

Beth Katleman

Folly

DEFINED AS A LACK OF PRUDENCE AND FORESIGHT, THE word folly is derived from the Anglo-French word *fol* or fool. Another connotation of the word is an excessively costly or unprofitable undertaking. A third connotation is an extravagant picturesque building erected to suit a fanciful taste. All three meanings are apropos for Beth Katleman's recent installation entitled *Folly* at Greenwich House Pottery.

Responding to the gallery's architecture, including a formal marble mantelpiece and double-height windows, Katleman's ambitious installation features 50 miniature white porcelain sculptural tableaux, which hover just off a brilliant turquoise painted wall. From across the gallery,



the entire wall resembles filigreed patterned wallpaper. Indeed *Toil de Jouy*, the French 18th century printed fabrics, inspired Katleman's work.

Ken Johnson from the *New York Times* described Katleman's work as "doll-sized theatres of murder and domestic mayhem". While Katleman does create miniature stage sets depicting elaborate narratives, the scenes are not domestic *per se*. Each scene presents tension between nature and culture. Large *flora* and *fauna* specimens dwarf famous architectural buildings or follies (as Katleman describes them). In Katleman's world, nature is winning. When I think of mayhem, I think of chaos and destruction. Katleman's works, however, delineate seemingly peaceful, orderly scenes. Yet havoc lurks just below the surface and could burst forth at any moment.

As I stare at the floating islands, Marianne Wiggins' novel *John Dollar* comes to mind. Described as a "female *Lord of the Flies*", the key scene occurs on an island, where a genteel picnic erupts into a blood-bath and horrifying act of cannibalism. Folly permeates every scene from the protagonist Charlotte's decision to tutor the British girls, to Charlotte's reckless affair with the sea captain, to the girls' instinctual acts of survival.

Like the setting of Wiggins' novel, Katleman's narratives occur on isolated island utopias lush with *flora* and *fauna*. The blue wall is the colour of a tropical sea during a sunny day. Upon first glance, all appears tranquil but, upon closer inspection, things are awry. On one island two women in long dresses face each other, as if in conversation, while a small baby drowns in a pond below. The women give the appearance of propriety, while either unaware or uncaring about the tragedy unfolding at their feet. Two enormous owls stare at the women, silently judging their amoral behaviour. Again like Wiggins' novel, civilization disintegrates into barbarism. The



Facing Page, Top: *Folly (Installation)*. 2011. Below: *Drowning Baby (Detail)*.
 Above left: *The Gift That Keeps on Giving (Detail)*.
 Above centre: *Elf, Snail, Sacre Coeur (Detail)*.
 Above right: *Flower Girl with Sheep (Detail)*.

owls are much larger than the women. This play on scale is a motif that Katleman uses throughout the installation to rupture the uniformity of the white landscape. The over-sized animal creatures dominate over the human figures and architectural landmarks.

Another island features a girl standing atop a precipice looking down at a bleating sheep, while a baby falls down the steep mountainous slope. Is the sheep trying to warn the girl? Two other babies cling precariously to the sides of the mountain. The large plants and topiaries appear alien, jutting out of the mountainous island at odd angles. Katleman's female protagonists not only lack prudence and foresight, but also seem to intentionally neglect their child-care responsibilities.

Many of Katleman's figures come from kitschy souvenir trinkets and figurines. The artist scavenges flea markets for second and third generation *tchotchkes*. By casting them in porcelain, she elevates these trinkets from kitsch to high art. Combining rococo ornament with popular cultural icons and architectural follies, the sculptures subvert viewer expectation. Dark humour abounds. On one island an elf rides a gigantic smiling snail. A miniature Taj Mahal sits on the other end of the island. On another island, a giant smiling baby pulls up his pants. Surrounding him are small smiling deer. There is something disturbing about so many smiling creatures.

The folly of undertaking a work that would deplete any normal human's bank account as well as requiring thousands of hours of craftsmanship is what makes Katleman's work so magical. I imagine a factory full of gnomes and elves (or at least a few interns) helping to cast each porcelain sculpture. In thinking more about the third connotation of folly (the extravagant picturesque building erected to suit a fanciful taste), I imagine a collector with fanciful

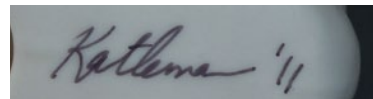
taste housing this ornate three-dimensional wall-paper in his/her home. I already feel sorry for the housekeeper who has to dust the artwork. In an act of prudence, Katleman priced each island individually. I did not see any red dots but I hope that Beth Katleman's work sells – not only so that she can recoup some of her costs, but also so that her exquisite, subversive works are not relegated to storage boxes.

A Review by Colette Copeland

Colette Copeland is a multi-media visual artist who examines issues surrounding gender, death and contemporary culture. She is a regular contributor to *Exposure Journal* and *Afterimage Magazine*. She recently relocated to Dallas, Texas, US. Her work can be seen at www.colettecopeland.com.

The exhibition *Folly* was held 20 January to 17 February, 2011, at Greenwich House Pottery, New York, New York.

All photos by Alan Wiener.



Above: *The Artist's Signature*.
 Right: *Portrait of Beth Katleman*.
 Below: *Lost Duck. (Detail)*.

