

MARGARET KEELAN

Cheryl Coon

Margaret Keelan's figurative work over the past two decades has been a personal journey, and each of the figures can be seen as a manifestation of her own concerns and experience. The work is poetically self-reflective, with an intuitive approach to exploring memories, relationships and transformations. The sculptures naturally become a documentation of daily struggles and a forum for making new discoveries. Her figures reveal the process of growth and of becoming wise in the fabulously aged surfaces of the sculptures.

Margaret's surfaces are both compelling and disconcerting. There is an immediate and visceral reaction to the heavily textured skins. The figures appear to have been excavated. The layers of stains and glazes curl and peel away, creating the illusion of disintegrating paint over weathered wood. Her meticulous approach to creating these aged surfaces gives the sculptures a strength and integrity, like they have undergone their own rites of passage through heat and flame.

As a young artist, Keelan studied ceramics at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada where she first met Marilyn Levine, her mentor. Keelan went on to receive her Masters of Fine Arts at the University of Utah, where Levine taught. Levine created startlingly realistic ceramic objects – such as leather jackets or leather shoes – that retained the character and the body presence of the person who had originally worn the object. Levine's ability to create these trompe-l'œil ceramic portraits was an inspiration to Keelan, who realized the potential for clay to be transformed into a tactile illusion of almost any material.

Through her lifelong friendship with Levine, Margaret discovered her passion for teaching young artists. Margaret approaches teaching with the same enthusiasm that she invests in her studio practice. She values the unique collaborative process, so she is able to create a dialogue that goes beyond the mere exchange of information with her students. She is inspired by the constant exploration and discovery that takes place in her classes, and the creative energy that informs her work.

In her recent work, Margaret uses molds from 19th and early 20th century dolls. The torn fabric from old dresses becomes part of the sculptural form, as do the clouded eyes and chipped lips. There is a sense of nostalgia in the dolls' faces,



ILLUSTRATION -

opposite page - "Bluebird Waltz" - clay - stains

left - "Girl with small Dog" - clay - stains





yet there is also a darker narrative in the decaying surfaces. Margaret's work often has this dichotomy – a sweetness that is also a bit menacing. Dolls are the intimate containers for our deepest secrets and perversions – reflecting all of our childhood angst – showing the effects of nurturing or revealing signs of torture.

I find it curious that a beloved doll, dragged around incessantly, will turn out looking much the same as one that has been neglected and abused – the ripped dress, the snapped hair, the scratched skin. In each of these sculptures, the traces of age and neglect are evident. Margaret uses these dolls – with their cracked skin, brittle or missing hair – to confront the inevitable aging

ILLUSTRATION -

left - "Childhood" - clay - stains

opposite page - "Journey" - clay - stains

process that we all must face. Yet even though these dolls appear to be broken and abandoned, the ceramic figures resonate with a deep strength – their scarred surfaces refer to a resilient interior world, rather than a superficial outer beauty.

After Marilyn Levine died, Margaret created several sculptures that explore the transition from life to death. "Where?" and "Gone" are carved into the foreheads of these figures, and the hollow interior is visible, inviting us to peer into the empty shell. The figure becomes a vessel for contemplation, for us to question our own mortality. There is both a tangible presence and an absence in this gesture that captures the emotion of missing people who inhabit our thoughts and memories.

Margaret's sculptures contain a deeply spiritual element that is expressed through subtle gestures, with the hands and eyes, and with symbolic elements such as water. As a figurative artist, she is interested in the intrinsic meaning of eyes, hands, skin. The multiple layers of glazes serve as the sculpture's epidermis over the clay's skin-like malleability, showing the life cycle of the sculpture and each session spent working on the surface.

The hands in Margaret's sculptures are significant – they express the intention of the figure – making an offering, a plea, or a protective movement. In "Hold", the figure reaches out, open-handed, a vulnerable pose – the gesture may be spiritual and open to the divine. In "House", the figure has her hands held upward in a gesture that could be a plea or a prayer. Her hands are graceful and expressive of so many cultures where the hands create a powerful visual emphasis on emotion. In "Flow", the position of the hands is symbolic – like holding the water that represents our life force – always trickling through our fingers as time slips away.

The water element represents the ephemeral – evaporating life, impossible to contain or control. But water also has a ritualistic role in Margaret's work. It can be seen as a passage from one state into another. There is growth and an initiation. In "Bath", we see a baby bathing in the lap of another figure. The scene is tender and nurturing. There is a sense of ablution and baptism, as the main figure is both a vessel and an instrument for cleansing the baby. The water is a life-giving source and also a metaphor for the soul, filling the vessel that contains it.

Margaret often uses water in conjunction with the eyes to emphasize the importance of introspection. "Resurrection" has eyes that are fluid and reflective, filled with resin to look like deep pools of water. "Head Under Water" appears to be an ocean-sodden piece of wood from an ancient ship. The emphasis is on the human being as a vessel. The eyes on these figure fragments are liquid and unfocused, as though gazing into the depths of the interior self.

Many of Margaret's recent sculptures are cyclical, showing a main figure with a doll. The relation between the figures is left open for interpretation – the smaller figure may be seen as a baby, or as an earlier version of the self. In "Flight Baby", the smaller figure has her hands outstretched, reaching for the sky in a gesture representing an unconscious desire for freedom or a

wish? In "Yellow Boat" the younger figure sits perched atop the main figure's feet. They may be travelling together or simply sitting in self-contemplation. In any case, with the dual figures, there is an element of time passing, of growth and transformation.

Often the figures are paired up with an animal companion. This animal, like many folklore tales, has a hidden meaning, and the mystery of the animal allows for many interpretations. Many of the creatures that inhabit the sculptures are transitory and cyclical – birds and cobras develop from eggs, birds migrate, snakes shed their skins. The animals embrace the natural cycles that include both time and distance. The animals can be seen as totems or messengers from the spirit world. In many instances the animal totem eases the transformation into adulthood and protects from danger along the way.

In some sculptures a bird is perched on top of the figure's head, in others, birds are on her arm. In "Crow Whispering Secrets", the bird is actively expressing something to the girl – we do not know what, and this secretive element adds a sense of whimsy to the work. In "Swan" the bird is layered with many references from mythology and folklore: Leda and the Swan, suggesting seduction and betrayal of innocence, or the Ugly Duckling, allowing for a transformation from the mundane to the glorious. The emotion in each of the birds has the intensity of a vivid dream that is bringing portents with sage advice.

The snake as the eternal Ouroboros, eating its own tail, is an apt symbol for the cycle of artistic creation. In "Journey" the cobra indicates the danger that is always lurking around the corner, while the baby chick is the innocent, new soul. The implied threat gives us a heightened awareness of the fragile circle of life. The snake is also infused with all of the sexual symbols of seduction and the fall from grace. In "Strawberry & Snake" the snake represents the dangers of surrender. Margaret describes the snake as: "coiled to strike, phallic, muscular", while pleasure and fecundity is represented by the luscious strawberry, which she holds in her hand, though we cannot be sure if she is taking the fruit, or offering it to the snake.

This dichotomy adds to the complexity of the relationship between the figure and the animal. The connection between animal and the female figure is ripe with intuition. The sculptures are infused with a wise innocence that is potent with emerging sexuality – a growing awareness of seduction and danger and confusion. There is that tension between naïve childhood and awakening that can be at once terrifying and exciting. In "The Girl with the Rabbit" we may be looking at a rite of passage, the rabbit leading the girl into the unknown. But, like Alice following the white rabbit into Wonderland, once the journey has started, there will be a maze-like journey ahead of twists and turns and surprises. Curiouser and curiouser.

Cheryl Coon is painter, sculptor and curator.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The faces of Keelan's sculptures are based on nineteenth century dolls, a stylization that disconnects them from time and place. Other references come from American Folk Art, and Central and South American Santos figures. The carefully crafted mimicking of decayed surfaces creates a powerful metaphor emphasizing the passage of time, which allows essential nature to become defined, even as the outer skin starts to disintegrate.



photo - Scott McCue

Margaret Keelan is Associate Director and Ceramics Instructor at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. Recent exhibitions have been at the Dairy Barn Art Center in Athens Ohio, Pacini Lubel Gallery in Seattle, and SOFA Chicago. Her sculpture "Girl With Crow" won a purchase award at 2009 NCECA Biennial.

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