

New Work:
Tiago Carneiro da Cunha and
Klara Kristalova



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July 8–October 30, 2011



Ceramics have long occupied the sidelines of modern art practice. Identified primarily as the stuff of tableware and souvenir tchotchkes, ceramic media have at times entered the realm of “fine art” as subjects of classroom figure study. Contemporary sculptors have instead favored the creation of large works (often architectural in scale) that engage industrial materials such as steel, aluminum, or stone. Yet there have been notable exceptions among California artists, especially in the Bay Area, where key figures such as Peter Voulkos in the 1950s and Robert Arneson in the 1960s were early to embrace the potential of ceramic art. Recent years have seen a revival of small-scale works made from more fragile and ephemeral elements, drawing ceramics into contemporary art practice in a significant way, perhaps as part of a wider renewal of interest in imperfect and inexpensive materials.¹

New Work: Tiago Carneiro da Cunha and Klara Kristalova narrows the lens on the reinvigoration of ceramics in recent art practice. These two artists live at an extraordinary distance

from one another (Carneiro da Cunha in Rio de Janeiro, and Kristalova in Norrtälje, Sweden). Yet while they come from markedly different cultures, their work engages the medium in a strikingly similar vein. Though their subject matter is steadfastly adult, both artists borrow from the realm of childhood, creating figurative works that recall characters from fairy tales or comic books and intentionally invoke the aesthetics of outsider art or craft projects. The edges of these sculptures, for example, are imperfect and muddled; their surfaces are pitted and gouged, and the glazing, while luminous, is rough and puddling. Such distortions of form and surface, intrinsic to ceramics, conceptually reinforce the notion of child’s play invoked by the sculptures’ subjects, yet they also represent a sophisticated and informed questioning of the standards of traditional Western academic art practice, in which a certain level of finish and perfection has long been demanded. Ultimately, the nuanced back-and-forth between simplicity and complexity in these works raises some serious and often unsettling questions about the world and the ways its history is passed to future generations. In highlighting the imperfections in their work, Carneiro da Cunha and Kristalova subvert the assumed innocence of childlike expression, suggesting that the story of modern life is more complicated than the glossy fairy-tale narratives found in children’s books.

Kristalova’s art practice summons the creatures and figures (mostly women and girls) of a Hans Christian Andersen story. Her fairy-tale landscape, however, careens even deeper into the strange. In *Game* (2008), a young girl sits blindfolded and alone—is this truly a game or something much more sinister? The delicate bend of the figure’s neck and the pale, almost iridescent glazing make this a quiet sculpture. But this scene of gentle repose is broken by the drips of glaze that Kristalova has allowed to run from the dark edges of the girl’s modeled blindfold. Black marks streak down her face, suggestive of mascara tears and deteriorating psychological well-being. *The Owlchild* (2009), a larger work that stands almost at the height of a three year old, seems



Klara Kristalova, *Game*, 2008

at first glance to be a costumed figure of play. Yet Kristalova notes that the work was born from the image of a child with a bag over its head, smotheringly covering its face. Ultimately the figure's frozen pose resists the sensation of playfulness, instead verging fully into more serious territory. Fantasy likewise becomes dangerous and even physically overbearing in *Kukuschnik II* (2007), in which a sleeping figure is being crushed under the weight of a cartoonish, mouse-like creature enlarged to human scale. Kristalova uses the language of particularly idyllic and fantastic childhood reveries (fairy tales, stuffed animals, pudgy toddler bodies), yet she renders the innocent and common mysterious and unsettling. The scale and imagery of her works match the contents of a little girl's ideal playroom, complete with (clay) stuffed animals and dolls ready to be perched on the edge of a toy chest. But the distorted nature of her sculptures and the dramatically ambiguous and at times overtly troubling twists in subject matter edge her kiln-fired childhood fantasy space toward the realm of nightmare. Kristalova's aim, however, is not simply to upset or to shock, but rather to reveal universal complexities in human nature and to highlight history's dark potential to repeat itself.

Kristalova's parents moved the family to Sweden after the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. After a childhood directly shaped by global struggles against Communism, pure innocence like that depicted in children's books likely seemed impossible to her. And the feeling of otherness imparted through her early immigrant experience surely heightened the appeal of fantasy. Escapist costuming and role-play are of course part

of any childhood, but perhaps the political and personal landscape of Kristalova's upbringing informed the ambiguity with which she depicts this type of activity. In her sculptures, escape is often tied to being burdened, blinded, or suffocated by fantasy. For Kristalova, a less troubled fantasy lies in the ability to see and remember reality—however traumatic—and to forge ahead with eyes wide open so as not to repeat history's mistakes

If Kristalova makes art that speaks of a little girl's life, Carneiro da Cunha's practice is built from the rich imagination of a little boy. His career began at seventeen when his comics were published in the Brazilian underground comics magazine *Animal*. His sculptures, like Kristalova's, are small in scale and have a childlike appearance. Yet while his practice is influenced by the kitsch culture of Brazilian comic books, folklore, and adventure stories, it edges overtly into violent and sexual subject matter. Much like Pop-inspired artists such as Jeff Koons and Urs Fischer, he experiments with a range of forms—including ceramic ashtrays, plant holders, and souvenir-like objects—that conflate high and low culture, humor and seriousness, and beauty and filth.



Like Kristalova, Carneiro da Cunha has been shaped by the political and cultural landscape of his childhood. Brazil's fight to emerge from dictatorship formed the major political backdrop against which Carneiro da Cunha grew up. The country's struggle with colonialism, which resulted in constant tensions between native Brazilian culture and imposed European traditions, was likewise a formative influence. In the arts, conflict between the country's rural inhabitants and those in military power resulted in a rift between folkloric tradition and the adoption of European Modernism. Carneiro da Cunha's sculptures explore this political and artistic history, all through his own fantastical lens.

Gargantua Rex (2009) depicts a massive, fleshy, bloated form sinking into a soft, bed-like, pastel-streaked base. The figure's crown and scepter mark him as a cartoonish king, head thrown back in laughter. Simultaneously grotesque and absurd, he is the embodiment of oblivious and disconnected greed and power. Fat from his riches, lazy, and inert, this reclining ruler laughs while bloody red glaze drips from his body. Here violence is combined with power, resulting in a ruler who is completely disconnected—either from his own demise or possibly from the violence surrounding or perhaps supporting his gruesome repose. The colors of this and many of Carneiro da Cunha's other works are decidedly different from the more muddied browns and blacks that populate Kristalova's world. Here, pinks and teals pool together—oddly feminine and pleasant colors adorning monstrously powerful humans, zombies, and skeletons. Certainly, this contrast of subject and formal qualities echoes Kristalova's juxtaposition of the playful and the awful, but these works are also clearly tied to language borrowed from a vibrant history of Brazilian folk art.

Carneiro da Cunha's art historical references are myriad and fascinating. Brazil has a rich history of modernist abstraction, but Carneiro da Cunha looks further into the past. The strong colors in his work reflect Brazilian tradition, but they are also the colors of European art; renaissance painting is a particular influence. This stylistic invocation extends



beyond color: his *Antropomorfismo Nietzscheano Coçando o Saco* (Nietzschean Anthropomorphism Scratching His Balls) (2009), for example, echoes the composition of a reclining Venus, a renaissance staple in which a naked woman's body is stretched along a comfortable support, often a pastoral resting place of some sort or even a bed. The Venus's body is typically torqued, so as to offer viewers the best possible visual access to her extended, posed form. While *Antropomorfismo Nietzscheano* approximates such a pose, it negates almost all other Venus-like elements entirely. Instead of a naked woman, existing timelessly in pastoral purity, Carneiro da Cunha gives us a fully clothed man, dressed in a modern Western uniform—the suit of a businessman, or some other powerful figure. And instead of evoking beauty or even sexuality, this subject, like *Gargantua Rex*, is a violent one. Blood pours from the edge of his mouth; he is a figure of death rather than repose. Black glaze drips over the sides of the sculpture's base, forming bands of dark color that echo the streaking of blood and create a sense that the sculpture will blur and disintegrate. This seemingly simple work, in the form of a tabletop collectible and the material of a children's craft project, is deceptive: Carneiro da Cunha has infused its unassuming form with complex political and artistic references, prompting us to reconsider his subjects and their histories with fresh eyes.

Carneiro da Cunha and Kristalova make an intriguing thematic and aesthetic pairing. Together, their work expands our understanding of an aspect of contemporary practice that is gaining new recognition. In addition

Tiago Carneiro da Cunha, *Antropomorfismo Nietzscheano Coçando o Saco* (Nietzschean Anthropomorphism Scratching His Balls), 2009

to navigating the field of figurative sculpture in the twenty-first century and exploring what it means to work on the borders of fine art, each of these artists creates poignant sculptures that examine the ways we as a global community learn from and about history. Like the best political art, theirs resists didacticism, engaging instead in timeless fantasies that draw on the shared language of childhood and fundamental human psychology. The sculptures' universal—and, at times, fantastical—subjects, along with their intimate scale, seductive colors, and shimmering surfaces, draw viewers in, allowing us to find a pleasure in the experience of looking that opens to and eases the contemplation of weightier issues. While the humor and delight evoked by their work ultimately gives way to serious concepts and troubling visions, these artists' deft navigation of fantasy and its shadow side eases the path toward understanding the darkness of the past and enabling its lessons to light the way forward.

Alison Gass

Assistant Curator, Painting and Sculpture

Note

1. Several recent exhibitions have examined this trend, including *Makers and Modelers: Works in Ceramic* at Gladstone Gallery, New York, in 2007, and the multigenerational 2009 investigation *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay* at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Reverse, from left:

Tiago Carneiro da Cunha, *Homem de Lama Grande* (Large Mudman), 2010

Klara Kristalova, *Kukuschnik II*, 2007

Tiago Carneiro da Cunha, *Generalidade* (Generality), 2009

Klara Kristalova, *And Still They Remain*, 2009

All images by Tiago Carneiro da Cunha except *Homem de Lama Grande* (Large Mudman) are courtesy Galeria Fortes Vilaça, Brazil; photos: Eduardo Ortega. *Homem de Lama Grande* is courtesy Kate MacGarry, London. All works © Tiago Carneiro da Cunha.

All images by Klara Kristalova except *The Owchild* are courtesy Lehmann Maupin Gallery. *The Owchild* is courtesy the artist. All works © Klara Kristalova.

The *New Work* series is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and is generously supported by Collectors Forum, the founding patron of the series. Major funding is also provided by The Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation and Robin Wright and Ian Reeves.

Tiago Carneiro da Cunha was born in São Paulo in 1973 and lives and works in Rio de Janeiro. He was an associate research student in the MFA program at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and has participated in many group and solo shows. He recently curated the exhibition *Law of the Jungle* for Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York and was a guest lecturer at the Capacete / 2010 São Paulo Biennial Talks.

Klara Kristalova was born in Prague in 1967 and lives and works near Norrtälje, Sweden. She studied at the Royal University College of Fine Art, Stockholm, and has participated in numerous group and solo shows. Most recently her work was included in *Luc Tuymans: A Vision of Central Europe*, an exhibition curated by Tuymans for the Bruges Central City Festival 2010.

Works in the Exhibition

Tiago Carneiro da Cunha

Cliche Derretendo (Melting Cliche), 2008
Polychrome faience
5 7/8 x 11 x 8 1/4 in. (15 x 28 x 21 cm)

Antropomorfismo Nietzscheano Coçando o Saco (Nietzschean Anthropomorphism Scratching His Balls), 2009
Polychrome faience
11 1/8 x 12 1/8 x 15 1/4 in. (30 x 31 x 40 cm)
Adriana Varejão, Rio de Janeiro

Cinzeiro Metalizado (Metal Ashtray), 2009
Polychrome faience
7 x 15 x 12 in. (17.8 x 38.1 x 30.5 cm)
Márcia Fortes and Eduardo Ortega, São Paulo

Exigente (Demander), 2009
Polychrome faience
13 3/4 x 12 3/4 x 11 in. (35 x 32 x 28 cm)

Gargantua Rex, 2008
Polychrome faience
16 3/8 x 16 3/8 x 14 3/8 in. (42 x 43 x 38 cm)
Private collection, São Paulo

Generalidade (Generality), 2009
Polychrome faience
11 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 9 1/2 in. (29 x 25 x 23 cm)

Pedinte Pequeno (Small Beggar), 2009
Polychrome faience
8 1/4 x 8 1/4 x 9 1/8 in. (21 x 21 x 24 cm)
Márcio Siqueira, São Paulo

All works by Carneiro da Cunha are courtesy the artist and Kate MacGarry, London, unless otherwise noted.

Klara Kristalova

The Catastrophe, 2007
Glazed stoneware
14 3/8 x 19 1/4 x 21 1/4 in. (38 x 50 x 55 cm)
Jarta Partliger, private collection

Hole, 2007
Glazed stoneware
11 x 13 1/4 x 13 1/4 in. (28 x 34 x 35 cm)
Ovitz Family Collection, Los Angeles

Kukuschnik II, 2007
Glazed stoneware
14 3/8 x 23 1/4 x 9 1/8 in. (38 x 60 x 25 cm)
Collection Robert Harshorn Shimshak and Marion Brenner, Berkeley

Game, 2008
Glazed stoneware
15 1/2 x 17 1/4 x 13 in. (40 cm x 45 x 33 cm)
Susan D. Goodman Collection, New York

Deprimido (Depressed), 2010
Polychrome faience
8 1/2 x 15 1/4 x 11 7/8 in. (21 x 40 x 29 cm)

Gargantua Afundando (Sinking Gargantua), 2010
Polychrome faience
30 x 40 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 x 101.6 cm)

Homem de Lama Grande (Large Mudman), 2010
Polychrome faience
16 1/2 x 14 1/2 x 22 in. (41 x 37 x 55.9 cm)

Reflexivo (Reflective), 2010
Polychrome faience
13 1/4 x 14 1/4 x 15 1/4 in. (35 x 36 x 40 cm)

Zumbi (Zombie), 2010
Polychrome faience
9 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 10 1/4 in. (23 x 30 x 27 cm)

Esqueleto com flores (Skeleton with Flowers), 2011
Polychrome faience
12 1/2 x 13 x 15 in. (31.8 x 33 x 38.1 cm)
Courtesy Galeria Fortes Vilaça, Brazil

Ubu, 2011
Polychrome faience
14 3/8 x 13 x 15 1/4 in. (37 x 33 x 40 cm)
Courtesy Galeria Fortes Vilaça, Brazil

And Still They Remain, 2009
Glazed stoneware
35 1/8 x 14 1/2 x 10 1/4 in. (89 x 36 x 26 cm)
Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, Paris

The Owchild, 2009
Glazed stoneware
41 3/8 x 14 1/2 x 17 1/4 in. (104.9 x 36 x 45 cm)
Collection of Mats and Jenny Kullman, Sweden

Last Little Stupid Donkey, 2010
Glazed stoneware
34 3/8 x 16 3/8 x 10 1/4 in. (88 x 42 x 26 cm)
Private collection, Detroit, MI, courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery

She's Got a Good Head, 2010
Glazed stoneware
15 1/2 x 14 1/2 x 25 1/8 in. (39 x 36 x 64 cm)
Mr. and Mrs. Denis Salama Collection, Paris

new work

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