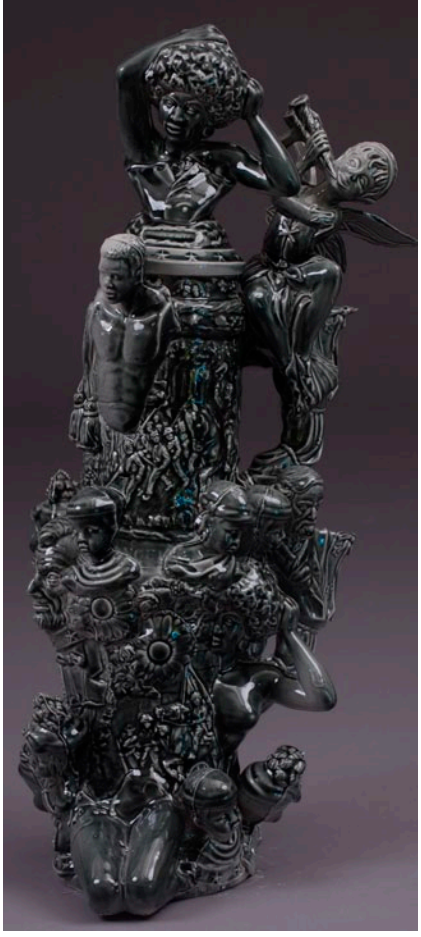

Left: ***Golden Girl.*** *Centre:* ***Robert E Lee.*** *Right:* ***Santa Jesus.***

Serious Play
New Work by Barry T Bartlett

A Review by Karen Gover

Almost half a century has passed since Warhol overturned the Greenbergian opposition of kitsch and the avant-garde. As inheritors of Pop Art's legacy, artists today commonly challenge the boundaries of high and low, art and craft, the sacred and the shallow. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to find art that genuinely engages with popular iconography in a new and profound way, rather than just relying on the images' familiarity to carry the work.

The task of making high art from kitsch becomes all the more complicated in the case of ceramic art, since clay as an artistic medium has been burdened by its association with the craft multiple. Rather than denying its craft heritage, Barry T Bartlett's new work takes the opposite approach, with surprising results. Like Alice looking so deeply into the looking glass that she comes out the other side, Bartlett's work confronts the problem of the ceramic multiple (Can it be high art?) by paradoxically embracing the medium's common uses as functional decorative art and hobby craft. Bartlett sculpts his highly provocative and seductive pieces by first taking porcelain castings of the souvenir moulds. He then dismantles and reassembles the forms to create surreal compositions made up of recognizable yet fragmented icons from popular culture.

A visit to Bartlett's Hudson valley studio reveals shelves stacked floor-to-ceiling and three deep with used ceramic hobby moulds. Reading their labels, one encounters a kind of found poem: Monk head/ White horse/ Dreams of long ago/ Jesus/ Robert E Lee/ Standing clown/ Eagle/ Elephant cookie jar/ Lighthouse/ Elf. This is just a small fraction of the thousands of moulds Bartlett collected from a craft supplier who was going out of business a few years ago. One might wonder how a serious artist like Bartlett is able to turn such banal, kitschy imagery into meaningful works of art.

Three Buddhas.

Yet Bartlett has been using these hobby moulds as the primary building blocks in his work for the past three years, with surprising effects. "The moulds are like a curse," Bartlett jokes. Beer steins, forest creatures, holiday themes, and religious iconography are the visual vocabulary out of which Bartlett constructs his ceramic sculptures' visual poetry.

At first glance this new work appears to be a significant departure from Bartlett's training and primary influences as a ceramic sculptor. He holds a BFA from Kansas City Art Institute and an MFA from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. As a young artist, he was strongly influenced by artists such as Peter Voulkos and John Glick, who straddle the divide between the ceramic craft multiple and high art. Bartlett's earlier work was more directly influenced by the abstract expressionist tradition of ceramic sculpture; his hand-built ceramic sculptures of abstracted figures strongly emphasized form and gesture. Nevertheless, he has always incorporated pop imagery and toy-like shapes into his surrealist assemblages. These give his art an uncanny sense of nostalgia suffused with a sense of innocence lost. Bartlett says that he is always "trying to find the light and dark" within everything he makes.

While Bartlett's use of craft moulds may seem to be an abrupt departure from a purist aesthetic that emphasizes form, gesture and process, we can still find the influences of this tradition in the new work. For example, Bartlett deliberately leaves behind the traces of the mould-making process in his ceramic sculptures. The pouring reservoirs and mould marks are often retained as part of the form. This serves to distance the work from the moulds' intended use in producing hobby figurines and commemorative vessels. Thus, Bartlett transforms everyday objects and their iconography into works of ceramic sculpture that display, rather than conceal, the process of their making. We can see this incorporation of the process into the finished work as significant on two levels. First, with respect to form, it becomes a self-conscious reflection on medium and process. Second, in terms of content, it metaphorically breaks the illusion of popular culture, its images and ideology, by leaving behind that which is supposed to be effaced: the traces of manufacture and manipulation. Disillusionment is both a theme and a strategy here.

When we focus on the sculptures' imagery, we discover a complex dynamic of defamiliarization and re-appropriation. The fragmentary figures of Buddha, Christ, Mary, Abraham Lincoln, George W Bush, Angela Davis and Robert E Lee take their places alongside fairies, country cottages, pin-up girls, Santa Claus and the Headless Horseman. Bartlett's work juxtaposes and recontextualizes these familiar images in a way that calls forth new meanings and associations. We thereby confront the uncanny strangeness of the hobby mould's seemingly banal and harmless iconography. We notice through Bartlett's appropriations that popular culture had already emptied these political and religious personae of their original significance: the Buddha has become a cookie jar; an army-fatigue-wearing George W Bush is a commemorative action figure. Bartlett's work re-appropriates the

Waiting Mary.

Left: ***Green Stag.***
Right: ***Headless Horseman.***

already-appropriated, thereby transfiguring the remnants of low culture into strangely significant pieces of art. As Bartlett succinctly puts it, "commemoration becomes commentary."

The piece *Robert E Lee*, for example, is formed from a beer stein. (In another nod to his medium's ancient history, all of the pieces are based on vessels.) On the top sits an ersatz bust of the confederate general, his head replaced with that of Angela Davis. Her fragmented body appears again near the base, her bare legs kneeling separately from her head and torso. The multiplication of the figures, along with the visible seams from the moulds, highlight the origins of these images in mass-culture, while the glazed porcelain recalls fine decorative china.

The *Three Buddhas* play further on the tradition of the ceramic multiple by using the same mould as the underlying base for three very different variants on the theme. One Buddha's torso is covered in baby bottle nipples, reminiscent of the Lady of Ephesus. The rest of the figure is covered in Americana: a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, tiny bald eagles, civil war soldiers. This rhymes visually with the large eagle perched on the Buddha's right shoulder, one wing flaring out long, like a salute or a sail. A third Buddha is covered in a turquoise crackle glaze, recalling Asian celadon ware. The Buddhas' cheerful grins belie the somewhat sinister effect of their being literally and metaphorically overburdened with a proliferation of incongruous images, objects, and histories.

Bartlett's work reveals the mutability of images, their susceptibility to reinterpretation, their ubiquity and mystery. It also dares to embrace the most banal forms of the ceramic craft multiple in order to re-appropriate and transform them into unique artworks. The sculptures are so appealing, in part, because they appear to be simultaneously effortless and highly self-conscious. As he navigates the challenges of both medium and content, Barry Bartlett makes ceramic art about politics, while at the same time confronting the politics of ceramic art.

Barry Bartlett's Signature.

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