



Staged Stories: Renwick Craft Invitational 2009

Wall Text

Intro Panel

Staged Stories: Renwick Craft Invitational 2009 features artworks that use theatrical devices to add drama and meaning. The four mid-career artists represented here—Christyl Boger (ceramics), Mark Newport (textiles), SunKoo Yuh (ceramics), and Mary Van Cline (glass)—employ craft media in ways that allude to staging, performance, and costuming.

For example, Boger applies her understanding of the history of baroque palace porcelains to the creation of pale, introspective characters that hover ambiguously between classical sculptures and decorative figurines. Newport recognizes that textiles are historically allied with women's work and uses that association to burst open gender stereotypes in the creation of knitted costumes for comic book superheroes. Historical painting and ceramics inspire Yuh to reference the theaters of love and war, understanding and misunderstanding. Van Cline photographs with an antique film camera to create black-and-white images of masked and cloaked actors in dreamlike environments, which she then encases in glass. How these artists employ disguise and staging and lend them significance is the subject of this exhibition.

Christyl Boger panel

The ceramic sculptures of Christyl Boger (b. 1959) remind us of traditional gilded figurines because they are single figures decorated with ornamental patterns. However, their large scale and kitschy props set them apart from historical precedents. Boger borrows freely from past and present cultures to create her cast of characters.

Each is a nude figure accompanied by an inflatable swimming pool toy, the type that does not assure buoyancy in times of crisis. Most of the figures crouch as if to hide from the viewer, exposed rather than empowered by their nakedness. Tiny areas of luster decorate fingers, toes, and other body parts like insubstantial costumes. Overall the characters exude vulnerability. Their vacant facial expressions suggest introspection or self-involvement. Lost in their interior dialogues, they seem ill equipped to cope with the reality that surrounds them. They give the impression they are uncomfortable with themselves and their environment, and their discomfort extends to the viewer. Do these figures portray true psychological states, or are they actors in a fantasy challenging us to enter their stage?

Christyl Boger process panel

One of the things that specifically drew me to work in clay is a “permission to labor” that is implicit in the crafts. I like spending time with the clay, and the pace of the work changes constantly. Sometimes I build quickly, adding or moving a lot of clay at a time, then there are periods of working very slowly and precisely over the surface. Usually I’ll spend several weeks building each figure and additional weeks refining, firing, sanding, and glazing.

My main working method is a combination of coil and pinch building, a hollow-building technique often used in making vessels. Rather than forming a solid clay structure that must then be hollowed-out before firing, I create the work from the start with an interior volume that is similar to that of the exterior. As I build, much of the shape is defined by stretching the wall of the piece from the inside out. The effect is similar to shaping a curved form on a potter’s wheel, except I have the freedom to move in multiple directions. I particularly enjoy the way my movements in this type of building echo the spiraling contrapposto rhythms that I am looking for in the finished figures.

The white clay body matures in the kiln at about 1940 degrees Fahrenheit. It is then glazed and re-fired to a slightly lower temperature, with subsequent cooler firings for the additions of gold luster, decals, or china paint.

Mark Newport panel

Mark Newport (b. 1964) knits costumes for superheroes such as Batman, Superman, and Spiderman. These protagonists first appeared in comic books and were further popularized in cinema and television, the media that brought theater to the masses. Some of Newport's other subjects include fictionalized heroes of the American West, such as Rawhide Kid and Two Gun Kid, and characters of his own invention, such as Sweaterman. Knitting is more readily associated with craft than high art, so Newport's lowbrow process, emphasized by his use of acrylic yarn, affirms his message about the influence and pervasiveness of the popular.

A superhero's sleek suit generally functions as a shield from injury, but the only protection that Newport's homey outfits offer is from the cold. They underscore the false security promised by fantastic beings. Far from skintight, the suits droop and sag. When displayed on a hanger they are lifeless, shroudlike vestments that seem to mock the implied physical power of the familiar emblems and color schemes. Though the artist creates them to his own proportions, their misshapeness indicates that they will fit no one well and everyone adequately. This is evident in Newport's prints, which are visual narratives about characters wearing his costumes. The artist sometimes knits in public while wearing one of his knitted suits. He performs in the everyday arena transformed by his dress; the most ordinary locales have the potential to be his stage.

Mark Newport process panel

Once I choose the yarn and the design for the costume, I begin with a raglan sweater pattern that I found on the Internet. I cast on the stitches that will form the torso, starting at the neck and working toward the feet. Stitches are added until I get to the sleeves, where the stitches for the sleeves are placed on stitch holders. I continue knitting toward the crotch. When I get to the crotch I leave stitches for each leg and knit a small tab that connects between the legs. After knitting each leg, I complete it with a sock pattern for the feet. I then return to the sleeve stitches and knit the sleeves, adding a glove pattern at the end for the hands. The hood is created using a design for an elongated cap. Finally, I sew on the buttons and finish off the ends.

Mary Van Cline panel

Mary Van Cline (b.1954) creates large black-and-white photographs of austere landscapes and encases them in glass to create staged environments. Populating these landscapes are idealized figures, frozen in their youth, often cloaked or draped, oversized and lording over nature. Their proportions are an homage to Greek humanism, which places human beings at the center of social and moral concerns. Van Cline's source material ranges from classical Greek statuary to Noh theater--a stylized form of Japanese musical drama so slow-moving that the actors seem to pause in time. Likewise, all of Van Cline's images evoke an enduring stillness.

The Listening Point explores the subjective nature of reality. A glossy, black glass proscenium--a direct reference to staging--mirrors the photographed figure and also reflects the sculpture's immediate environment. Therefore, the actual world and the one portrayed in Van Cline's photo overlap. In addition, the photograph stands perpendicular to the floor and to the glass proscenium and, when lit, behaves like an old-fashioned 35 mm transparency, casting images onto the glass, in effect increasing the space that it occupies. *The Listening Point* incorporates the viewer, who enters its theatrical realm and becomes part of its fantasy.

Mary Van Cline process panel

I begin by taking photographs using a traditional film camera. To create the images in my works, however, I use a technique inspired from the very beginnings of photography. Before film was invented, photo emulsions were coated on glass plates and then put into the back of a camera to capture an image. There are many different formulas for photo emulsions, all of which produce varied results. I use a positive emulsion which produces a continuous-tone, black-and-white image. I coat the glass plate with the emulsion and then use the glass like a piece of photo paper. I put the glass under the enlarger in the darkroom and expose a large negative onto it. Then I develop the glass just like a piece of photo paper. After the glass dries, I cut it and laminate it to thicker pieces of optical glass using an optical epoxy that I had designed especially so it will not attack the silver in the emulsion. I developed this technique in 1980, when I visited Kodak and developed a relationship with their glass plate factory. I worked with Kodak until they shut down that department in 2003.

SunKoo Yuh panel

The ceramic sculpture and drawings of SunKoo Yuh (b. 1960) are composed of tight groupings of plants, animals, fish, and human figures that suggest stories. Korean art, along with Buddhist and Confucian beliefs, inform some aspects of Yuh's imagery, but his work is largely driven by sociopolitical critique. His drawings are inspired by Korean folk paintings and are studies for his sculptures. In both his two-dimensional and three-dimensional works, Yuh juxtaposes comedy and tragedy to create unlikely casts of characters caught in improbable plots---elements shared with theater of the absurd. This type of performance, also known as antitheater, developed in Europe in the late 1940s in part as a response to World War II. Time, place, and identity break down; dialog may be nonsensical; and the story is open-ended---sometimes hopeful, sometimes nightmarish. Theater of the absurd was active at roughly the same time as the German expressionists, and Yuh has an interest in the painting of that period. Its influence can be seen in the elongation of many of his figures, his unsettling spatial configurations that stem from the density of his figural groupings, and the acrid colors of his glazes that give his ceramic figures a forlorn, even desperate feel. This anxiety is communicated by Yuh's layered and dripping glaze, a technique based on that of Chinese Tang dynasty funerary sculptures, which the artist admires.

SunKoo Yuh process panel

The body of my work as an artist is to transform the images from my mind into tangible ceramic sculptures. The sculptures are sometimes monumental and then again sometimes small. Images come from inside me, then I draw intuitively and spontaneously with ink and brush. These two-dimensional images contain unconscious concerns in my life. My work expresses my inner emotions, communicates about life, and directly draws from mundane experiences.

I closely study my drawings and select a few to hand build into three-dimensional clay sculptures. I build them with different clay bodies such as porcelain and stoneware, and sometimes porcelain casting slip. I use fifty different colorful glazes on top of each other then fire to around 2300 degrees Fahrenheit. Rather than controlling glazes, I allow them to melt, blend, and run while firing. I accept the results of these unexpected serendipities.