



"Re-Objectification,"
installation view, 2012. All
images courtesy of Friesen
Abmeyer Fine Art.

Christa Assad at Friesen Abmeyer Fine Art

by Matthew Kangas

For her seventh solo gallery exhibition since 2000, entitled "Re-Objectification," at Friesen Abmeyer Fine Art (www.friesenabmeyer.com), in Seattle, Washington, Christa Assad collaborated with illustrator Jessica Hess on three mini-installations or tabletop tableaux of painted backdrops of graffitied urban walls with attendant painted-porcelain objects in the shapes of aerosol spray-paint cans and various house-paint cans. These works draw on the artists' surrounding environment in the Bay Area: ruined, disused buildings and warehouses and overgrown architectural structures.

Though a small portion of her overall exhibition, the Assad-Hess partnership brought a new form of expression to contemporary ceramics, suggesting ways that clay can further be used to document and draw attention to social





3

- 1 Christa Assad and Jessica Hess, *Robot-Friends and Providence Pieces*, mixed media on ceramic, acrylic on canvas, 2011 (see p. 45).
 2 Christa Assad and Jessica Hess, *Beverly Spies*, 8½ in. (22 cm) in height, mixed media on ceramic, acrylic on canvas, 2011.
 3 *Caledonia I*, 8½ in. (22 cm) in height, porcelain fired in an electric kiln to cone 6 by Christa Assad, acrylic painting by Jessica Hess, 2011.



2

issues such as individuals who deface private and public property; the success and failure of miniaturizing large-scale built environments; and pushing the power of ceramics to emulate many other materials, in this case wood, aluminum, and rusted metal.

Beverly Spies sets two spray cans and three cylindrical paint cans (all acrylic on porcelain) on a pedestal before Hess' colorful graffiti-wall canvas (about three feet square). *Robot Friends and Providence Pieces* (page 45) also duplicates the backdrop imagery (more buildings and graffiti), but echoes them on porcelain paint cans that contain inserted images of toy robots. Such adolescent appurtenances could also be a reference to the ages of the can-bombers. *Grey Girls* sticks to black, white, and gray, using a wooden shack as backdrop image and bizarre female nudes with rooster headdresses wrapped around the spray cans. Gender-bending, to say the least, with male-potency symbols and cheesy nudie-cuties, Assad is here embracing the tacky and vulgar, long a staple of Bay Area ceramics—from the days of Peter Selz's legendary 1968 Funk exhibit to the present.

More effective and varied than the collaborations involving canvas and ceramic groupings, which are either too small to be real installations or too big to be intimate objects, the individual sculptures of graffiti-decorated flower pot shapes, aerosol cans, hand grenades, fire hydrants, and even teapots seem less constrained, more adventurous technically, and more direct in terms of social urban commentary.

Crushed Gold Spraycan and *Rusted Spraycan* (both 2011, not shown); *Grenade* (bronze) and *Pineapple Grenade Teapot I* (not shown); and



4 Christa Assad and Jessica Hess, *Grey Girls*, porcelain, mixed media on ceramic, acrylic paint on canvas, 2011. 5 *Grenade* (bronze), 21 in. (53 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, fired in an electric kiln to cone 6, metal pin and ring, 2012.

Caledonia I and *Caledonia II* (not shown) are among the best of the glazed and acrylic-painted porcelain sculptures. Alternately mimicking or even satirizing the cult of graffiti art, they shimmer and shine, and the latter two are themselves “victims” of (spray) bomb attacks on their circumferences. With identifiable images such as robots, people, roosters, and female nudes, the letters-only graffiti parts remain largely indecipherable, recalling Jesse Jackson’s memorable description of graffiti art as the “hieroglyphics of destitution.” Instead of celebrating such iconic hip-hop effusions, he asked early on, “Why can’t we send them to art school instead?”

Of course, that is exactly what happened to the best of them, such as Malcolm Mobutu Smith (see CM, October 2008), the godfather-guru of hip-hop/graffiti ceramics whom Assad met as a classmate at Pennsylvania State University. Smith transforms tags and phrases into new forms and shapes, richly allusive fragments that help alter, construct, and bolster his vigorous containers and abstractions. In contrast, in the collaborative pieces, with forms created by Assad and painted surfaces by Hess, the artists simply cover conventionally found shapes, diminutively adorning them with graffiti rather than underscoring any radical or defiant poses of the originators. The exhibition was like a comfortable drive-through tour of an Oakland slum.

Despite this criticism, the tall (12 to 21 inches high) *Grenades* and *Fire Hydrants* (page 45) are less derivative of Mobutu Smith. Ominous and full of dangerous expectations, their oversize scale (larger than real hand grenades) and brooding, coppery colors hold their own without recourse to the strained context of the Hess collaborations. If Assad could sweep aside her numerous commitments to pottery shops and concentrate on summoning up other symbols of the dangerous world we live in, her stature as a contemporary artist who happens to work in clay could rise substantially. Although her Syrian heritage has led to some pots decorated with tanks and bombers, I wonder why it has taken her so long to respond to her extensive international travels (China, Israel, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Jamaica). Why not, for example, criticize urgent political events that have already occurred such as Tienanmen Square, or document other human rights violations and social issues abroad on porcelain? The slightly sour taste in my mouth suggests such moves may only be temporary and timely strategies.

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