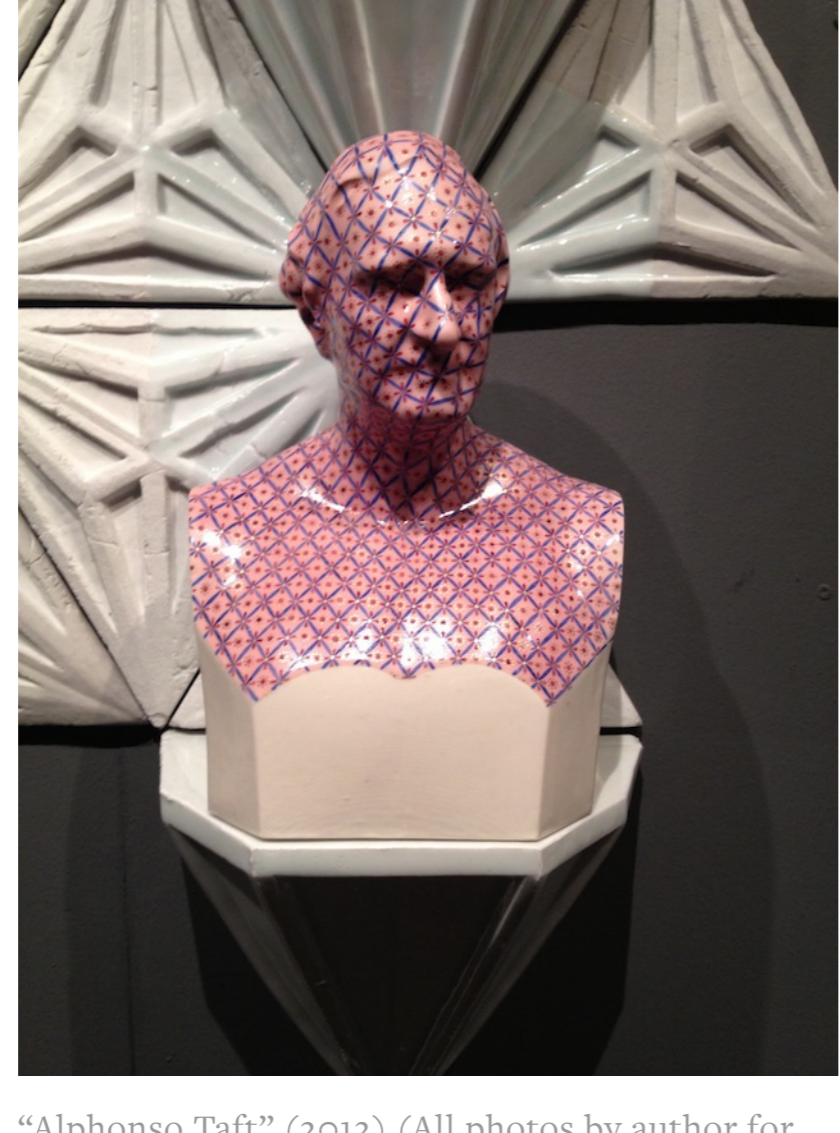


ART

Artistic Bootlegging Begins in Cincinnati and Ends in China

Alicia Eter December 11, 2012

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"Alphonso Taft" (2012) (All photos by author for Hyperallergic)

KANSAS CITY, MO — If Chairman Mao were actually a monkey with prison tattoos, and if Alphonso Taft didn't have that bump on the left side of his forehead, artists Katie Parker and Guy Michael Davis wouldn't have had as much fun playing with form in their whimsical two-person exhibition at Red Star Studios at the Belger Art Center. Taft and Mao are politically charged figures, yet the work here prefers to deal with ideas of authenticity, cultural appropriation, and blasting an object from the past into the future.

For Parker and Davis, the bump on Taft's forehead and Mao's likeness to a monkey are fodder for working with the delicate material of porcelain — or white gold, as Parker calls it — and responding to time and place through objects. Their work draws on American history, decorative arts, Chinese cultural figures, and the language of animals to create a new melting pot made out of porcelain, a material that is one of the hardest to work with in the world, yet yields the finest results.

"Porcelain allows for total clarity of form and image," says Parker. "True porcelain in the West has only been around for 302 years, still making it something special and rare — it's white gold."



Installation view of work by Katie Parker and Guy Michael Davis

Walking counterclockwise around the artists' exhibition is like traveling from the Taft Museum in the city of Cincinnati, Ohio, where the artists live and work, to Jingdezhen, China, where they did a month-long residency at The Pottery Workshop. Both locations profoundly influence the work in this show, marrying two very culturally different moments.

For reference, Alphonso Taft was the Attorney General and Secretary of War under President Ulysses S. Grant. He was the founder of the Yale University's Skull and Bones, an undergraduate senior secret society whose membership boasts the "power elite," and the father of the 27th U.S. president, William Taft. Parker and Davis created these busts in response to those found at The Taft Museum in Cincinnati. Taft's bust is replicated and positioned on the wall, but he doesn't appear in bronze with the proud side profile that one might find in a historical museum.



Katie Parker and Guy Michael Davis, "Alphonso Taft" (2012)

In Parker and Davis's busts of Taft, he is covered in patterns that actually obscure his signature bump and make him appear more like your average 19th-century gentleman. Simultaneously, the patterning looks like a sort of futuristic facial tattoo. In one bust, Taft is covered with a wash of light pink paint over which is drawn a blue diamond line pattern speckled with connecting red and gold flowers. Another Taft bust features a natural white glaze with a cluster of orange, white, black and yellow flowers covering the left side of his face, shoulder, and mouth, including his forehead bump. On another Taft bust, it appears as if the artists dashed strokes of dark blue paint onto the man's face.

Arranged within a connecting pattern of triangle-shaped ceramic tiles, the identical Taft busts form a trail across the wall, leading viewers away from any historical references and instead into an aesthetic experience that focuses around turning an ugly man into a beautiful, decorative object and nothing else. The Taft busts are aesthetic experiences pulled from the past and rocketed into a futuristic ideal.

After the wall of Tafts ends, the exhibition slowly meanders into industrial China. A miniature monkey sits on its butt, wearing a Mao mask on its face. Two prison tattoos appear: A tear beside the right eye of the Mao mask and a spider web on the left elbow. Neither has fixed meanings, other than suggesting that the person has done time in prison, signifying a struggle one has been through.



Parker and Davis's Mao-mask monkey

"We couldn't help but toy with some subversive ideas while in China," says Parker. "Working in a factory that was so entrenched with Mao propaganda and idealistic views, it seemed nicely inappropriate. Guy also gave that figurine really long gross toenails."

On another stand, three monkeys don Marie Antoinette hair made of flowers. Other monkeys have brains half the size of their bodies resting on top of their skulls; their vital organ is completely vulnerable to the outside world's forces.

"China is a dynamic place to be," says Parker. "Working in a communist factory, there is no choice but to respond to the situation and how that is drastically changing day by day. The landscape and artwork being made both reflect this, heavily rooted in the past while speeding towards the future."

The most ordinary-looking works in this exhibition are thick, sturdy porcelain tea glasses. Here, patterns of blue-outlined plants on a white background return to the objects we cup our lips on and sip from. Some might call this an arbitrary pasting of decorative imagery onto standard teacups. It's a common sight. Others might call it a smart exploration of patterns on porcelain. Flip over one of the porcelain cups, however, and there's yet another message. The text "FAKES ARE BOOTLEG" encircles the portrait of a staid bulldog.



Parker and Davis's "bootleg" tea cups

"When we moved to Cincinnati in 2008, there was a wig store by our house, and scrawled down the side of the window it said 'Fakes are Bootleg,'" Davis says. "In our work, because we are pulling so many different forms and images together, we are always questioning authenticity — what is real, and what can we steal?"

This saying conceptually ties this show together, suggesting that everything — from the recreated Taft busts to the monkey with a Mao mask and prison tattoos — are the objects we pluck from myriad culture in order to create something altogether new.

Katie Parker and Guy Michael Davis's work is on view at the Belger Art Center (Kansas City, Missouri) through January 26.

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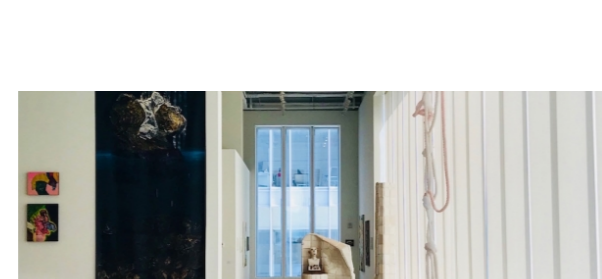
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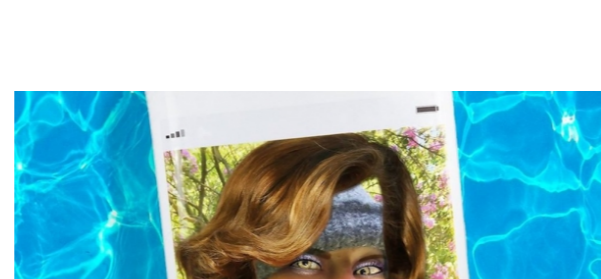
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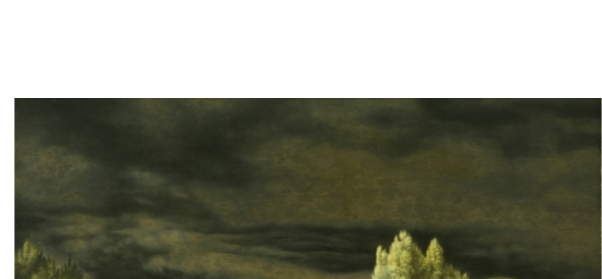
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