

Dish Out Your (Metaphorical) Dough to See Some Clay

By Chris Iliff

When I was twelve years old, my mother sent me down to our artistically talented neighbor once a week to foster my interest in the arts. One week, my neighbor attempted to teach me how to make something out of clay on a pottery wheel. What began with good intentions ended with a lopsided, beehive-like object that my mother was so proud of it now graces our upstairs hallway. I was so bad at forming the clay, my neighbor agreed to never make me do it again. *Clay in the Bay*, an exhibit at Santa Clara University's on-campus de Saisset Museum, on display until March 17, brings together the work of twelve local artists, some of whom create purely in clay and others for whom clay is just one means of expression (Kouvaris). The exhibit is diverse, featuring historically inclined sculptures, modern figurines, stoneware cups, and screen-prints on porcelain tablets. When I walked into the museum, I carried with me the emotional baggage of a failed clay artist and the knowledge that clay, as a medium, is a difficult one, expecting to be impressed by just about any sculpture. I was impressed, and then some.

The first pieces that caught my eye were two ceramic wall pieces by the artist Monica Van den Dool. "Chunk" (2010), located in the back right room, depicts a pile of clearly dead entangled rabbits, rats, pheasants, and canaries mixed with apples, oranges, and limes, confined to a wooden frame. The fruits and canaries, with their bright colors dripping messily onto the animals and cartoonish like chunky shapes immediately draw the viewers' eye. The cups of paint with which the artist appears to have painted the piece sit atop the oversized wooden frame, tipped over, causing their bright orange content to collect at the bottom in large drips. The real attention, however, should be paid to the rats, pheasants, and rabbits. Despite being colorless, the sculptures do not lack for any other accurate detail, down to individual feathers on the birds and the tail rings on the rats. Likewise, in "Swans" (2011), there exists a sharp distinction between realistic yet colorless animals and cartoony bright fruit. In this piece, though, the wooden frame is replaced by two massive clay swans positioned in a heart-like shape that act as boundaries. The pieces are reminiscent of seventeenth and eighteenth century Dutch still-life paintings, in which dead animals, fruits, and other objects are painted with painstaking detail. Similarly, Van den Pool has created a pair of beautifully crafted sculptures depicting animals and fruits that are a feast for the eyes. The pieces are worthy modern remakes of a classic art subject.

By turning around from Van den Dool's pieces, the viewer will inevitably witness a wall stacked bottom to top with shelves holding colorful stoneware cups. "240 of Thousands" (2012) is a collection created by United States Marine Corps veteran Ehren Tool. Each cup depicts a different aspect of war, from helicopters and guns, to President Bush speaking in front of an American flag. "The use of these icons," Tool says, "reveals how abstract war is for most of our culture." A cup with the image of comic book hero Captain America, the glorification of the American fighting spirit during World War II, might sit next to a cup displaying aerial drones dropping bombs on skulls, representative of the new, less heroic face of war for our generation. The images appear to be pressed into the cups through the use of pins, coins, figurines, and decals, before being colored in broad brushstrokes and glazed. Most are violent in nature, yet ironic, as one cup has a plane dropping bombs, with the words "just business" written above them. Others are just sad: A pregnant woman is displayed next to the words "Mothers Against War," juxtaposed against a barren wasteland, evoking thoughts of a mother raising her son lovingly for years, only to have him die in a foreign land. Though the artist confesses that he "does not wish to impose his opinions on the viewer," it is hard to believe that Tool's opinions of war are anything but negative (Kouvaris). Each

cup is an individually well-crafted piece of insight into the mind of a veteran of war, and the viewer would be hard-pressed to find any optimism in the display.

While the exhibit did not convince me to give clay art another attempt, I did leave with an increased appreciation for the medium as it is used for emotional and deep content. Van den Dool's "Swan" and "Chunk," and Tool's "240 of Thousands" are by far the best of the bunch, but they are surrounded by a strong supporting cast of more conventionally themed pieces. The de Saisset does not lack for substance, despite its placement as a school museum. Visitors will be pleasantly surprised by this exhibit, and more, especially considering the lack of an entrance fee.