

The Ceramists Ushering in a New Era of Surrealism

These makers are finding beauty and strangeness in the everyday, producing winking renderings of prawns, ashtrays and more.

By Amanda Fortini, February 16, 2022



These clay works — including, from left, Genesis Belanger's disembodied hand balancing a sardine on a cracker on one finger and Katy Stubbs's prawn cocktail — depict items so prosaic as to seem beneath one's attention, yet they make us see the quotidian anew.

IN HIS 1869 poetic novel, “Les Chants de Maldoror,” the French writer Isidore Lucien Ducasse, known pseudonymously as the Comte de Lautréamont, describes a young boy who is as “beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table.” Lautréamont’s book was rediscovered and championed by the Surrealists

after World War I, and this particular simile became a kind of foundational mantra for the movement. Its juxtaposition of mundane objects in an unexpected setting conveyed the Surrealists’ cheekiness, their love of the incongruous and irrational and their overriding fascination with found curiosities.

The Surrealists were, as we would put it today, obsessed with the totemic power of the object and its ability to re-enchant humdrum reality: Marcel Duchamp's punning readymades and Hans Bellmer's fetishistic dolls, Salvador Dalí's winkingly evocative lobster phone and Méret Oppenheim's more overtly suggestive furry teacup. Members of the movement roamed flea markets in search of treasures and documented the bizarre wonders that floated into their subconscious while they slept. On the occasion of the landmark "Surrealist Exhibition of Objects," held in Paris in May 1936, André Breton, the godfather of the movement, wrote an essay in which he called for the "total revolution of the object" — a goal the Surrealists arguably achieved, as numerous artists, from Louise Bourgeois to Sarah Lucas, have been influenced by their sensibility, images and ideas.

Nowadays, a group of contemporary artists are making what one might call oddity ceramics: playful, imaginative, funny but often slightly menacing objets d'art. Genesis Belanger, Rose Eken, Alma Berrow and Katy Stubbs are all working in a similar vein (as are a handful of notable others, such as Lindsey Mendick, Jessica Stoller and Woody De Othello). These four artists — all of them, not incidentally, women — take the notion of the readymade and subvert it, refashioning quotidian artifacts (cigarettes, sandwiches, shoes, lipstick, beer cans, sweaty plates of meat or eggs) in ceramics, a medium that was once considered a lowly craft but, in recent years, has been welcomed to the loftier echelon of fine art. Although their humorous, sometimes dark sculptures all share a spiritual DNA, each artist treats the object in her own highly specific, idiosyncratic way, which is perhaps not surprising, given the strange, often diminutive but eerily compelling works they're creating.

THE BROOKLYN-BASED artist Belanger, 43, who sculpts pastel-colored ceramics out of porcelain and stoneware, calls her work "Pop Bauhaus with a Surrealist bent." Belanger worked for several years as a prop stylist's assistant on campaigns for major brands like Tiffany & Co., Chanel and Victoria's Secret, and finds inspiration in vintage advertisements — particularly in their use of beauty to induce desire: "It's borderline offensive to actually offensive when you look at it now with our contemporary eye," she says. Her unglazed matte clay objects, which she tints with powdered pigments in nostalgic confectionary hues the colors of Jordan almonds, tend to anthropomorphize everyday household articles. A thick, pink tongue extends from a tape dispenser. A foot-long hot dog is tucked into a platform sandal (get it?). Lamps have lips or breasts or arms and wear jewelry. These pieces are beautiful on the surface but rather disquieting beneath, recalling the creepily seductive work of Alina Szapocznikow, Robert Gober and David Lynch, as well as Man Ray's iconic fashion images of feet, hands and Lee Miller's tearful eyes.

Despite their seemingly decorative nature, Belanger's ceramics aren't stand-alone curiosities; they tell a larger story — as do the creations of all these artists. Belanger makes installations that conjure an entire mise-en-scène, building the furniture and wiring the lighting herself. "I normally start with what the room is going to be, and then build all the objects to tell a more fleshed out story," she says.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/16/t-magazine/oddity-ceramics-surrealism-art.html>