

500 figures in clay

volume 2



Nan Smith
JUROR



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introduction

The artist often serves as the interpreter of the time in which he or she lives, so what better vehicle could there be than our own human form? Ceramic art makes frequent use of the figure, and the medium has a luminous tradition of employing it as a means for expression. Whether the art is sculpture, surface relief, or paintings on vessels and tile, the figures depicted are often used in a narrative fashion: stories are told about daily life, history, myths, tales, and dreams. The resulting compositions can be visual mirrors of the self, the communities in which we live, and even the culture at large.

Clay has been an interpretative material, manipulated by hand into human effigies, since prehistoric times. From the lighter side of Austrian figure sculpture to the serious renditions in terra cotta made during the Renaissance, ceramic figures have remained a strong part of human history throughout the ages. In more recent decades, leading American figure sculptors of the 1960s—notably Patti Warashina, Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, and Stephen De Staebler—established the paths for today's artists. Warashina's work revitalized the figurine tradition, merging it with gender issues and liberational content. Arneson linked ceramic figure sculpture with the statuary scale and tradition, creating monumental portraits of himself as an artist. His wry socio-political spin on the portrait bust brought a controversial conversation to ceramic art. Frey's painted monuments offered everyday, kitschy found objects a new life. And De Staebler's figures investigated the human spirit as fossil, embedded and timeless.

With such a strong figurative tradition, what can be new and distinctive? This pictorial survey seeks to answer that question by showcasing new and expressive creations of singular works by established and emerging artists. The collection of contemporary examples included in this book documents the ongoing exploration of the human form through key art works that tell us about the contemporary world.

Selecting the art to be included in this book was like no other experience I have had as a juror. An open call regardless of



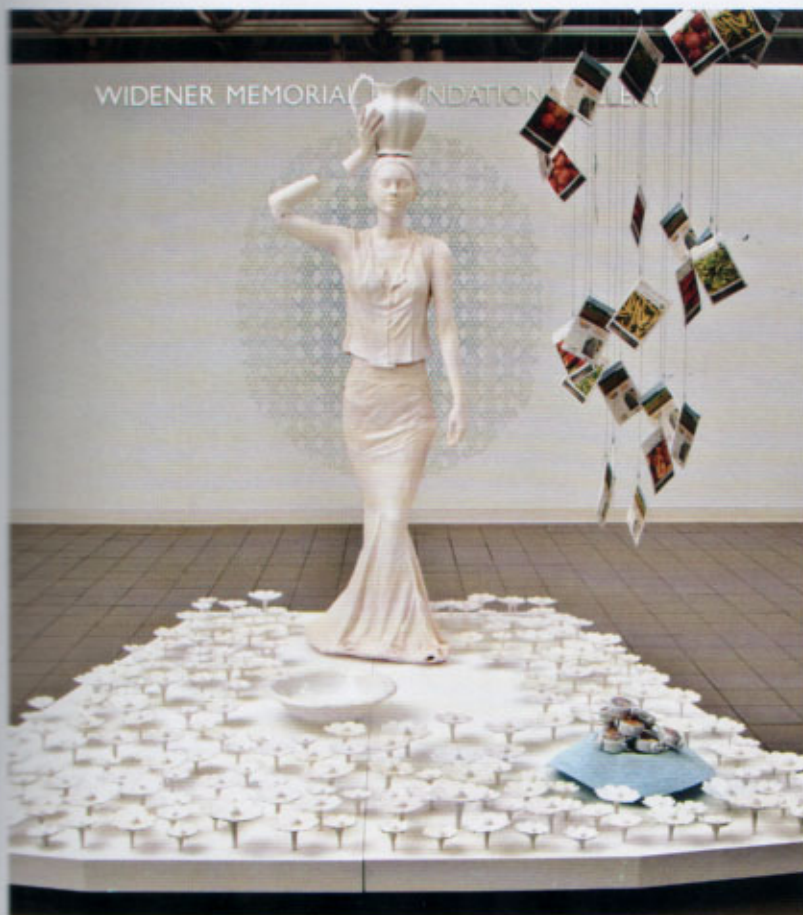
ABOVE: **Summer's Over (Detail)** ■ 2011
65 x 25 x 58 inches (165.1 x 63.5 x 147.3 cm)
Press-molded, modeled, and slip-cast earthenware,
china paint, photographic decal; glazed
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALLEN CHEUVRONT

FACING PAGE: **Garden** ■ 2010
132 x 96 x 168 inches (335.2 x 243.8 x 426.7 cm)
Hand-formed, press-molded, and slip-cast
earthenware, china-paint decals, wood,
stainless steel, backlit photograph
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN CARLANO

professional status allowed for emerging talent, student talent, and those who are further along to stand side-by-side for viewing. (This is wonderful for a juror like myself, who has played a role as a studio artist and as an educator.) The jury descriptions did not provide me with artists' names, but I did consider form and content by reading artist statements and learning about their evident relationship to the work.

As I immersed myself deeper and deeper—sitting at my computer for hours making notes—I felt blessed to be able to view the breadth of talent possessed by contemporary figure sculptors from all over the world.

After much thought on the creation of chapters, I decided to establish them based on format alone. There were many





Balance ■ 2009

75 x 96 x 96 inches (190.5 x 243.8 x 243.8 cm)
 Press-molded, modeled, and slip-cast earthenware,
 china-paint decals, stainless steel, wood; glazed

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALLEN CHEUVRONT

interpretations of the human head, ranging from pop culture derivations to academy references to slick, reductive, almost sci-fi representations. The ever-popular bust showed up in its traditional form, but also in more experimental sculptures that referenced the classical with a postmodern spin. It seems that smaller renditions of the figure, those from 15 to 24 inches, are currently very popular. (Many times, these works referenced children and dolls.) Full figures, on the other hand, were limited in number, especially those created at life-sized scale. The work in the "In Context" chapter presents the figure as part of a vignette, wherein the surroundings convey a narrative or an idea. The few artists who brought the figure into installations earned my congratulations. The work entailed can be daunting, yet crossing dimensions and mixing materials helps move ceramic art beyond its craft associations and into a fuller mainstream conversation.

Regardless of the chapter, content is prevalent in the pieces I reviewed. There is a social undercurrent with overt commentary and imagery in these works that conveys issues more directly than ever before. Children caught the attention of many artists, and depictions of them ranged from babies crying to more affectionate and comforting interpretations. There were also many human hybrids—figures combined with forms like trees, lattices, or furniture. I saw numerous interpretations of the human body morphed with an animal head, and of an animal body (especially the rabbit) combined with a human head.

In the end, after more than five rounds of viewing every piece, I grew to know each work. Since I viewed them on a daily basis, I felt as though I was living with them in my home. From these familiar friends, I selected just a fraction: the top 500. Throughout these works, fantasy is alive, and emotion is conveyed; a concern for a child, a love of the body and the environment are expressed. The human figure is represented in line, form, and abstracted. It is visualized in context, relationally and alone. I hope what you see presented in this collection conveys all the creativity, diversity, expression, imagination, and excellence that exists in figurative ceramic art in the 21st century.

Nan Smith

Professor, University of Florida

about the juror

Nan Smith lives in Gainesville, Florida, where she maintains her private studio and holds the position of tenured full professor in the Ceramics Program at the University of Florida. On the faculty of the School of Art and Art History since 1979, she has served as the Ceramics Program Area Head and has received two awards for teaching excellence from the University of Florida.

As an artist, Nan is known for her contemplative installations and figure sculptures, which synthesize sculpture—often life-size figures—with digital photomontages. Over the years she has explored social narratives that reflect her interest in spirituality, nostalgia, and most recently, environmental issues.

Her sculpture has been exhibited at SOFA Chicago, the American Museum of Ceramic Art, the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, and in invitational exhibitions throughout the United States. Nan's work is also part of many institutional collections, including those of the American Express Corporation; the Lamar Dodd Art Center; the Givat Haviva Institute's Art Center in Israel; and the World Ceramics Exposition Korea International Collection in Icheon, Korea. She has received four State of Florida Individual Artist Fellowship Grants, an NEA-funded Southern Arts Federation Fellowship in Sculpture, and a University of Florida Research Foundation Professorship. Her sculpture has been presented in numerous publications, including *The Figure in Clay* (Lark 2005); *500 Figures in Clay* (Lark 2004), *World-Famous Ceramic Artists' Studios* (Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House 2004), *Ceramics Monthly*, *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, *Sculpture*, *World Sculpture News*, and *China Ceramic Artist*, as well as more than 30 other books and periodicals.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT KOLHOUSE

acknowledgments

Thanks to the Lark team—especially editor Thom O'Hearn—for giving me the opportunity to jury this book, remaining open to my ideas, and supporting me during the entire process. I would also like to thank the artists, including the many international sculptors, who responded to the call for entries.