

*Em Kettner creates elaborate casings for her sacred sculptures*

*These small performative objects exemplify disability and protection.*

By S. Nicole Lane, November 18, 2020



Em Kettner, *The Suppliant (2)*, 2020. Cotton woven around glazed porcelain  
Credit: courtesy Goldfinch

Garfield Park-based gallery Goldfinch opened "Play the Fool," a solo show with works by Em Kettner in late October. I traveled to the gallery earlier last week to examine the works that sit, live, and perform on the shelves and walls of the gallery. With the recent stay-at-home advisory in place, the entire exhibition is also viewable on the Goldfinch website with extensive documentation. Kettner's charms and cabinet curiosities can be seen as characters in a larger story or narrative that we have yet to finish. In an interview with Goldfinch curator Elizabeth Lalley, Kettner explains that she's always been interested in votive objects carried by "pilgrims, saints, and children; those used in healing or transformation ceremonies." In "Play the Fool," the sacred characters do have a supernatural quality to them, especially those who have the face of a human, but take on the shape of a bed, thin cone, or twisted pretzel.

In tarot card readings, “the fool” represents new beginnings and a belief in the future. In myth, Kettner explains, the fool delivers advice or holds power over certain events. Through humor, these figures detail stories, events, and performance. Since Kettner’s work surrounds the theme of disability, this exhibition title also refers to disabled folks playing the role of “court jesters, circus sideshow attractions, and even gods of mischief and laughter” where they “were at once celebrated and isolated for their anomalous behaviors.” The names of the sculptures—The Guardian, The Mirror, and The Sycophant—are all similar names to tarot cards. The pieces in the show, along with their names, resemble a carnny family traveling to their next destination. As a viewer, I stop and smile at each piece, taking on the role as the outsider—the looming public gawking at their tiny comedic stances and carnival-style woven costumes. Many of the weavings are in diamond- or square-shaped patterns, synonymous with circus troops and traveling performers. Several of the characters in the show wear cone-shaped hats with a ball on the very tip. These woven costumes are bound together with cotton and wool. Underneath the material threads are the individual porcelain pieces that are only held together by their outer layer. One piece of work can be made up of several pieces—the weavings work as glue and hold them together to create one whole piece.

Kettner tells Lally, “I embellish what is strange or broken so that the sculptures flaunt their sinewy limbs with panache, diverting attention toward their brightly woven costumes. There’s power in embracing your own smallness and fragility, and insisting others delight in these conditions as well.” And Kettner’s pieces are, in fact, very small. I circle the gallery twice and notice various details that I didn’t notice before. Kettner describes her work as “accessible and deceptively simple.” Crouching down is required for many of these

works. That’s when you can see the weaving of the thread and the intricate detail put into the costumes.

A small tongue licks the shelf on the wall in *The Pilgrim*. Breasts protrude from a costume. A little buttocks pops out from the backside of pants. They perform as they hang from the walls and sit on the shelves. Their sexuality reveals itself on my second go-around. It’s only after you look long enough that you realize these characters are more than their elongated and silly outer shells.

Kettner, who lives with a rare form of muscular dystrophy, re-imagines the disabled body in her works. As someone who relies on other people for a physical support system, these miniature sculptures depict those moments of support. Kettner typically needs someone to aid in her standing up, and her sculptures imitate these additional limbs in her everyday life. “I have four extra limbs working in tandem with mine,” says Kettner. And these works mimic the “moments of expansion, mutualism, and dependence.”

In conjunction with “*Play the Fool*,” the gallery also opened a painting show in the back gallery by Oregon-based artist Howard Fonda. “the message or the messenger” features large-scale paintings with vivid brushstrokes, vibrant colors, and narrative scenes. The markings on Fonda’s paintings work well in conjunction with Gallery 1 and Kettner’s colorful use of weaving and paint. These two exhibitions support one another although they differ in medium and in size. In a way, I feel as if Fonda’s works are enlarged scenes of Kettner’s sculptures. They could live inside of each other’s magnificent worlds.

It's difficult to imagine that Kettner doesn't work with a miniature loom. But readers, she does not. She creates the porcelain figures and then wraps them with cotton and wool thread. Working with a domestic craft, Kettner's weaving works as a crutch for many of these pieces. Without her thread to keep them in place, they would simply fall apart and lay in several separate, functionless pieces. Kettner stitches them together and gives them a new purpose, a functional life, similar to folks who may need an aid or need assistance. The weavings are casts or casings that protect, honor, and serve the fragile works.

When Lally asks Kettner if these figures all exist in the same story, Kettner says that they do but that the "story is still unfolding." She goes on to explain that some of her characters in the show are created at various times in their journey. Like Medieval paintings repeat figures, Kettner's work may repeat characters as they grow and change through time.

Like small tokens or relics, the figures come to life individually and as a whole. I feel like I've

caught these souvenirs in the act. They are all frozen in mid-action, the orgy of cacophonous sound is silence for a brief moment. I imagine when the gallerist turns off the lights for the evening, they all dance with one another, celebrating and carrying on as if we were never there.

*<https://chicagoreader.com/arts-culture/em-kettner-creates-elaborate-casings-for-her-sacred-sculptures/>*