

Carla Potter Catalogue Essay  
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Meticulously barnacled rocks, vegetated corals, textured sponges, prickly cucumbers glistening with wetness. Carla Potter's elaborate ceramic constructions seduce the eye with strange beauty. Slimy skins glint and beckon, specimens of a newly discovered sea. Anemones sprout legs, a poodle-bodied form has a tentacled head, and a rocky nest is filled with fur and belly-buttoned larvae. In Potter's work, forms of life we know to be as distinct as snails and sassafras are mutating and hybridizing.

Pulsing with color like alien flowers from secret and imagined places, these are sensual and exotic life-forms. Each pore and tendril is fashioned by hand, twinkling with impossibly tiny points and naturalistic textures. Ruffled and reticulated, these creatures are torturously detailed. What madness is this? What pleasure?

The discipline of doily-makers and the studiousness of scientists seem to fuel these hybrid inspirations. These are not the quiet, compulsive productions of age-old domestic labors. Potter's porcelains deny the service and function of "feminine" arts. Her forms are fanciful instead of practical, invented rather than traditional. This collection of creatures challenges the historical function of porcelain with wildly imaginative results. No two sculptures are, nor have ever been, identical. Each form is the result of repeated studied attempts to push the clay to new limits of possibility. These finalists are the mutant survivors of tedious teasing by tools and trials by fire.

Potter begins with loose drawings and sensual ideas, digging from tide pools of memory. Potter has turned stones, explored for hours the fertile coasts of South East Alaska, where she was raised. Fascinated by the endless variation and detail of the coastline, Potter embellishes the decorated beaches of her childhood. She adores the unabashed excess of seaplant-strewn rocks and curvaceous cucumbers.

"I never felt very comfortable relishing girlishness, femininity. Ballet dancing in beautiful tutus and gowns was as close as I could come...I spent seventeen years of my young life examining the human form in a mirror. Not only in a static sense but moving and dressed in flowing garb."

The attraction to decoration and flowing movement, attenuated curves and lines is evident in her work. Like an Elizabethan collar, clusters of pendulous coral-colored eggs skirt the elegant neck of a tall vessel, sprouting into pale green seaweed ruffles. Like the sinewy stipe of kelp, long tendrils drape languidly from the tops and tips of encrusted forms. Wet-looking ruffled orifices gape, exposing deep watery throats and pooled recesses. Nature is a happy exhibitionist and certainly has impressed a girl who longed to be so lovely, so thrilled with her own grace and style.

“I remember painstakingly curling my hair, looking fresh and beautiful ready to go to school, then at the last minute flattening my hair and lowering my head. I was terrified to bring attention to myself.”

Reacting to the self-censoring habits of her girlhood, Potter blossoms into the freedom of her art, making real her flights of imagination, the details of celebrated sensuality.

“Puritan ideals run deep in our society, and we have very complex and contradictory attitudes about sex, body and family. I was raised on ideals that contradicted all the natural impulses that come with hormonal and mental development and those stages of life were never acknowledged as wholesome and natural but always as something to be denied...It has been through examining nature that I have been able to sort through my own contradictory and guilt-laden feelings and untie all these knots.”

Indeed, the sculptures are knotted with various forms of life, layered, bursting like fireworks with contained energy. The wet tentacles of an anemone beckon and bristle. The sculptures both invite and repel. Sea creatures and flowers copulate with footed and furred fauna, exposing this artist's pleasure in the confusion of categories. Potter's fanciful co-mingling conflates science and logic. She proposes a world of beauty and imagination that challenges Western scientific and cultural traditions.

“My work is definitely about relishing desires that have been sublimated either by religion or culture....Always when I work, the thought occurs to me that our emotional boundaries are so manipulated by societal structures.”

Steering toward a direction of contemporary cultural criticism gives deeper significance to her uncensored creations. Aligned with the feminist critique of science, Potter expands her work's reach. Challenging the Aristotelian paradigm of a dualistic universe (which holds that “male” and “culture” are ordered in opposition to “female” and “nature”) Potter's sculpture proposes radical new life forms, featuring imaginative, deviant biology.

“We are able to love the beauty of a flower and “nature” with an unabashed lust. It is a place to let desire run free for with our fellow humans, there are so many strictures and structures, frustrations, misunderstandings. Sideways and disapproving looks bruise our desire, constrict joy. Work is a place to be absolutely free and... wonderfully devious.”

Potter quietly foils scientific illustration with invented “biology”. These exquisitely rendered forms pose simultaneously as scientific specimens and cultural artifacts, evoking the subversive rebelliousness of Judy Chicago's 1979 installation, *The Dinner Party*. Chicago worked with dozens of other artists to set an elaborate table for major female writers, artists and scholars (contributors to art and science which heretofore had been excluded from the canon of significant works). Chicago's homage featured exquisitely crafted painted porcelain plates, fantastical variations on vaginas. Potter elaborates this current of cultural critique with specimens that are both seductive, sexualized souvenirs and curious cultural artifacts: a new and strange nature of her own design.

“Last night as I went to sleep, I dreamt of a near edgeless form that would flow out of a deep somewhat folded opening. It will spread out low over the surface and be so soft and about so much sadness. I was thinking about the shape of emotions and how sadness is malleable and spreads out, edgeless.”

Potter’s sculptures seem to grow from emotion and experience, validating and manifesting depth of feeling as physical metaphors and sensory objects. Evocative, mysterious, finely crafted, Potter’s work resonates with physical and psychological allusions. Her work’s strength builds on diverse associations and playful defiance against categorization.

