

ART REVIEW

Exploring sentimentality's dark edges



"Beasts of the Chase" by Future Retrieval, the artist duo of Katie Parker and Guy Michael Davis.

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 29, 2011

BROCKTON - Here's a nightmare scenario: You're in a small room, and it's jam-packed with tiny people, frozen in place. Some of the diminutive adults are outsized by figures of babies. There are monstrous people and salacious situations. Other goings-on may stir childhood memories - of eating Peeps at Easter, say, or playing with a grandmother's pristine porcelain belles. Yet even as they evoke the comfort of childhood, odd twists wrench the sentimentality from them, and turn them dark.

Welcome to "Fresh Figurines: A New Look at a Historic Art Form," at the Fuller Craft Museum. Independent curator Gail M. Brown has put together a lively exhibit of more than 50 works, mostly ceramic. She has artfully crammed the intimate pieces into a relatively small gallery, and the installation feels appropriately crowded. You don't want to give these works too much room; they'd get lost. But even in this surrealistic cocktail party of a scene, there's a feeling of someone else being in the room: centuries upon centuries of figurines past.

The artists wrestle directly and indirectly with a heritage that goes back to prehistory. Small clay figures - some apparently fetish or funerary objects - are evidence of early human society. We can guess, for instance, that the well-endowed female forms from prehistory known as Venus figurines lauded the sexual and procreative powers of women.

Leap ahead tens of thousands of years to the 18th century, when German ceramicists popularized porcelain figurines, often of gallantry and animals. Then let's alight briefly in 1935, also in Germany, at the creation of the first chubby-cheeked Hummel statuettes, and you get a sense of what figurines have become to us: Forms charged with sentimentality, connoting innocence, nostalgia, romance, heroics, and sometimes social status. To the eyes of a contemporary art lover, they are too cute, too precious - and completely lacking in edginess.

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