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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Uncovering the Feminine Grotesque

by Jillian Steinhauer on February 6, 2014



Jessica Stoller, "Untitled (stack)" (2013), porcelain, china paint, and luster, 12 x 7 ½ x 9 in (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Jessica Stoller's porcelain sculptures are a cornucopia of crassness. Her [current solo exhibition](#) at PPOW (also her first there) features a pile of oozing, misshapen breasts topped with ice cream cones as well as a bowl of fruit balanced on the head of a ghost. There are dishes featuring detached legs and hands as ornamentation, and women wearing gowns that appear to be made from elaborate mounds of frosting. In accordance with its title, the show, *Spoil*, looks as if a dainty tea party has gone awry.



Close-up on Jessica Stoller's "Still Life" (2013), porcelain, china paint, luster, mixed-media, 65 x 47 x 23 ½ in (click to enlarge)

The centerpiece, "Still Life" (2013), could perhaps be the table from the tea party scene in *Alice in Wonderland*,

featuring, as it does, cakes on stands with delicate trim, vases of flowers, cookies stacked neatly on tiered plates. At first glance, the grinning skull may not so much alarm you because the whole ensemble appears perfectly frilly, pastel, and proper. It takes a minute to register that a number of the desserts appear to be made from breasts, others topped with hands whose fingernails look like they belong to some Cruella de Vil-like personification of death. At one end of the table, what looks like a pastry features the visage of a blonde woman, her lips an icy purplish pink and a fly grazing on her left cheek. Suddenly the chocolate dripping from the strawberries at the other end begins to look quite sinister. These pieces, and the many more in the show, are made from porcelain, china paint, and luster, and Stoller obviously relishes the contrast between the preciousness associated with these mediums and her ghoulish, sexually suggestive scenarios. She seems to play up the kitsch factor for the same reason — many of the sculptures in “Still Life” look like pieces you’d find in a tea set for children. The juxtapositions are clever, but what pushes the work further, into the realm of effect, is Stoller’s incredible technical ability, as well as her surreal bent, which comes to the fore in PPOW’s second room.



Installation view, "Jessica Stoller: Spoil" at PPOW

There, in a genuinely frightening untitled work from 2010 that seems to channel Munch's "The Scream," gold drips out of the misshapen nostrils of a woman whose thick hair covers her eyes and most of her face (and looks like molten chocolate). Next to her sits "Untitled (lick)" (2013), in which a woman wears one of the aforementioned frilly frosting dresses while a swan, possibly dead, lays on her head. Another woman kneels naked behind her and licks at the dress. A new take on Cinderella? An even darker fairy tale that time forgot? (Swans are, after all, associated with rape and death in Greek mythology.)

Stoller's PPOW show has distinct connections and resonances with Allison Schulnik's [solo exhibition](#) not too far away in Chelsea, at ZieherSmith. Schulnik, too, displays works in porcelain, and ceramic, but her primary concern seems to be what can be done with clay *before* it's fired. Schulnik's centerpiece is "[Eager](#)" (also the title of the show), an eight-minute claymation video that gets its own room in the gallery. "Eager" doesn't have a plot, but it features dancing female figures who follow a horse into a forest, where flowers sway and morph to the sounds of ethereal, wordless music that's heavy on piano and electric guitar.



Allison Schulnik, still from "Eager" (2014), clay-animated, stop-motion video, 8 min, 34 sec

All of the figures in “Eager” embody a kind of purposeful messiness, an aesthetic of achieved imperfection. The women have thin but lumpy bodies made from different colors of clay that aren’t quite blended together, and their hair consists of strands of clay, matted imperfectly like leftover spaghetti. Close-ups of flowers reveal multicolored mounds of clay, as well as the hands of the artist that shaped them, with fingerprints often visible.



Installation view, “Allison Schulnik: Eager” at ZieherSmith, with “Boneless Horse” (2013), glazed ceramic, 22 x 25 x 24 in, in the foreground (click to enlarge)

But more importantly, the characters in “Eager” shift quickly from being beautiful to creepy and back. Blooming buds are, at one second, bursts of joyous color and at the next, malicious faces. The flowers seem to dance, but so too do they scream and eat each other. The dancing women, meanwhile, don’t have faces at all, just voids surrounded by that stringy hair. In the chilling final shot of the video, a black form that looks alternately like a flower bloom, a skull, a gas mask, and a Venus fly trap appears where one of the women’s faces should be. Nature, Schulnik reminds us, takes many different forms. The lesson is echoed in the handful of sculptures and paintings scattered throughout the rest of the gallery, of flowers, animals, and a sad clown in a forest. These are all similarly done, with thick globs of paint and imperfect, sinister forms.

In fact, formally, Stoller and Schulnik are pretty much opposites; what unites the two is something that I want to call the feminine grotesque — a subversion of the ideals and expectations of femininity through their distortion. Both take certain tropes of femininity — porcelain china, tea sets, dolls, in Stoller’s case; dancers and flowers, in Schulnik’s — and undermine them, not with parody, rebuttal, or some kind of

earnest performance, but by starting inside and working their way out, disrupting as they go, turning images upside down and stretching concepts until they might break.



Schulnik's "Eager" installed in its own room at ZieherSmith

These women are not, obviously, the first to work in this vein — one might posit Cindy Sherman as a forebear, and there are stirrings of the style in other shows I've recently seen around town: the splatters of blood in Wangechi Mutu's stunning collages of women at the [Brooklyn Museum](#), the outsized twists of Lynda Benglis's mind-bending ceramics at [Cheim and Read](#) (which look like female rejoinders to John Chamberlain's car wrecks). But Stoller and Schulnik both do

it notably well, and their feminine grotesquerie feels distinctly current to a time when gender is increasingly seen as a **fluid construct** and feminism is undergoing **dissection** by those who've long felt excluded from it — familiar concepts and ideas stretched and pushed to their breaking points, too.

Jessica Stoller: **Spoil** *continues at PPOW (535 West 22nd Street, 3rd floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 8.*

Allison Schulnik: **Eager** *continues at ZieherSmith (516 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 22.*