HANDEYE

OUT OF THE WUNDERKAMMER

Julia Kunin's ceramic sculptures contemplate desire and repulsion.

Julia Kunin's mad mounds of octopi or snail shells or strange flowers might at first look formless – even incoherent. But look longer, as you might at clouds or a Chinese scholar's rock, and tentacles gradually transform into arms twisted together in passion, or an unstable, undulating grotto. From the interplay of mass and emptiness, from the pulsing crowd of individual clay "beings," meaning emerges. Kunin's sculptures are objects to contemplate – three-dimensional Rorschach invitations to plumb your own depths – to discover a blend of beauty and decay, entropy and ecstasy, desire and repulsion.

Much of Kunin's work is inspired by the 16th-century artist Bernard Palissy, who made platters of wriggling aquatic life by using direct casts of animals and plants. Additional inspiration comes from Wunderkammer collections of rare and fantastical objects assembled for study, for amusement, or just for their beauty. As with Palissy, the individual elements of Kunin's sculptures are generally made from life-casts of shells or frozen octopi – whatever catches her eye. Each sculpture takes shape one life-form at a time, heaped up into forms that somehow derive their logic from the "beings" which make up their structure. As with a Wunderkammer, the results are beautiful, a little terrible, magnetically attractive, and indeterminately repellent at the same time.

Some of Kunin's recent work is made from more straightforward slip casting, which she mastered during a residency at the Kohler ceramics facility in Wisconsin. She began with an elephant foot waste can, which lead her to Wendy Christiansen-Senk at the Milwaukee Public Museum's natural history offices. She loaned Kunin her Tanzanian black rhino death mask – relic of a 1923 museum expedition to Africa. The mask captured only the contour and texture of the animal's nose, and Kunin found its disembodied, almost abstract quality "monstrous and magnetic."

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Christiansen-Senk told Kunin about Carl Akeley, scientist, artist and taxidermist, and one of the inventors of dioramas. Akeley designed a muskrat diorama for the Milwaukee museum, as well as the African Hall at NYC's Museum of Natural History.

Kunin's research into his life and work has taken her in a new direction. Gorilla hands and elephant feet were, in Victorian times, among the spoils of colonialism put on display in the parlors and Wunderkammers of the "civilized" world. What was once viewed as exotic entertainment now reads as barbaric, wasteful and disrespectful. Kunin's slipcast objects, with their iridescent metallic glazes, put the discord into almost Expressionist terms.

Kunin came to ceramics in her early teens, as she frequently wandered through the clay studio at the University of Vermont in her hometown. The head of the studio, Hideo Okino, eventually offered her an unofficial perch there, which meant that she could work in clay at will. "Hideo was a remarkable man who offered space to several potters who were just starting out, and was instrumental in helping create the craft movement in the 1970's in Vermont," comments Kunin.

Even though Kunin pursued a liberal arts degree at Wellesley, she continued to study ceramics both at Carnegie Mellon University with Ed Eberle, as well as with Aurore Chabot at UVM. In 1984 she abandoned clay altogether, "not wanting to use what I saw as a crafty, traditional, ugly brown colored material. I continued to work in sculpture, however, with a multiplicity of media." Among the memorable pieces of her "post-ceramics" period is a series of meticulously crafted red suede saddles, whose blend of sensuality and toughness impressed critics and viewers.

But in 2002, Kunin visited Manhattan's Asia Society to see the work of Chinese artist Ah Xian. His porcelain busts of men and women were painted over with motifs from China's centuries-old tradition of decorative porcelains. He made the busts in Jindedgen, China, long a center of the finest ceramic work. The way in which the decorative elements overwhelm Xian's human forms invites a conversation about the immense burden of culture and history. "I was so taken by these sculptures, that I felt that I could make art with a material that I had neglected due to its craft associations," tells Kunin.

"I had been casting baby octopi out of glass, and was able to take that imagery and build abstract forms by piling up ceramic octopi. I wandered into yet another pottery shop, this time in Brooklyn, and was advised to create press molds for the octopi, and at the same time was introduced to the work of Bernard Palissy. Since then I have been passionately interested in porcelain and ceramics, and continue to experiment with different techniques."

When asked how people read her work, Kunin comments: “The work is shown in an art gallery context, and as a result is not seen so much as craft, but as fine art. I don’t mind having a foot in both camps, craft and art, as I’ve always been influenced by craft, whether it be learning leather craft from a shoemaker, or casting glass in the Czech Republic. In addition, it is my hope that people read the work on multiple levels – that is seen as baroque, elegant, grotesque and humorous all at once.”

Future plans include something special and secret and Hungarian. But Kunin is not ready to lift the veil.