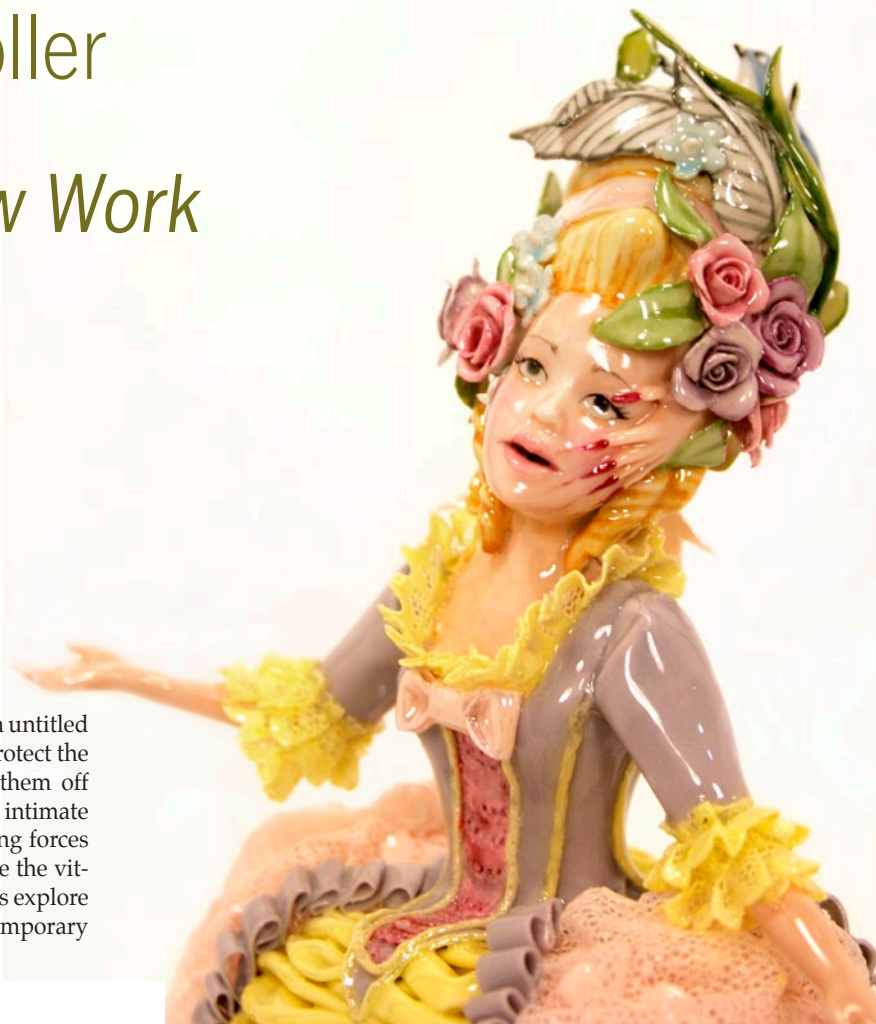


Jessica Stoller

New Work

WALKING THROUGH THE Clay Studio's gift shop and two main galleries, I almost missed Jessica Stoller's works. Situated in a small enclave stood five new cast-porcelain, china-painted works by the figurative sculptor. Painted pristinely white, both the alcove and pedestals reinforced the sculptures' small scale. Plexiglas vitrines encased each untitled sculpture. The Plexiglas served to protect the delicate creations, but also sealed them off from the outside world. Stoller's intimate scale and masterful intricate detailing forces the viewer to crouch and peer inside the vitrines. Her porcelain female figurines explore themes of both historic and contemporary gendered stereotypes.



Left: **Untitled**. 2010. Porcelain, china paint and lustre.
8.5 x 8 x 7 in.

Above: **Untitled**. 2010. Porcelain, china paint and lustre.
10.5 x 7.5 x 5.5 in.

A Review by Colette Copeland

While many artists examine gender roles, Stoller's females defy cliché. She creates transgressive figures under the guise of conformity. One figure resembles a Barbie doll version of Marie Antoinette, dressed regally in 18th century Rococo fashion. The dress's colour palette of pink and yellow tulle with a lavender bodice and trim remind me of Easter eggs. Mouth slightly open, with a Cindy Sherman-esque passive gaze, this Antoinette figure defies her historic counterpoint. A green vine snakes through her elaborate hairstyle. One detail ruptures the bucolic vision – a perfectly manicured hand with razor





Top: **Untitled**. 2010. Porcelain, china paint and lustre. 12 x 12 x 5.5 in.

Above: **Untitled (Detail)**.

sharp fuchsia-coloured nails clutches the side of Antoinette's face. Patriarchy usually gets the blame for marginalising women. In this case, it is the matriarchal hand, which keeps the woman compliant and passive.

Antoinette appears again in another work – this time post-guillotine with her severed head on a platter. Despite her violent death, she appears quite serene, eyes closed as if in repose. Her large decorative headdress resembles a bulbous tumour painted in pastel cake-icing colours. A large fly perches at the end of her head, a reference to Dutch *vanitas* painting. I am reminded of a vivid detail from my undergraduate costume history class. Women's elaborate hairstyles prevented them from washing their hair. To alleviate the itching caused by insect infestation, hairstylists would cut open the top of the hair every

few weeks to dig out the bugs, resealing it again with more glue. This vision gives new meaning to the confines of fashion. Yes, she is dead, but at least she no longer suffers from the neck-breakingly heavy, bug-infested headdress.

In another work, Stoller humorously presents us with the contemporary beauty paradox. The sculpture features a contemporary woman's head with long, mousy-brown hair covering her sunken eyes. Her nose has melted, gold leaf leaking from the nostrils. Strangely, her nose resembles Michael Jackson's nose (in his later years). Perhaps they shared the same plastic surgeon. As with most plastic surgery gone awry, the woman appears to be a hybrid – a combination of human and alien life forms. The paradox: while attempting to achieve idealized beauty, we instead look like disfigured aliens. On a positive note, we can bleed gold.

One work comments on young girls' acculturation of gender roles. Six nearly identical girl figures kneel around an unlit bonfire. Despite their youth, they have already succumbed to society's mandates about femininity and appearance. Dressed in black patent-leather Mary Janes, these blonde haired girl-children

Untitled. 2010. Porcelain, china paint and lustre. 7.5 x 8 x 5 in.





*Untitled. 2010. Porcelain and china paint.
9 x 7 x 5.5 in.*



Jessica Stoller: New Work Installation View.

are missing their eyes. It does not appear that their eyes were violently plucked out, since a thin skin covers the eye sockets. Their expressions range from resignation, to complicity, to mild fear. The kneeling gesture and unlit bonfire suggests a primal ritual, which is about to occur. The staged tableau reminds me of Anna Gaskell's haunting colour photographs of young girls at play. Fraught with tension, Gaskell's images, like Stoller's work, juxtapose the innocence of childhood with a subtle violent undertone.

My favourite Stoller work depicts a woman in a pastel pink *burqa* with vines growing out of her

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mouth. Unlike the dark heavy *burqas* that mask the body's contours, this *burqa* is moulded to the woman's body, accentuating her figure. The green vines that bind and restrict the body also decorate the body, blooming with vibrant purple flowers. Nature has reclaimed the woman. Out of all the works, I find this particular sculpture to be the most transgressive. Not because Stoller is criticizing the *burqa* as a symbol for women's oppression (which she may or may not be doing) but because the work represents hope. Despite whatever inequality or persecution women face, they will prevail (or in Stoller's work – bloom.)

Stoller's process and technique mirror the conceptual ideas inherent in her work. Historically, the commercially produced ceramic figurines characterized prevailing social values and mores. China painting and cast ceramics were viewed as women's work. "My work deals with notions of costume, sexuality

and the subjugation of the female body. The notion of the decorative as weak and inherently female is subverted as the figures depicted are purposely innocent and sexual, self-sacrificing and violent, powerful yet unaware of their power." Jessica Stoller's female figures may be unaware of their own power, yet they powerfully remind us of the perils of female subjugation both past and present.



Jessica Stoller in her studio.

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.

This exhibition was held at The Clay Studio Gallery in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, US from 4–27 February, 2011.