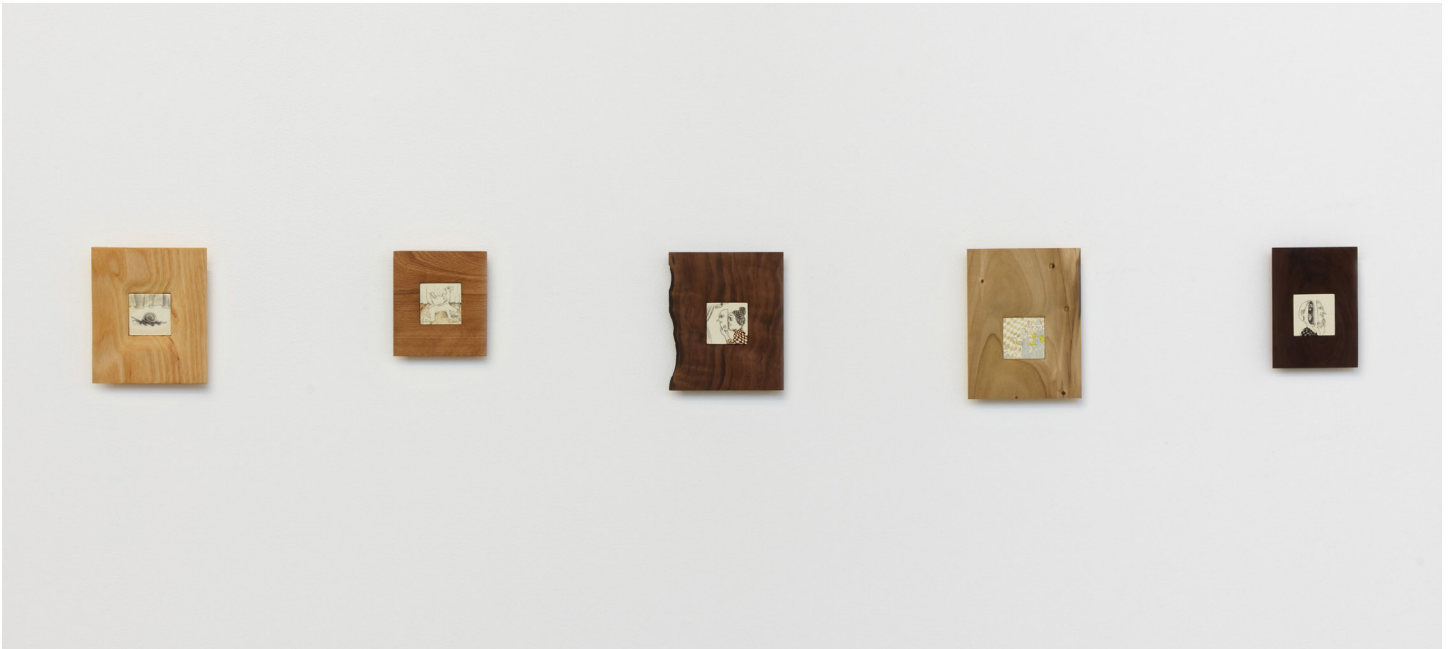


Em Kettner  
*The Understudies*

April 2, 2022 - May 7, 2022



Em Kettner interviewed by Assistant Director Sydney Krantz on the occasion of her second solo exhibition with Francois Ghebaly, *The Understudies*.

**Sydney Krantz:** I'd like to start by asking how this body of work came about. It has been so exciting to see how your tile works have evolved from the hidden gems embedded in the walls in *Slow Poke*, your first exhibition at Francois Ghebaly, to this new series of framed works. Can you talk about that development, and how you got interested in working with tiles in the first place?

**Em Kettner:** The tiles are my sketchbook, if each page turned to stone. I use them to imagine origin stories or future narratives for my sculptures, and recently they've branched off into several theatrical realms: circus sideshows, hospital operating theaters, and intimate or hallowed ground.

In *Slow Poke*, a sculpture installation that revolved around a troupe of flamboyant porcelain figures, the tiles hinted at darker, more erotic content. The titular piece of that show was a coy little tile hidden behind the main pedestal: it depicted a person carrying a snail on their head, which I thought of as a key for understanding the other sculpted portraits as hybrids, or people under the influence of a most humble mollusk. With this new series, I wanted to reveal that the simple forms I'd been repeating in the sculptures — round heads topped with round buns — are stand-ins for a wider cast of characters: famous snails, doctors with retro headlamps, inner voices, and a couple attempting a balancing act, for example. Each scene touches on the pressure of having a body that is always on display, always under study.

With these vignettes now taking center stage, I wanted them to have a surprising power and weight that would seem initially at odds with their small size. They're encased in glass through the process of glazing, and further preserved like precious

relics in wood surfaces with dramatic grains. The image doesn't stop at the tile's edges, but rather seeps into the frame and transforms into a different kind of atmospheric drawing.

**SK:** I love the idea of the tiles as a sketchbook turned to stone, and I would be interested to hear you speak more on the specificity of the tile format (the scale, the relationship to craft, etc.).

**EK:** Almost all of the tiles are 2x2 inches and would normally be destined for mosaics and other domestic projects, laid out in multiples to embellish another surface or arranged together to create a single larger image. The modular square format is also a nod toward the storyboarding process: before all the narrative threads are neatly tied off, cells can be rearranged to alter the entire course of a film or novel. I'm presenting my tiles individually but I hope they maintain a whisper of those implied applications... ultimately they still rely on each other to tell the whole story.

**SK:** Looking at the circus sideshows and hospital operating theater scenes, I am struck by the smiling expressions on the faces of the onlookers and the facelessness of the bodies on display. In *Balancing Act (Backlit Duo)*, the details of the lights illuminating the couple on display are more clear than the couple who appears only as a silhouette. By emphasizing the onlooker, these tile works seem to implicate the viewer. Did you intend for the viewer to see themselves here in the audience or as the doctor rather than onstage or the operating table?

**EK:** Totally, and that perspective shifts depending on the image: as viewers we may go from embodying a doctor or audience member to then feeling like the next patient or performer waiting in the wings. In *Center Stage* and *Sold-out Show*, for example, we're positioned in the shadows cast by the snails and able, from this vantage point, to look out over the illuminated faces in the crowd. We get a sense of the spectators' transfixed expressions, but never know exactly what they're responding to. And then there's this creeping anxiety, at least for me, about being called onstage to perform for them next.

So as you mentioned, in these images the source of the light, those who direct the light, and the shadow cast by the light are often more in focus than what the light is hitting. Behind the curtains, shadows flatten and fade into one another. I'm obscuring the central characters and using different environments interchangeably to discourage our tendency to classify or diagnose based on surface-level data. It's worth it, I think, to return to moments where we're in the dark and humbly look again at what we thought we understood.

**SK:** Can you talk about the significance of the snail, the doctor, and the couple as symbols?

**EK:** These actors also pop up in my practice as sculptures—especially the intertwined couples—and are associated with slowness, mutualism, and vulnerability. I think of The Snail as a proxy for my own slow-moving body, and that slowness is simultaneously a choice, a burden, and an evolutionary advantage. There's something silly and absurd about a crowd of people paying to watch a snail crawl across a stage, but I am earnestly insisting that we observe and value that pace of movement.

The Couple then takes the stage to perform a burlesque balancing act, transforming themselves into a snail-shaped hybrid body. I've been repeating this image of pleasurable interdependence because I want to dispel negative connotations around dependency. I rely on another person to help me stand up, and in those moments I have four extra limbs working in tandem with mine as the boundaries of our individual bodies blur. It's an experience akin to a spiritual or erotic communion, and we need new imagery and language to appreciate these parallels.

The theater scenes also allude to circus sideshow attractions, where people elected or were more often coerced into rebranding their physical characteristics as sub-human curiosities for the stage. This is one example of the long, complicated history involving the exploitation of disabled people in the entertainment industry. And these same dehumanizing strategies have been rampant in medical practices as well, manifesting as experimentation, institutionalization, and exclusion from public spaces and activities. So too in my tiles, the traveling show gives way to the operating theater: draped velvet stage curtains twist into sterile hospital

partitions, and The Doctors appear as judgmental specters eager to map the vulnerable subjects on their tables.

**SK:** The frames seem to echo your sculpture process in the sense that they hold and support the tiles just as the cotton weaving holds and supports the porcelain figures. Do you see them as functioning in a similar way?

**EK:** Definitely, in both cases the materials physically change each other as they come into contact. In my sculptures, the woven elements conform to the porcelain structures while also bolstering and expanding upon what's been sculpted. I'm applying this idea of mutual dependence at the material level for the tile presentation as well: each tiny square sinks into the hardwood surface like a body into a hammock, rippling the grain under its symbolic weight. And in turn, the wooden frames serve as protective and reverent cases for the diminutive drawings.

Some of the frames were carved from the same ash wood that formed the plinth in my last exhibition at Ghebaly, wherein miniature figurative sculptures were arranged on a floating bed-sized platform. Up close, the surface was sanded out in a unique footprint or trail under each sculpture, suggesting movement and surprising force of impact... as though the sculptures were so dense that they depressed the surface like it was a silk sheet – or as if they'd been there for so long that they cut through the wood like water cutting through stone. Following the show, the planks were disassembled and divided. And now, many of *The Understudies'* tiles are embedded in the footprints of their sculpted predecessors, each preserved like a flattened, partial memory of a body long gone.



Em Kettner, *Main Attraction* (detail), 2022. Glazed porcelain tile in white ash artist's frame, 6.5 x 5.5 inches (16.5 x 14 cm)