

'Figurines' Show a Display of Mini-Sculptures

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Kate McGraw / For the Journal

Growing up in Indiana, Christine Golden was, by her own admission, a “somewhat troubled child.” She was shooting the hook as often as possible, spending time with the wrong crowd, disdainful of people who actually worked at school activities. As a sophomore, she signed up for a ceramics class taught by the photography instructor, “because I knew I could pass without doing anything.”

“I think I threw two pots the whole semester; I was barely there, and I passed,” she told the Journal recently. So she signed up for second-semester ceramics — and discovered a new teacher, a potter from Texas who actually expected her students to show up and work.

The battle was on. “I was in detention every day,” Golden recalled with a laugh. “But she saw some talent in me under all the bravado and acting-out and pushed me. She stuck it out with me and we became good friends.

“Pottery became my savior and my focus,” Golden said. “I even broke into the school during the summer to throw pots. My teacher entered some of my work in a show without telling me and when it was accepted, my God, that was such a boost to my confidence!”

Now 31, Golden is living and working in Flagstaff, Ariz. By her own volition, she responded to an invitation from Santa Fe Clay to enter its “Figurine” show opening today in the gallery in the Railyard. “I was overwhelmed when I got the prospectus that had the list of artists; I knew 95 percent of the names on the list. And then when I got to my name, and realized it was an invitational show — I was ecstatic,” she said. “It’s such an honor.”

The size limitation — no larger than 12 inches in any dimension — was a challenge for Golden, who usually works life-sized. Her entry in the show, “Contemplative Piss,” depicts a young woman or girl squatting, her skirt hiked up. It is done in white stoneware with a porcelaineous slip and a crackle glaze with oxides rubbed into it to make it look older.

“I’m very much into the human condition, the everyday things that we do,” Golden said. “My work is pretty much about the times when we’re alone and vulnerable, when the subconscious things we’re ignoring creep up on us.

“Americans don’t have a quiet time, when we’re left with our own thoughts, very often,” she said.

In all traditions

Figurines have been made throughout history and across cultures, Santa Fe Clay owner/director Avra Leodas said. They exist within traditions including realism, allegory, portraiture, archetype, narrative, kitsch and the ornamental, and the 24 artists invited for this show fill all those bills.

“This is the first time we’ve done a show on this scale and it’s exciting,” Leodas said. “From a curatorial standpoint, it’s all over the map — we invited artists of some renown together with young, emerging artists.

“Some of these artists don’t usually work in this scale so we were hoping to challenge them with the limitations,” Leodas added.

Taking it down

Misty Gamble, now working and teaching studio practice at the Kansas City Art Institute, is one of those challenged. Her ceramic work is usually life-sized. She is very familiar with figures, having spent her Los Angeles-based childhood with a father who was a master puppeteer. At 43, Gamble is just three years out of grad school; she worked as an entertainment-industry publicist for 15 years before changing careers. She calls herself “a sculptor who uses clay.”

Clay, Gamble told the Journal, is “immediate and extremely challenging. You have to be flexible with clay. You have to be happy about mistakes.” Making a figurine on the scale she usually employs for maquettes was the hard part for her. Her piece, “Tan Bride,” is a satiric look at wedding garb and customs sparked by information a former student sent her about a 200-pound wedding dress. Gamble took the imagined dress to figurine size.

“I like fashion and a sense of installation,” she said. She likes to focus on issues surrounding femininity and challenging conventional standards of morality, normalcy and propriety.

Julianne Harvey, 57, is very involved with issues of environmental damage and injury to the ecology. An instructor at both Central New Mexico Community College and the University of New Mexico, Harvey lives and works in Albuquerque. Her porcelain figurine, “the one that got away,” shows a bare-breasted woman in waders proudly displaying a couple of salmon she’s caught. The subtext, Harvey said, is that wild salmon are being depleted and endangered.

“My work has a lot of undertones,” she said. “I try to work with imagery.” Although the artist works in several media, including bronze and painting, she has been working with clay since her high school years in Michigan. She earned a master’s in fine arts degree in sculpture from UNM.

She was not daunted by the size limitations of the “Figurines” show. “I work in that scale pretty often,” Harvey said. “In some ways it’s harder than to work larger. Working life-size is really challenging, though.

“There’s a whole tradition of porcelain figurines that began in the 17th century, and they’re all very small scale. I’m very interested in that tradition — flamboyant but very reflective of their culture,” Harvey said.

Flamboyance is a natural for Max Lehman, 50, whose show piece, “Bubblehead Bird Brain with Burning Beetles,” depicts just what the title describes. Lehman, who is rehabbing a Nambé-area farm with his partner, told the Journal he’s found his home place. “I’m never moving again.”

The size of the figurines didn’t bother Lehman, he said with a laugh, because he misread the prospectus, thought it said “Figuring,” and planned to enter one of the large pieces he’d been planning in his artist’s mind. It was only when Lehman visited Santa Fe Clay to beg for more time to finish his 4-foot-square piece that he discovered his mistake.

“Fortunately, I had some smaller pieces waiting to be finished,” he said with a loud laugh. “I work in a variety of scales.”

Lehman grew up in Fort Knox, Ky. His family moved to Arizona in 1970 and he moved to New Mexico 20 years ago. For him, art goes back to his childhood, although he majored in video production at Arizona State University. He apprenticed at Cave Creek Pottery north of Phoenix, and has worked in the art form since. “I consider myself a sculptor,” he said. “I just happen to use clay.”

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If you go WHAT: “Figurines,” invitational show of clay figurines.

Photo Credit – COURTESY SANTA FE CLAY Cutline – “Tan Bride” is a 2011 stoneware and mixed-media sculpture by Misty Gamble.