

## Pleasures and Misdemeanours

**Richard Saja's** curatorial strategy for *Confabulations of Millennia* may best be summed up by the moniker he has used for over a decade: *Historically Inaccurate Decorative Arts*. The eighteen compatriots Saja has assembled for the *Confabulations* exhibition share a fascination for visual references and techniques from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and what they may mean in the present. Excess, simulacra, humour, “bad taste” and previously excluded or edited experiences and identities now appear in contemporary mashups of old and new. Traditional skills are revered by artists who have honed their crafts, alongside strategies that borrow from the past with varying degrees of technical or aesthetic irreverence. Saja's curatorial eye lands in similar places to his artistic eye: humour often foils erotic and otherwise unexpected additions. The staid monochrome landscapes of *Toile de Jouy*, a French textile printing tradition that typically depicted monochrome scenes of bucolic bliss, now include alternative joys: pleasures and misdemeanours that very likely took place, unrecorded, across these landscapes.

**Beth Katleman's** porcelain scenes are inspired by rococo decoration and excess. But she too introduces the unexpected. Flea market finds cast in white porcelain are combined into new communities which expose a far less innocent world. Amongst saccharine figures and flowers, severed heads and missing limbs appear. **Ryan Swanson's** digital textile prints combine figures from 1970's porn magazines collaged onto found wallpaper. While Swanson creates a seamless new surface, the figures feel as though they may be trespassing through landscapes of the past. Wedgewood blue landscapes appear on the décolleté and faces of **Melora Kuhn's** plaster cast busts of 'ideal' female beauty. The original drawings, which Kuhn transfers, are collected from surfaces of other ceramics and *The Aldine*, an arts magazine published monthly from 1868-1879.

**Erin M. Riley's** self-portraits use tapestry to depict scenes of personal intimacy. Historically, the function of tapestry was public, keeping out drafts and shielding the private spaces from public eye. But Riley's weavings operate like a mirror, depicting scenes the textile more conventionally shields from public sight: plucking stray hairs around a nipple or cutting the back of her thigh shaving. If Riley turns a mirror on herself, **Vadis Turner's** recent abstract paintings made from hand stitched quilts combined with painterly ribbon look outward to seek the wisdom of twenty-two women Turner interviewed in her community. Domestic and decorative, the works celebrate, rather than apologise, for materials long associated with the feminine.

Decorative excess is another recurring theme of *Confabulations* – tinged at times with discomfort. **Oscar Sancho Nin's** gilt framed paintings obscure the sitter's face while maintaining the atmosphere of censored royal portraiture. *Self-portrait Pillow* series by **Anthony Sonnenberg** uses found fabrics, semi-precious stones, crystal beads, decorative edging and tassels that refers to Baroque and Rococo aesthetics, and his personal struggle with obesity. He explains, “Decadence is a by-product of our attempt to cope with the fear of uncertainty.” **Jeremy Hatch's Ricochet Studio** produce editions of ornate gilt vessels which suggest the shapes of 18<sup>th</sup> century vases. But in place of an empty interior, we can instead see through a central window

what look to be soft organs. Such fullness makes function an impossibility – but also positions the viewer as voyeur as we glimpse a private, unexpected, interior.

Simulacra also teases and tests the eye throughout *Confabulations*. **Douglas Goldberg** describes his *Fear* series of draped cloth hewn in marble as “personal monuments to our flawed humanity”. The artist’s personal fears are represented by objects hidden beneath each drape and alluded to in each artwork’s title. **John Brauer**’s *Illusion* table is also formed from what looks to be a draped cloth but it is in fact hard acrylic, turning the shape of drape into a functional table. While **Livia Marin**’s interest in the everyday and the influence of standardization and globalisation emerge in her small cracked ceramics vessels. **John O’Reilly**’s foetal animals and animal body parts made in silicon moulds from porcelain mixed with bone powder and polyurethane resin create what he describes as “realistic biological alter pieces”.

Humour also plays a hand throughout – often with works that indulge in “bad taste” or use conventional craft techniques to reference popular culture. **Julia Whitney Barnes** gold-plated glittering ceramic bats appear indoors, in daylight, installed within the gallery space. While they take on the shape of life, materially they seem to suggest the unreal. **Emily Diaz Norton** also works with ceramics, here creating vignettes of faux piles of sticks complete with glittering beetles. **Martha Arquero**’s pottery sculptures use traditional hand coiling and natural pigments to render characters from popular culture such as Pokémon, Minnie and Micky Mouse and Spiderman. **Joey Chiarello**’s hand-built ceramics such as the cat Maneki Neko carries an iphone with a gilt screen saver. **Ryan Wilson**’s pair of turquoise Chinese Foo dogs seem relish their own self-deprecating humour.

*Confabulations of Millennia* wears the legacies of two centuries of decorative art traditions lightly. Many exhibitors find inspiration, rather than awe, in the craftsmanship and visual traditions which have come before us. While visual and material references that refer to bygone traditions resurface, nothing is sacrosanct. Instead, as viewer you are often cast as voyeur – catching glimpses of scenes you perhaps were not seeking – but may nonetheless delight in seeing.

-- Jessica Hemmings, Professor of Crafts, University of Gothenburg, Sweden