

Erotomania: An International Display of Erotica



*A Review by
Colette Copeland*

*Above: Installation View at The CandyCoated Center, Philadelphia.
Opposite page: Top left: Nidhi Jalan. Aswattha. Top right: Ajla Steinvag. Synthetic Fractures.
Below left: Leroy Johnson. Phallus. Below right: Jesse Potts. Bellwether Buoy.*

WALKING INTO THE GALLERY IS LIKE WALKING INTO OWNER and curator Candy Depew's living room. Cozy and informal, Depew invites her visitors to sit down for tea, as she gives personalized tours of the exhibition. Works are arranged and displayed as one would encounter in a domestic environment. Unlike traditional gallery spaces, Depew designed her studio to function as a collaborative space, where art is created, exhibited and shared. Rejecting the modernist canon that art objects should exist without outside context, Depew regales me with anecdotes about each artist. Her enthusiasm and knowledge about the artists and their works is infectious. Committed to cross-cultural exchange, Depew discovered each of the artists while participating in global residency programs. The resulting exhibition *Erotomania* features 40 artists from eight countries, whose work explores the theme of erotomania.

I confess to choosing the exhibit based solely on the title. I imagine a gallery full of salacious and tawdry objects. While a few of the works might fit into the 'erotica' category, I realize erotomania has little to do with sex. Depew informs me that the word was first referred to in 1623 in psychiatric literature and means self-referent delusions. Erotomania is actually an illness, a delusion caused by certain psychoses – schizophrenia and bi-polar disorders. The afflicted believe that another person is secretly in love with her/him. Treatment? Anti-psychotic meds. Much more interesting than your everyday erotica. I briefly wonder if Depew found artists suffering from this phenomenon or if it is a statement about the narcissistic

nature of artists. Perhaps the exhibit reinforces the negative stereotype that all artists are crazy.

In speaking to Depew about how the exhibition relates to erotomania, she explained, "The theme of *objets d'art* fulfilling needs of an erotic nature has a history in art, most prevalently featured over a century ago with the decorative Art Nouveau movement where erotic subjugation came to denote the modern." Indeed the entire exhibition has a lovely decorative quality, which enhances the viewer experience. Some works function as decorative objects, while others explore conceptual-based ideas. A few works did not exist in object form at all but solely in documentation form.

Symbolizing both eroticism and power, guns as subject matter occur frequently throughout contemporary art. Artists Harry Koopman and Leroy Johnson both created ceramic gun sculptures for this exhibition. Combining the decorative with the emblematic, Hoopman's ceramic *El Flamingo* looks like a cross between a dildo and a pink gun. Contrasting Koopman's playful pun, Johnson's work *Phallus* (1999-2000) is political, reflecting urban street culture. Johnson fabricated his realistic, edgy earthenware object using a pit-fired process, combining bisque and sawdust to accentuate the grittiness. Johnson's practice extends into the community, includes art therapy with incarcerated youth and adults.

A component of erotomania is an obsessive desire to pursue love. Embracing obsession as an element of the artistic process can be found in the works of Heeseung Lee and Jesse Potts. Lee crafts ornate, handbuilt, red earthenware vessels.



Each object undergoes up to eight firings, as Lee meticulously layers slips and decals. Potts' process is equally complicated. For his work *Bellwether Buoy* (2009), he scanned a photograph of a bee into a CAD program. The computer transforms the image into a 3D model, milling it into a foam positive. Potts then makes a plaster mould, presses porcelain into the mould and fires the work. Adding gold lustre, he fires it again, lastly dipping it in resin. Suspended and preserved in a glass vessel, the bee has wires attached, as if it had suffered electrocution. I imagine a mad scientist, harnessing the bee's buzz sound, converting it to energy.



Call me a purist or a fetishist but when I see art, I desire to see the actual object. Especially if I have to write about said art. My only criticism of the exhibition is that some of my favourite works were only accessible through photographic documentation. It is difficult to write about art's formal qualities (scale, texture and the sheer physicality of the work) without experiencing it in person. I do concede that photo documentation is necessary, especially for works that are temporal, site-specific and/or too fragile or large to ship.

The works by artists Nidhi Jalan, Julie Pointras Santos, Ajla Steinvag and David Rickard especially drew me in. Obsession is a key component in Nidhi Jalan's work. Inspired by Hieronymus Bosch, Jalan created *Aswattha* (2010) a large-scale Persian carpet made out of thousands of tiny clay parts (low-fired, white earthenware). Inspired by the poem "The Song of God" from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *aswattha* tree depicts both heaven and earth. While interesting from a design perspective, the digital collage did not do justice to the textural intricacy and complexity of the work.

Julie Pontress Santos' ephemeral work *Ophelia* features a bed made from low-fired clay, suspended in water. Over time, the clay disintegrates, disappearing into the water. Due to its site specificity, I realize the impossibility of seeing the actual work, but perhaps a video showing the sculpture's deterioration?

After researching the use of ceramics in the bio-medical field, Dutch artist Ajla Steinvag created the series *Synthetic Fractures* (2009). Simulating bio-ceramic medical implants, the intricately crafted bone china human hip, abdomen and skull references developments in the use of ceramic implants

in reconstructive surgery. The work elicits a feeling of both wonder and horror, awe with science's progress and disbelief that the human body would accept such a large foreign object as its own.

Wall-mounted in a high corner of the gallery are snapshots of New Zealand artist David Rickard's performance piece *Test Flights* (2009). He created a monumental, perfectly formed, unfired clay ball, and then dropped it from a crane. The smashed clay pieces are permanently installed in London's Economist Plaza. The resulting documentation includes a limited edition artist's book, which delineates each stage of the artist's process. The performance is humorously absurd but wrought with danger; an act of creation with the sole purpose of destruction.

In a sense, I was pursuing unrequited love, a yearning to touch and hold the art objects of my desire. Was it Depew's plan to induce erotomania in her visitors by subjecting them to unrequited love? Presently my self-referent delusions are minimal, although the number of my secret admirers grows daily.



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