

SASSY PARK: *Little Saints*

Sassy Park is an artist with a wide range of involvements, interests, and preoccupations and in *Little Saints* she impressionistically models family, friends, celebrities and artists and considers the role of contemporary figurative depiction in relation to religious and spiritual traditions and ideas. The works are predominately busts and figures and are informed by a long art/ceramic history: 4th C Greek Tanagra figures; religious iconography; 18th C figurines from Staffordshire and Europe, Della Robbia majolicas in particular; Merric Boyd figures from the 1920's; and the work of contemporary artists Hilton Nel and Stephen Benwell. Trained as a painter and then again in ceramics, Park experiments here with both.

This current body of work stems from her exploration of French figurative folk traditions during a 2021 residency at La Cité International des Arts, Paris. The Exhibition title, *Little Saints*, is a translation of the Provençal term 'Santons' which describes small religious figures used traditionally in church-based nativity depictions. When churches were closed and public worship banned during the French Revolution, Santons were made instead for private situations and the cast of characters grew to include secular figures that paid tribute to local, familiar, people: a butcher, a seamstress, the baker, and more.

Park draws upon this tradition of honoring the everyday here: her partner with an injured finger, a boy reading a book, a close friend who has passed away, all are personal narratives but with universal familiarity. People outside her intimate realm who have touched her are commented on in ceramic form: the death of ceramicist Betty Woodman's photographer daughter, the tennis player Naomi Osaka shown relaxed (or maybe despondent), a football player, all have been tenderly interpreted.

Not everyone is immediately recognizable. First names used as titles give clues but the modelling and painting is loose and scant detail is employed. This ambiguity opens up possibilities though, allowing the works to move outside the artist's personal domain to become emblematic of particular states of mind, actions, or experiences and in this way they act as conduits to broader collective experience. Clay and glazes have been chosen for specific purpose so, for instance, a shiny glaze on brightly coloured sculptural bases serves to amplify the emotional aura. On 'Model figure' the matt surface, sketchily painted and only loosely descriptive, helps to suggest someone still in the act of becoming.

The handbuilt busts, with their air of solemnity, are both enigmatic and arresting and have been equally warmly and compassionately rendered. Alongside the figurative works, and intriguing in their own right, are a pair of heavy, breakable and unwearable ceramic slides, a somewhat disquieting upside down 'bucket' head, a pair of ceramic plaques and a number of eggcups. The eggcups, such small-scale domestic objects, offer context for the work as a whole in a way that would seem outside the power of such humble utilitarian objects. They do this by making concrete the idea of a personal narrative, a story of the everyday pleasures, sorrows and questionings of one person living at this current moment, and so draw the audience into the exhibition in its entirety.

Park began her 2018 Masters dissertation with the short and definitive sentence: 'Ceramics is my form of social media.' and her current work signals continued fruitful engagement with that idea. In this exhibition though, the more measured steps and processes of shaping, working, and finishing clay and its gradual progressions and constantly looming failures have allowed ideas to be considered and settle, not closed or complete, but presented nonetheless as part of an ongoing dialogue. In this way, the work in *Little Saints* invites the viewer into her world, without asking that they leave their own behind.

Patsy Hely
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