



Em Kettner, *The Cross* (2021).
Cotton and silk woven around glazed porcelain,
10 × 9.5 × 3.5 inches. Image courtesy of
the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles.
Photo: Paul Salvesson.

Em Kettner at François Ghebaly

June 26–July 24, 2021



Many of the petite sculptures in Em Kettner's *Slow Poke* (most of which were installed across a thigh-high pedestal), took the form of a bed. In several, a porcelain bed frame became an ad-hoc loom wherein a small tapestry was woven—a blanket that connects the errant heads, limbs, and dicks that sprout from its patterned fibers. Some of the bedposts morph into feet or hands, fusing with the small heads that lay within to become skeletally conjoined. Laying alone in their beds, some figures gaze silently upward, while others are coupled into steamy trysts—hands groping, mouths interlocked. Kettner's work pulls the private locale of the bed (and its attendant themes of intimacy, care, and illness) into the public square—life's banalities, ecstasies, and sufferings aired out for viewing.

The pedestal, on which Kettner's characters twirled and laid, also evoked a bed. About the size of a queen-sized mattress and topped in rich white ash, the pedestal was tenderly sanded down to create divots underneath the feet of each sculpture, almost giving it the appearance of a plush, malleable surface. We spend at least a third of our lives in bed; it is the place that we retreat to for the utmost privacy and comfort, whether in the heat of passion or the throes of pain or illness, and Kettner mines these polar experiences. Some of the actors in her bedded

scenes appear immersed in raunchy passion, while others are pursed, like the two white heads with pink, frowning lips giving each other the side-eye in *The Lovers' Quarrel* (2020). Yet, the joyous and cozy woven pink triangles on the quilt that blankets these lovers seem to imply that this tiff too shall pass, and tomorrow's bedtime scene might look more like *The Long Night* (2021), in which a couple's faces interlock in a deep kiss.

Others of the bed-figure tableaux feel more clinical, with a solitary figure isolated and alone, like *The Invalid* (2020), who lays swaddled in yellow and orange patterning, staring up at the ceiling, as if waiting for bones to heal. The collapsed space between intimacy and illness, as well as depictions of both raucous and limited physicality, refreshingly expand ideas around disability and mobility, pulling notions of able and disabled bodies out of rigidly oppositional poles and placing them in a more malleable, flexible continuum. Clothing and crafting her small characters becomes an ouroboros of holding, supporting, and cradling—Kettner holding the beds that hold her prone figures. Like Central and South American backstrap looms, in which the weaver's back becomes a structural component of the loom, Kettner's interlacing of body and fiber speaks to both a rich weaving tradition and the support structures—canes, prosthetics, and wheelchairs—that become extensions of the body in order to aid mobility.

The low, queen-sized display method might also compel a standing viewer to contort their body, requiring them to squat low or lean at

odd, 90-degree angles to meet the works' demand for a close, inquisitive eye. While circling the low pedestal and oscillating between bending and squatting, my back began to stiffen. That the viewer's body might constrict while viewing Kettner's small sculptures, which also deal with the body's limitations and motility, creates a productive tension.

Alongside the bed-figures, several snaking, porcelain bodies, some with multiple limbs, twisted and crawled across the low pedestal. Where the figures in bed were blanketed with colorful weavings, the un-bedded figures were festooned in woven costumes that wrapped tightly around their lithe bodies as pants and sweaters. Support—whether sexual, practical, or familial—was again foregrounded. The two mirroring figures in *The Cross* (2021) posed mid-coitus like a *Kama Sutra* diagram. Both lying face up, one balanced atop the other, the bottom partner's wrists are braced firmly to support his companion's arms into an outstretched T-shape. The work pictures intimacy as both a supportive act and an Olympian effort, potentially requiring practiced positions in which one partner physically supports another to achieve ecstasy.

Kettner's penchant for folksy figuration and garb becomes a pathway to convey the overall exuberance with which her characters support each other through sex and life alike. In *The Piggyback (Self-Portrait with Adam)* (2021), the artist is pictured slung onto her partner's back, the two porcelain figures gleefully grinning at each other. In the sculpture, Kettner grabs her partner's shoulders, yet aside