

James Klueg

Weapons of Mass Seduction:
Ceramic Work 2001-10
MacRostie Art Center
Grand Rapids, MN

James Klueg is of two minds about ceramics. In fact, it's the battle/attraction/negotiation between those two minds that offers delight to the eyes and minds of his viewers.

The physical form

of the work – light, broad-shouldered, slab-built vessels about a foot and a half high with carefully trimmed mouths --- has stayed quite consistent over the decade this show work represents. The pieces present two relatively flat surfaces that insist on being viewed head-on, in sequence. Klueg uses a general-purpose raku body that plays the role of a neutral ground. Using an opaque projector, Klueg projects then carefully draws, paints and scrapes text and imagery that he first combines in digital programs such as Illustrator and Photoshop. Then he meticulously strategizes his layering of glazes and stains to get the effects he seeks.

The effects

Klueg seeks are subtle, smart, provocative, scholarly.

The pieces

pack a one-two punch. They are clearly pots (you see the ripple and sheen of the ceramic chemistry) and they are clearly hand-painted (you see the tiny line-slippages of a skilled, but very human, hand). But the words and images that heat and chemistry produce, however, are marvelously unexpected. This is unruly pottery, wryly hosting a huge variety of text and imagery from worlds far from traditional ceramics.

The heart and mind

of Klueg's work lies in the way in which he curates and recombines word and picture. Klueg says his process sometimes begins with the text, sometimes with the visuals. An unresolved, un-pigeon-hole-able piece of communication sticks in his cultural craw. He notices a message that is seemingly innocuous but somehow undermines or parodies itself. He keeps these fragments close until they find their uneasy companions in "just the wrong" fellow fragment.

Visually,

Klueg chooses chunks from the length and breadth of culture. What they have in common is that they already bear the marks of their own reproduction – a wallpaper-like pattern, engraver's lines, or the screen dots of a newspaper photo. These are citations that wear their sources of origin like quotation marks or thick accents.

Verbally,

Klueg has a taste for tone, from the flat, discursive “His intensely ornamental surroundings belied an essentially simple nature” to the advertising slogan feel of “accessorize your ennui.” For these original texts he collects oddities and conundrums of written tone with the same sure taste as he collects culturally loaded imagery.

What makes Klueg

quite unique is how he handles the letterforms of the Roman alphabet with the deft touch of a canny graphic designer. Due perhaps in part to his long friendship with graphic design iconoclast Gunnar Swanson, Klueg has a wonderfully sophisticated sensitivity to typography --- in particular the trite and overused schlock type of the desktop publishing vernacular. He devotes great effort, he says, to “getting the type just right.” This means not only size, placement and line breaks, which he uses to great effect, but to reading and using the cultural echoes of the fonts themselves, from the filled-in plastic Dymo™ label lettering of “devils” to the dimensionalized 3d sans serif of “van ordinaire.” Together these pieces form a precise catalog of the typographic sins that mainstream graphic design teachers warn their students against.

It's not just that

Klueg picks the ‘wrong’ font to undercut the semantics of the phrase and fight with the cultural provenance of the accompanying image. He painstakingly paints the letterforms with the most liminal, subtle shakiness of line and transparency of pigment to continually remind us that this is a hand-crafted unique object, subject to the same twists of fate that await every kiln-full of work at every firing. Klueg’s objects are unique precious objects born of the transgressive mating of creatures of mass-production.

Experientially, the two

sides of Klueg’s vessels are the A side and B side of a record; they are the set-up and punch-line of a joke; they are the two terms of a logical contradiction that send you walking back around the pedestal shaking your head to make sure you remembered correctly. The pun is an apt analogy. Puns make two contradictory parts of our brains fire at once, creating an alert and often delicious sensation of wrongness. The “wrongness” is then resolved into laughter, completing the gestalt and creating a surprising and satisfying sensation of wholeness. Two wrongs indeed make a right.

The key

piece, the one that unlocks the strategy behind this collection, bears on one side: “He made a mix cd” and on the other “listing tunes by title length.” The typography is tilted, extruded, shaded, filled in; it is type that is trying too hard, reaching for every trick it can to be noticed, to be special. The background is a gorgeous blend of symbols of organic form – branches, fur – drawn from print culture, mixed with splashy sweeps of pigment that bring us right back to Abstract Expressionism.

Klueg is a semiotic DJ, a proponent of ultra-contemporary 21st century remix culture, an observer of life and society who is as much at home in the kitsch recesses of Google and YouTube as he is in the dust of the ceramics studio. Klueg creates visual mash-up music mixes bent on signifyin’. The scholar DJ with a vast knowledge of forgotten and neglected pop music styles, with a crate full of precious vinyl culled from hundreds of dark basements, is a new model of the creative artist, a post-Modern Post-Romantic figure. Klueg is a prime example.

The most powerful

impact of the show – the deepest joke – is that even the clay itself is, ultimately, used ironically. Are the incongruous words and images being pulled into the world of ceramics or are they pulling the pot into their world? Jim Klueg is of two minds about the physical world and the world of signs symbols and images it interpenetrates. This is a room full of objects having an identity crisis.

This show is a genre-bending mix CD, this

summer’s hot playlist, crafted by Klueg to make us uneasy, crack us up, and make us think.

Rob Wittig