

MUSEUM OF CERAMIC ART – NEW YORK

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

Up Close and Personal With: Melissa Stern An interview with Patricia Pelehach – May 2006

Flying somewhat under the radar of art world glitterati, Melissa Stern has, nonetheless, had a very solid and successful career. She exhibits regularly in diverse venues and her art graces a number of notable private and institutional collections. While her primary output is in clay, her works on paper explore many of the same themes and, like her clay work, are notable for their spontaneity, raw emotional power and haunting quality. She is also much valued as a teacher by those privileged to work with her (this author among them).



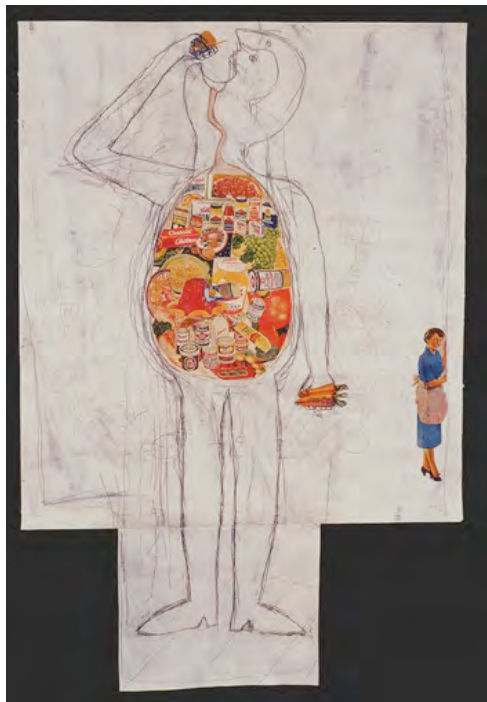
Stern is first and foremost an artist concerned with the human condition writ small. She is a master at capturing fleeting, fugitive emotions — moments of indecision and petty humiliations, yearnings quickly tamped down, rage and terror in the living room, the exquisite torture of shyness, the cleansing laugh of absurdity — all those inconvenient emotions that we oh-so-quickly paper over with a veneer of bonhomie and our social mask.

Born and raised in Philadelphia, educated as an anthropologist, now a wife and mother living and working in the heart of New York's Chelsea

district, Stern is happily female, happily urban (a country home upstate helps preserve balance), relentlessly adventurous, and inexhaustibly compassionate. Her sunny disposition belies the poignancy of her work. The so-called “inner child” is an icon of contemporary pop psychology and self-help books, but in Stern's work the inner child is seen from the safe distance of adulthood, an adult who knows that ultimately vulnerability is strength, and geek passions are liberation. Her work tells the touching, eventful, zany story of our humanness, how we hurt, how we ache, and ultimately how we triumph.



Almost always figural, even if stripped of limbs and appendages, Stern's work exists in a fuzzy state between universality and specificity. In reviewing her 1996 show at the Bachelier Cardonsky Gallery in The New York Times (December 15, 1996), William Zimmer said of Stern's figures that "in their essentialness they are patterns for all humans", yet one can argue that each is given a mark, an emblem, or characteristic that makes the figure unique, an individual. Zimmer found the work "reminiscent of preclassical Greek sculpture... not only because Ms. Stern frequently leaves off limbs, mimicking the imperfect state in which ancient works are usually discovered, but because the figures are usually intensely rudimentary, cylinders topped by elongated spheres. They have no faces but definite nobility nonetheless." Vivien Raynor, also writing in The New York Times (August 2, 1992) found African, Cycladic and Surrealist influences in Stern's work. In fact, Stern's style is profoundly her own, and her art, by turns gentle, compassionate, hysterical, vengeful, rueful and funny, reflects the courage to own both "positive" and "negative" emotions.



A wonderful quality of Stern's work is its lasting freshness. "What?" a rudimentary torso with red mugs for ears makes you laugh when you first see it, and also makes you laugh every time you see it. The joke never gets stale. "Birthday Girl" is a tiny tot dressed in frilly femininity scowling her way through her own birthday party. It is a reminder of how our own emotions — ever unreliable — sometimes make a hash of what should be a pleasure. "Too Many Friends" comments on the limits of compassion when our hearts are open, but our calendars are full.



While she often worked very large earlier in her career, her large sculpture “17 Reasons Why” from 1989 is 7 feet tall. In the late 1990s, perhaps because of the influence and exigencies of having a small boy, son Max, in her home, Stern worked in a more intimate, “table top” size. Perhaps Max inspired “Back to School”, a collection of drawings Stern exhibited at the Children’s Museum of the Arts (NYC) in 2003, and “Vacation” a suite of small clay and multi-media figures exhibited at the Spike Gallery (NYC) that same year. Recently, with the production of “Birdland” a multi-figure, multi-media installation — exhibited at the David Lusk Gallery (Memphis, TN) in March 2006 — Stern has returned to scale as an integral part of her work. It is a welcome change, putting her work on more of a museum or institutional scale, and demanding attention on that level.

A consummate teacher, Stern is very articulate about her own work, and can talk about her inspirations and processes with confidence and clarity. “Birdland” refers both to the jazz great Charlie Parker, nicknamed Bird, and to Birdland, the venue where he often performed. Composed of 24 black and white figures set in a field of 600 red silk poppies, Stern’s “Birdland” is her tour de force. The figures are humanoid birds that bear an uncanny resemblance (maybe it’s the beaks!) to the hapless cartoon figures of Edward Koren in *The New Yorker*. These are not country birds. Their eyes are startlingly human and knowing (Stern used artificial eyes for birds and reptiles made for taxidermists). The figures, ranging in height from 10 to 43 inches, are assembled in a field of poppies, the symbol of Morpheus, referring to the dream state of sleep or opium-induced visions (Parker died at 34 of alcohol and heroin addiction). As in all of her work, the figures are stripped down, reduced to their essence, and in this case limited to two colors — black and white — in order to emphasize their sculptural qualities. The larger figures stand over the poppies, while the small figures are half-

hidden, inviting interaction on the part of the observer, who gradually discovers them amongst the flowers.

The recipient of many awards and honors, Stern holds a Masters in Ceramics from the State University of New York at New Paltz, and has exhibited both nationally and internationally since 1983. In 2004, she was invited to exhibit as a featured artist at the World Ceramic Biennale in Seoul, Korea. The totality of her work exhibited was purchased for the permanent collection of the new Contemporary Art Museum to open in Seoul in 2010. Her work is included in the permanent collections of Dow Jones, Bear Stearns and the Arkansas Art Center among others. A solo drawing exhibition is scheduled at Wesleyan University in October, 2006.

In May 2006, the author visited Melissa Stern at her home and studio and talked with her *up close and personal*:

PELEHACH: What is your favorite sound?

STERN: My son's laughter.

PELEHACH: What is your least favorite sound?

STERN: Car alarms.

PELEHACH: What is your favorite animal?

STERN: The pangolin.

PELEHACH: What makes you laugh?

STERN: My son, who is the funniest person I know. Also, how absurd the world seems sometimes. It's a surreal Universe we live in.

PELEHACH: What talent do you wish you possessed?

STERN: I wish I had the ability to really sing...to move people with my singing.

PELEHACH: What is the trait you admire most in your friends?

STERN: Loyalty and truthfulness.

PELEHACH: In your interactions with others, what do you bring to the table?

STERN: My hope is that I bring openness to others' visions and dreams. I think I'm a really good listener.

PELEHACH: Who was the biggest influence in your life? And how?





STERN: My dad. He was smart and wildly funny...a tough self-made man. He was a restless and brilliant intellect; he was always interested in what I thought about things. My opinion mattered.

PELEHACH: What is your hidden vice?

STERN: Buying books.

PELEHACH: Is that your worst vice?

STERN: No.

PELEHACH: What do you think is the greatest injustice?

STERN: There are so many injustices in the world...where to begin...I guess what moves me to greatest anger is any injustice done to a child.

PELEHACH: Who is your favorite author?

STERN: Raymond Carver.

PELEHACH: Who is your favorite artist?

STERN: Breughel, Max Beckman, Jean-Michel Basquiat.

PELEHACH: What is your favorite midnight snack?

STERN: Tequila and pretzels.

PELEHACH: What is your favorite fantasy vacation?

STERN: Not cooking. Eating fresh papaya every day. Working in some fabulous locale, sleeping well and being really turned on by what I am making.

PELEHACH: What was the worst job you ever had?

STERN: Prep chef in a restaurant having to peel membranes off of calves brains. I quit after two weeks.

PELEHACH: What was your first experience with clay?

STERN: When I was nine years old a hippie lady opened a ceramics studio near my home and my parents enrolled me to get me out of the house on Saturdays. At the end of the year I had an exhibition at The Works Gallery in Philadelphia and I was hooked.

PELEHACH: What is happening in the art world or clay today that you think is positive or optimistic?

STERN: I feel quite cynical about the art world. The mainstream art world seems more than ever tied to fashion and flash and money. However, I love it when, every decade or so the art pundits herald a return to “craftsmanship” or a return to the “object.” We seem to be in that stage right now. I love going to galleries and seeing real objects and drawings that have sense of the maker's hand in them.

PELEHACH: What art world trend do you most deplore?

STERN: The obsession with youth and being the newest hottest thing. It's not sour grapes on my part. It's just that it's a bore and —let's face it — the work of a 20 year old is rarely the best that they're ever going to make. There is a little something that comes along with age and experience.

PELEHACH: When you hit a creative dry spell, how do you renew yourself?

STERN: I look at a lot of books. I daydream. Usually I become convinced that I will never make anything again and that panic propels me into the next body of work.

PELEHACH: What are you working on now?

STERN: A large series of drawings based loosely on the series Birds of America by Audubon. I'm also beginning to research for what I hope to be another installation piece, this will be about fairy tales.

PELEHACH: Thank you. It was a pleasure to talk with you.

