, frustrations, anger and sense of futility engendered by the collective awareness of a rapidly degrading planet. The artists in this category reveal their concerns about the quality of water, air pollution, acid rain, ozone depletion, drought, famine, global warming, conservation and preservation, the ravages of disease, the evils of uncontrolled population growth, and corporate greed. They are able to use the natural properties of clay to highlight our awareness of these problems.

In conclusion, these artists use their art as a weapon for exposing the inequities that exist within every culture. Collectively, they constitute an ever-louder voice that demands to be heard, a voice against the insults that daily assault our sensibilities. The work is not easy; it is visually demanding. We have a choice: we can look away or stare, be moved, and perhaps transformed.

Judith S. Schwartz, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art and Art Professions at New York University. She directs the Sculpture in Media area (Clay, Metals, and Glass), teaches studio based courses in ceramic sculpture combining multi-media techniques reflective of contemporary trends in mixed media sculpture. Although a studio based artist using clay, millinery materials and body ornamentation as wearable art, she is also a curator, critic and author reflecting on the diversity of contemporary crafts.

Confrontational Ceramics: The Artist as Social Critic will be available from A&C Black, London, July, 2008.

### PATTI WARASHINA

(B. 1940, Spokane, WA, lives in Seattle, USA)

Patti has always used her art to comment on societal struggles: feminism, pollution, ethnic animosities and, more recently, political issues as in her Sake Sets: Drunken Power Series. The tray circumscribes the "space" for her political messages, while the cups, sake bottle, and other objects become the messages themselves. Like Arneson, her themes have evolved into deeper, more critical issues as she takes on Bush and Cheney's interest in Mid East Oil, ecology and war and annihilation.



Real' Politique. The dictionary refers to this term as "an expansionist national policy having as its sole purpose the advancement of national interest."

This term seems to bring us here, especially in today's world scene.I sometimes think of myself as a voyeur, looking from outside and into our world, trying to stay abreast of new situations that affect the world. The

policies that are made by various governments, and how they affect the economics, and the interaction of societies of the world become like pulsating reactions that affect the harmony of our world. With globalization, technology, and governmental policies, civilization is profoundly effected, sometimes over night.

This brings me to this series of work. While working on the Mile Post Queen Series, one of my female figures had the gestures and feeling of a masked French circus figure, perhaps in a side show. Since my work generally is narrative and sometimes autobiographical, I could see my interest in world issues, combined with the absurd atmosphere of a festive circus. This is the basis of this series called "Real' Politique".

I have always felt that you never had to search very far for an idea, as the real world is full of absurdities and idiosyncrasies with which to base my work. I want the work to be approached in a curious way, as in this case, the circus motif; but because of the unexplainable objects within the work, there is an underlying feeling that the viewer can bring their own ideas to the work.

### JEAN FONTAINE

(B.1952, Macon, lives in Davayé, France)

He transforms reality by offering detailed observations of machines that both consume and mirror the human race. His machines are powerful engineering feats filled with rust, dust and age which stink, pollute, destroy and crush. They ape us, they are us - in a

science fiction metaphor they mirror our efforts and exhaustion. Whether we be lovers or haters of technology, we apply our gestures, actions, and good or ill will toward them.



The child ceramist I used to be has gone through his teenage crisis: he has thrown away the glaze skin, the playing with atmosphere and the very simple desire to create what appears as beauty. I have kept the clay but the adult sculptor has stripped it of its appearance and asked it the questions which he asked himself: where does posthumanism lead us? And supposing

mechanics invaded our world? Artifice disguising naturalness, etc.

The monsters of Hieronymus Bosch have pursued me since the Prado Museum; our fears are no longer metaphysical but ecological: global warming, pollution and clones. Harnessing animal, mechanical and human realities as a surgeon does, transplanting, assembling and juxtaposing the ordinary, I try to make way for the strange and the supernatural.

Even if wood, paper, glass and other elements sometimes blend in with the clay, the optical illusion which transforms this clay into a metallic skin is always the rule. I have fun with the mechanical cogwheels which put madness and reason in motion.

Far from isolation on a pedestal, I have attempted to tackle the power of a hippopotamus or a reactor by exhibiting at the Natural History Museum or the Science Museum, giving birth to "Zoofolie" and "Mécanofolie", exhibitions which confront living creatures with our children: machines.

The space left or given to bodies in my sculptures means to reveal the space which our society decides to assign to mankind.

### JINSOO SONG

(B. 1974, Seoul, South Korea, lives in Tempe, AZ, USA)

Song is inspired by Surrealist art, Freudian psychology, and the grotesque. Through anthropomorphosis, the mundane becomes a manifestation of lust, fear, disgust, and pain. While a vessel references the body - how we hold a cup, and use our lips to touch its rim, Song transforms the spoon as a reminder that it is the only universal object that we allow to enter a bodily orifice. As soon as we part from the warmth and familiarity of our mother's nipples, we are introduced to the cold, hard object of a spoon - so while it functions to deliver food - a symbol of comfort and pleasure there is also discomfort: where there is pleasure, there is pain. His most recent work experiments with large scale installation that use body parts and altered objects as he continues to commingle the grotesque, the absurd, and the subconscious to disturb.



Jinsoo Song's oeuvre is a beautiful if unsettling union of paradoxes. Using an admixture of seduction and repulsion, he titillates and toys with his audience, but his tone is often sobering. His work strongly references Surrealism, employing a repetition of fetishistic "part-objects," disembodied parts, empty human shells, and functional objects rendered non-functional. The

production of these pieces serves as a sort of synthesis and catharsis: "Making art serves as a means of processing the raw emotions. I recollect, analyze, and contemplate throughout the act of art making. In the end, the work becomes a cryptic page in the visual diary of my life." Song addresses, from an emigrant's perspective, the schizoid nature of his masculinity and his moral and amoral in-fighting. His audience is left to wonder if his work critiques or condones the objectification it models. Song considers his work an allegory of life experience; he writes "Biblical parables and Confucian stories were the means of conveying complicated ideas in my childhood. It is no surprise my work is allegorical."

Confrontational and sexually charged installations and performances dominate Song's current work, but he values the confrontation as a means of facing his internal conflict. The spectacular nature of his installation work is counterbalanced by virtuosic craft and meticulous detail. A desire for rebellion is often in conflict with a reverence for tradition. He can in the same piece recreate the immaculate elegance of a Song Dynasty bowl, and then simultaneously taint and gild it with masculine abjection. Song's work is highly personal, in his own words "diarist" and the separation between himself and his work is often blurred. "Art making is how I confront my fear, struggle with desire, confess my sin, and reconcile myself."

Excerpt from the essay Part-Object, Part Performance: The Work of Jinsoo Song, by Corie J. Cole

### NUALA CREED

(B. 1954, Ireland, lives in Petaluma, CA, USA)

Her art addresses issues relating to gender, childhood, values, the environment, and war. In 2002, the White House invited her to make an ornament for their Christmas Tree, and the invitation acted as a catalyst for her "Babes in Arms" series in which she expressed the universal concern of mothers to protect their children from weapons of war and the lack of a future that the proliferation of such weapons portends.

Having worked with children my entire adult life, the child has naturally become a focus in my art work. Using the figure of the child enables me to address socially relevant themes. Currently, I am exploring the politically charged issues of war and the environment.



"Babes in Arms" addresses my concern for the values we are passing on to our children. Babies adorned with weapons and gas masks juxtaposed with religious symbols are intended to be provocative. Some of the weapons the babies are burdened with are ridiculously oversized, reflecting the world's increasing arsenal of weapons. The rationale for the escalation in weaponry

is that they keep us safe, a deadly paradox.

"Eco Children" is my answer to "Babes in Arms". This work offers hope. Here I want to engage the viewer in a gentle way with my figures. The frogs, bugs, butterflies, and birds that form the children's hair reflect their thoughts. Nurturing young children's innate curiosity for the natural world will help them become Earth Stewards capable of repairing the harm of previous generations.

My work is allegorical: its intent is to urge us to find alternatives to war and protect our natural world.

### **NIKKI BLAIR**

(B. 1972, St. Louis, MO, lives in Greensboro, NC, USA).

There is a cynical humor and playfulness to Blair's illumination of sexual disparities, perversions and exploits. She confronts society's over use of the body as a commodity as she references personal instruments which are made to fit concavities, such as deodorants, condoms, and dildos, giving them utilitarian, medical, and fetishistic roles. The pieces often convey an unsubtle erotic charge, affecting the viewer in a manner similar to a sex toy.



My most recent work investigates contemporary issues of gender and sexuality as it exists within popular and material culture. The issues of gender within my work address psychological constructs placed on individuals by society. For example, little girls are often referred to as "flowers" signifying their beauty and delicate nature. Where as boys are said to be "built like tanks"

referring to their strength and durability.

This stereotyping supports the notion of gender being taught as a behavior, removed from the anatomy of sex. I use these stereotypes in my work not to support such nonsense, but to bring humor to what could otherwise be a damaging practice. I do like to think of maleness and femaleness as being two

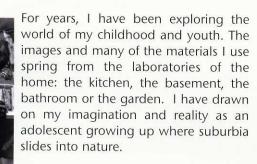
distinct cultures and therefore providing two uniquely different life experiences. Recently, I was listening to an interview with a transgendered man who recently became a woman. When she was asked of the differences in her experiences as a female verses a male the list was quite extensive. She joked about wearing a bra and spoke seriously about the way in which she felt society tends to narrow a woman's experience and limit her freedoms.

This interview has had a profound effect on me as I continue to see the methods in which popular and material culture address these differences through (among other things) advertising campaigns, product design, and television programming.

### STEPHEN SCHOFIELD

(B.1952, Toronto, Ontario, lives in Montreal, CA).

His work fluctuates between realistic renderings of human and animal subjects but always centers on the psychological underpinnings of gender and sexuality. The full sensuality of the material surfaces under his hand as he deals with the sexual content that permeates culture, particularly aspects of tenderness and delicacy in men that threaten large segments of society.



I believe that the tone of my work has oscillated between pathos, humour and eroticism because it addresses inchoate and misdirected sexual want. I use low-tech materials that come from or near the home, clay, used clothing, safety pins, fun fur soaked in clay slip, silk soaked in boiling sugar water, eggs, vacuum cleaners and recuperated plumbing.

Although most of his recent sculptures focus on my body as a young man, I have also started to include a father figure and adolescent sisters in this inner world. The gestures and posture of these quiet bodies are both simple and I hope, magical. Rather than emphasising realism, I've tried to work naturalistically so that they bodies suggest a conceivable existence rather than try to convince us of it. The clay figures are dressed in clothing that corresponds to their reduced scale ranging from 3/10 to 2/3.

### RUSSELL BILES

(B. 1959, Concord, NC, lives in Greenville, SC, USA)

For Biles, art evolves around life rather than life evolving around art. His artistic direction follows the philosophy of Lenny Bruce: "The truth is what is, and what should be is a fantasy; life isn't what should be, it's what is happening."

Biles in true satirist fashion, chooses our collective culture of fast food restaurants, advertising, television and "the family" to force us to face uncomfortable realities. Like all satirists, he uses the guise of humor as the tool for having his confrontational messages accepted.



My satirical sculpture is a combination of content, imagery, attitude, and humor. These elements are expressed through a visual narrative. This visual narrative allows me to convey ideas to a broad audience on different levels. My desire to reach a broad audience reflects my belief that my audience is made of individuals with individual perspectives, each one as relevant as the other. Their

interpretation is only limited by their willingness to open their minds and overcome the obstacles I confront them with. These obstacles are manifested in content, imagery, attitude and humor.

Content represents the most significant aspect of my work. I strive to develop truthful content based on first hand knowledge or well-researched material. With frequency I will pit these truths against preconceived beliefs. Religion and politics are favorite subjects which are often polarizing areas for people of conviction.

Another area of polarization is imagery. Imagery is the first punch thrown by a piece of visual art. The first reaction from the audience will come from that initial eye contact. The viewer may walk away or stay as the result of this first contact. I try to confront the audience right off and although my concept is to reach everyone, I relish the times when some individuals walk away. At this point my attitude reins in.

My emotional attitude permeates every aspect of my work. I feel for all I do and I enjoy siding with the underdog. Experience dictates this methodology may hinder commercial success but I personally believe my heart over head mentality creates richer art.

One element that allows me to make my bitter subjects palatable is satirical humor. Humor breaks down barriers and allows viewers to confront ideas that may arouse unsettling emotions. Satire works to manipulate the viewer's perspective through misdirection by drawing attention to the obvious. Thus

allowing the underlying meaning, when discovered, to hopefully be more thought provoking.

Basically this is the gist of my satirical sculpture. But there is one other important element not yet mentioned. This element also plays a role in reaching a broad audience by immediately connecting with the viewer.

It's craftsmanship and craftsmanship is a finite quality of my work. Historically craftsmanship is appreciated in all cultures and in my opinion is an element of humanity lacking in a lot of contemporary art.

### LEOPOLD FOULEM

(B. 1945, Bathurst, NB, Canada, lives in Montréal).

His eccentric and provocative ceramics intermingle cult heroes, the well known, mythological figures, and famous icons with the figurine form to transform them into parodies of societal values. Whether Santa Claus, Blue Boy, or the Colonel – his wish is to destabilize the viewer by confusing the real nature of the objects with parodies of the models they refer to.



The major formal preoccupation characterising my artistic output is not self-expression.

I am not aiming to create new forms, but rather I am pursuing an artistic and intellectual quest to develop and set up singular and relevant conceptual frameworks for ceramics as an autonomous art form. My objects are formal and material embodiment of this

obsessive and rigorous exploration.

The sources that nourish and stimulate my artistic output emanate primarily from the ceramic lexicon. The conscientious use of exact and pre-established parameters enables me to arrive at a synthesis that is unquestionably ceramic in origin, which ultimately transcends the category without disavowing it.

My sculptures are about ceramics and images, or more precisely, they are ceramics as ceramic images. As such, they brave the fine arts' prevailing hierarchy. I am constantly aiming to construct auto-referential ceramic images that radically transform the nature of the objects into abstractions.

The ceramic objects that I formulate are more than things: conceptually, they are abstractions because they have lost their intrinsic reality. In this process, they have acquired a new one.

I am not dealing with the real thing, but with the idea of the thing itself.

### **NILS MARTIN**

(B.1969, East Kilbride, Scotland, lives in Oslo, NO)

Martin renders social commentary in cool sleek tones of blacks and greys, icy blues, acid reds and sour purples rendered in meticulous two dimensional drawings on three dimensional clay tablets. They could be thought of as propaganda political posters. His narratives are about the subtle dilemmas we face daily. Boy Pranks, for example addresses childhood misbehaviors -setting fires, writing Nazi grafitti, teenage violence - which address the serious issues of race relations and dysfunctional male identities that society does not adequately address. In "Rustningstid" (Rearmament Time), he juxtaposes renaissance knights with today's superheroes – sort of like the romantic meets the brutal. He longs for more idealistic times when masculine ideals of chivalry, fair play and moral and ethical rationales were presented as a precursor to war.



Nils Martin's series of painted objects, "Rustningstid" (Rearmament Time), evokes fun and games, comics, computer games, virtual constructions and possibilities. A sense of adventure comes across in the motifs, like Alice in Wonderland or an illusionist's tricks. Martin's three dimensional works speak to general history and art history, particularly with regard to the latter to

the Italian renaissance, Michelangelo's superb drawings, mannerism, Georgio de Chirico, Philip Guston, futurism and Dadaism...The motifs contain contradictions: classical/contemporary, motion/inertia, fragment/whole, disturbing/beautiful. Martin is interested in the movements of forms, and of reproducing these movements in the motif. Movement is used as a compositional device; often, many different movements are projected onto the surface. Movements are used too as a repetitive element, rendered slightly differently with each occurrence throughout the picture series. In "Rustningstid" (Rearmament Time) Martin inserts older symbols and attributes associated with the knights errant and crusaders. including coats of arms, heraldic motifs, lances, stakes, swords, daggers, scythes, cloaks, buckles, falcons, snakes, tigers, cats, circles, spiral forms, buildings. They are all linked to authority and the exercise of power.

Contemporary effects such as torpedoes, letters, film reels and loo paper also do service as pictorial elements. The knights are never portrayed in full posture, only as severed arms, legs, torsos and heads. Their faces remain hidden. In some cases, face and extremities are concealed by cloaks and flowing fabrics, like a mummy or mask.

Excerpt from the essay Time To Get Armed by Therese Veier, art historian.

## PATTI WARASHINA



# JEAN FONTAINE



**MÉROU DE SECOURS, 2007.** 65 x 35 x 30 cm **CHOUETTE MOUETTE, 2006.** 110 x 35 x 30 cm







# JINSOO SONG

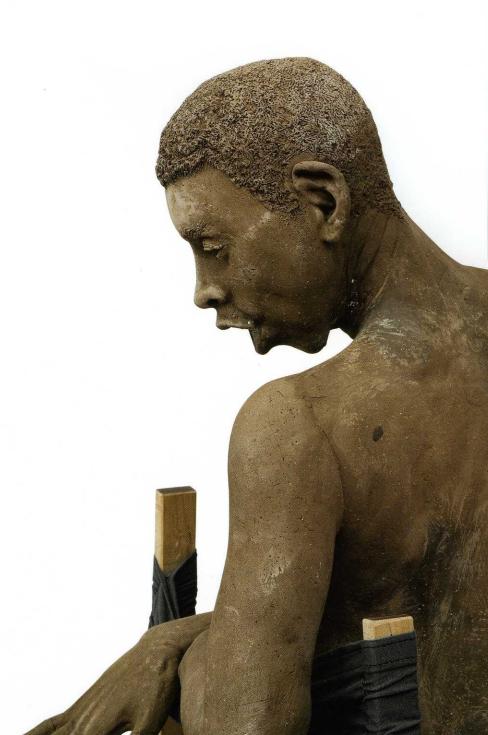




NIPPLE PILLOW WITH RUBBER RING, 2000. 90 x 45 x 22.5 cm



# STEPHEN SCHOFIELD



C. WHITE, 2006. 78 x 35 x 70 cm Collection: Pari Nadimi Gallery PHOTO : Guy L'Heureux



BEAR ATTACK (overpopulation), 2007. 26.2 x 42.5 x 20 cm Courtesy: Center of the Earth Gallery PHOTO: Tim Barnwell

CLAY



**BLACK SANTA COFFEE POT, 2002.** 33.5 x 25.8 x 10.5 cm



REARMAMENT TIME SERIES, 2004/07. (Detail)