

# Primping the Vacuous Soul



*Beauty and Power Installation at  
Cricket Engine Gallery, Oakland,  
California US. 2008.*



*Bouffant Stump (Detail)*, 2008. Ceramic. 34 x 14 x 14 in.



*Beehive Stump (Detail)*, 2008. Ceramic. 39 x 15 x 15 in.

## Recent Works by Misty Gamble

*Article by Nancy Servis*

PUPPETRY AND PERFORMANCE ARE FUNDAMENTAL elements to the ceramic figures by Northern California sculptor, Misty Gamble. Her work evolves from childhood experiences of assisting her well-known father with his many shows using marionettes to tell fanciful tales, often animating audiences with their performance. During those early years, an integration of visual and performing arts left an indelible mark on the artist who came to ceramics at mid life. Presently the artist is preoccupied with making serial groups that interpret undercurrents of propriety and social status. Three series titled *Chanel*, *Big Hair* and *Sweet Terror* illustrate, both humorously and somewhat darkly, societal commentary unfolding like sinister narratives in the guise of pleasantries.

Her current studio lies along the south eastern shore of the San Francisco Bay in the city of Oakland where industrial workshops are now usurped by artists who have occupied vacant buildings. Painters, sculptors and creative craftsmen surround Gamble's dual-purpose live/work space where she stays

when in the Bay Area. Along with the other artists of note who live nearby, the historic nature and creative tempo of this locale stimulate this artist in her productivity. Sequestered down a nearby dilapidated lane is a small gallery in which her most recent body of work is on display. This site, far from trendier settings in the Bay Area, is appropriate for the artist's solo show largely due, she explains, to the "integral part of the original community of artists that have been in the area for years."<sup>1</sup> After entering a modest doorway, a room populated with nearly life-sized figurative sculptures is illuminated, showering warm light on unsettling forms. Six female figures coexist in this odd realm where banality and propriety coalesce, representing the exhibition called *Beauty and Power*.

Gamble has developed thematic groups of figures that depict malfeasance. The chromatically selective pieces represent her *Chanel* series and depict a maladjusted world where gesture and exaggeration underscore perversities of current society. Biographical in origin, Gamble's assertive *femmes*



*Chanel No. 9 (Detail)*, 2008. Ceramic and wood chair.  
40 x 24 x 24 in.

illustrate a, “conventional standard of morality, normalcy and propriety,”<sup>2</sup> while satirizing contemporary extremes to preserve youth. These caricatured women are tightly clothed in realistically-depicted Chanel suits, considered the high bar of proper fashion. The emphasis on costume and propriety here is a double *entendre* for it is these very preoccupations against which this artist recoils. Select fashion trappings further define these figures while the most appropriate determining factor, the face or the character of the hands, seem secondary. The illusion of the circumstance is further developed by the facial exaggeration and tempered body scale as is seen in the sculpture, *Chanel No. 9*. Here a seemingly socially acceptable middle-age woman, demurely seated on a chair asserts her aggression with claw-like gesture and beguiling expression. The artist’s restricted colour palette places these nearly life-size and life-like figures in the realm of caricature while also pushing a sinister message to the fore.

Such demeanour harkens back to Gamble’s own experiences. She was raised in Southern California where high society was intermingled with Hollywood glamour. Her present-day social mythologies were culled from these earlier times. Her early perceptions of affluence and entertainment, Disneyland especially,



*Chanel No. 2*, 2008. Ceramic.

provided a bizarre environment for an inquisitive adolescent. The other-worldliness presented in her current work also evolves from her father’s influence as both airline pilot and puppeteer. They travelled world-wide so as to stage puppet performances that, as is characteristic of the expression, fostered provocation using visual cues. While these childhood performances were reenactments of wholesome folktales, their staging and interactions have influenced Gamble’s current ceramic adaptations. Today, Gamble’s figures inhabit installations where counterpoint and dialogue exist between arranged sculptures. She cites this combination of privilege, performance and puppetry as the origins of her work, providing commentary in clay. Her interests lie in perversely challenging the notions of appropriateness and social behaviour specifically in questioning women’s challenges and equality. Her experiences as a debutante herself along with the theatre of performance from her early years especially percolate throughout her work as seen in the *Chanel Series*.

Unlike some artists whose work can be overly

provocative, Gamble lures attention to her sculpture with accepted safe symbols like bright colours or nice clothes, only to trick perceived security with sinister humour. This practice identifies her efforts with the Northern California sculptor, Clayton Bailey, whose interests in funk ceramics brought him to California from Wisconsin in the late 1960s after hearing of the activities of Robert Arneson and others at the University of California, Davis. He remained in the state and developed rich sculptural satire that earned him the fond status as a prankster while also producing works with poignant meaning. Gamble's interests resonated with his backdoor humour while also maintaining quality of craftsmanship. This sense of satirical narrative is considered as confrontational, a topic which has recently been explored through exhibitions reinforcing the idea that overt political or satirical ideas can be artfully addressed in the contemporary ceramics realm. But it is because of its humorous and hence more palatable nature, states Judith Schwartz in her recent publication, *Confrontational Ceramics*, that satire can more effectively provoke change. Both artists' works have been classified as such and the endurance of Bailey's work bodes well for Gamble who cleverly features societal issues in her work.

A technique Gamble employs to present her message is the consistent use of dualities or, as she prefers to describe, opposing forces. Her figures and bases are portrayed in two distinct vintage Chanel colours. Their textured skin, usually the softer feature, contrasts with the smooth and carefully rendered garments. This deliberate visual context assures that her meta-message is not missed – limitations dominate within an individual when surface enhancements are overly addressed.

Gamble's *Big Hair Series* further emphasizes soullessness. Slightly over-scale 'stumps' (not busts), they are armless mannequin-like torsos whose hairdos are signifiers for prestige. They illustrate overt vanity and societal power handed those with the most exterior adornment. Due to their simplified form, their gazes emphasize the role of a voyeur, an ongoing topic of exploration for the artist. Positioned in groups, their intimidation becomes effectively predatory.

Gamble graduated from San Francisco State University in 2007, and while there observed the work of Robert Arneson and others who aggrandized the banal, pursuing disarming subject matter. Prompted by ideas of vulgarity and perversity, she further developed her concepts of malfeasance through the study of vintage horror films while also exploring the origins of children's moralistic fairy tales. These works evolved from 19<sup>th</sup> century writings, like that of *Der Struwwelpeter*, whose naughty children pay a price for their misadventures. Ten separate poems recount unfortunate results for those misbehaving



*Sweet Terror Installation*. 2007. MFA Thesis Exhibition, San Francisco State University.

and serve as the essence of Gamble's series, *Sweet Terror*, a separate but equally provocative body of work as *Chanel* or *Big Hair*. In this earlier group of sculptures, five girls posture in acts of play which, upon closer observation, appear on the verge of sinister acts. Seemingly innocent, her works surprise in their combination of wholesomeness and perversity. *Nelly Has Scissors*, presented in the nostalgic colour of flat pink, exemplifies the artist's propensity for dark mischief caught in a secretive moment. Her attribute or weapon is the tool behind her back with which she can unleash destruction. Specific vintage horror films like *The Bad Seed* from 1956 provide a directive for the artist to profile the troublemaker in clay. Though some of her figures depict the grotesque, others possess a subtlety of meaning. The discomfort of these works is haunting, and indicative of a deeper inquiry.

Gamble's satirical premise is broadened with her preferred installation of several thematic figures within a prescribed environment. They inhabit the space creating a denizen of perverse identity in a theatrical way, directly resulting from her performance origins. From 1992 to 2005, she was an arts administrator in music and the performing arts and served as publicist, music promoter, talent buyer and festival producer. These endeavours fully occupied her time



*Nelly Has Scissors (Detail).*

until she found her footing as a ceramic sculptor. In 2002, she started making artwork again after a long period of helping other people create, produce and promote their work in music, performance, spoken word and sound. Additionally, Gamble acknowledges the influence of Akio Takamori and others like Juan Muñoz and Magdalena Abakanowicz who create narratives with numerous sculptural figures. Gamble's compositions of women emphasize their unsavoury features like manly hands, overly stylized hair and gawking expression. As reinterpretations of beauty, style and poise, the artist's personas mock these societal values, unveiling shallowness.

There is also strength (power) in numbers and the preference by the artist to assemble figurative installations is another layer of her participation within the broader realm of competition. For years women artists have been creating work that is less about contesting the playing field and more about pursuing their own focused work. For Gamble this dynamic in part applies. Yet, competition does exist in her work and it is unclear whether its origins stem from an urge to equal the playing field or depict the harsh realities of social status among women. Her interests in fairness and women's societal status may have germinated from a feminist canon. She believes, however, that their development is from the idea that her work is based on issues that surround womanhood and are not intended to be provocative in the feminist sense. The visual charge that emanates from the work creates an active world of bouffant narrative loosely based in the artist's reality. These tough girls are not sculptural goddesses.

Upon further consideration it is apparent that Gamble associates her work with a cinematic world. Both film and photography evolve as contextual touchstones. The figures of *Sweet Terror*, according to the artist, are caught in a momentary snapshot of a single event. Her attraction to horror films as a contextual source is indicative of the broader panoply of information the artist savours while making her work.



*Nelly Has Scissors.* 2006. Ceramic. 57 x 30 x 30 in.

The preferred installations engage the viewer as an unknowing participant in the theatrical construct. Her propensity for these manipulations is testimony to her thoroughness as an artist while exposing an impulse broader than the sculptural form.

To date Misty Gamble has received artist-in-residence positions at Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts in Maine and Armory Art Center in West Palm Beach, Florida US. She has also been awarded the Howard Kottler Juried Fellowship and is currently interim faculty at the Kansas City Art Institute. Her celebrated emergence in the highly visible ceramics world indicates an artist of inherit skill. What lies ahead is anticipation for us all.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Interview with the artist, July 15, 2008.
2. Artist's unpublished biography, 2008.

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