

Second Generation Bay Area Artists

Article by Jo Lauria

THE LARGER-THAN-LIFE PORTRAIT HEADS CREATED by artist Stan Welsh belong to the centuries-old tradition of portraiture in Western art. Like the many painters and sculptors who have come before him and evolved the tradition, Welsh

uses portraiture as a visual lexicon to evoke mankind's shared human condition and experience in the world. Welsh believes that the human face conveys and discloses human character – in all its magnificence, mystery and miserable wretchedness. Welsh

Stan Welsh. Listen. Terracotta clay. 2003. 81 x 61 x 46 cm.



has focused on creating heroic portrait heads for more than a decade, pushing his sharp-eyed observations into ever more challenging territory.

The installation of portrait heads on display at the Daum Museum premieres a new, cohesive body of work that Stan Welsh has been developing for the past four years. Whereas his previous portraits were deliberately ambivalent, their anatomy devoid of perceptible countenance, the heads comprising this new grouping depict extreme psychological expressions – all troubling images sculpted with striking precision. Welsh wants the viewer to understand these large-scale heads – three to four times larger than life-size – as “psychological profiles... representing a wide range of expressions, including denial, contemplation, greed, meanness, pleasure, pain, sorrow, frustration and confusion.”

Welsh’s study of the sculptural busts of 18th-century Viennese artist Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736-1783) inspired him to invest his present portrait heads with a heightened sense of drama and intense emotionality. Messerschmidt was one of the first sculptors to actualise the art of physiognomy – an art that judges complex human emotions and temperament from outward appearances. Messerschmidt created a typology of ‘character heads’ wherein he manipulated the subject’s external facial features to convey, according to the principles of physiognomy,

such character attributes as nobility, vengefulness, mischievousness, fortitude, cheerfulness, sadness and vexation, just to name a few. Later in his life, Messerschmidt became estranged and reclusive, and his tortured psyche surged into his art, resulting in a group of 54 heads, known as the ‘convulsive’ or ‘grimacing’ heads and self-portraits, unarguably the most affecting of his oeuvre. It was from these historical grotesqueries that Welsh drew inspiration, adapting techniques and strategies designed to survey the human soul – laying it bare in clay – in a relevant and intelligible visual language appropriate for a contemporary audience.

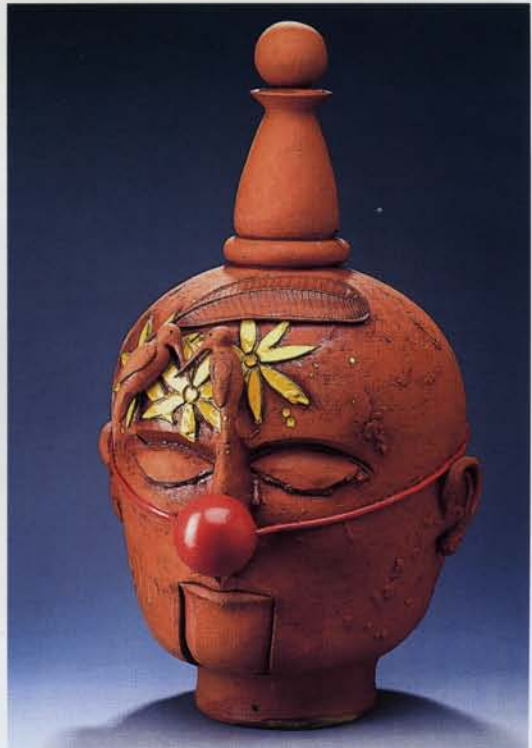
Welsh’s monumental heads function as a kind of representative man. He intends them to be generic, without specific identifying features, and certainly not autobiographical, at least not consciously so. The work has an implicit social edge, but it is not explicitly political. Welsh’s objective was “to point up conflicts in the human condition and some of the underbelly of life’s complexities, but not to make the work overtly political”.

These subtle socio-political implications provide an undercurrent of meaning. The significance of each head can be determined by decoding the emblems, metaphors and beacons that the artist deploys as quick visual references. For example, all of the heads are sculpted with what appears to be mechanical

Stan Welsh. *Mister*. Terracotta clay. 2003.
71 x 53 x 43 cm.



Stan Welsh. *Sleeping Clown*. Terracotta clay. 2003.
91 x 48 x 48 cm.



mouths, mimicking the mouthpiece that would be used to articulate a puppet's movements, or simulating the action of talking through a ventriloquist dummy. Additionally, most heads are adorned with a party hat, some representing the classic pointed party topper, others of the clown or Disney Mouse variety. Welsh uses the mouths as general metaphors for manipulation or, in some heads, more specifically as a reference to the insincerity and vacuity of politicians who become 'talking heads'— mouths flapping away reciting the script that will reel in the most votes. The party hats are beacons of denial, pointing to the arrogance of fools who pretend that 'life is a party' when indeed the world is crumbling at the edges, and it is anything but a fiesta for the disenfranchised. Such is the subtext of *Worried Man*: ornamented with a gilded party hat in the shape of a royal crown, this sad party-goer's face features a tear running down one side, the other side is interrupted by the surreal placement of golden pliers/tweezers. Welsh intends this head to represent President George Bush, the Boy-King, in his role as politician, preaching honesty, equality and justice. The golden (empowered) prying/plucking instrument stands at the ready to extract the truth from the lies, as all politicians speak from both sides of their mouths. Likewise, in the heads *Mickey's Shadow* and *Progress Report*, the Mickey Mouse party hats and the embedded exaggerated dollar signs are symbols of the sinister side of capitalism, pop culture, commodification and commercialisation.

Welsh's installation of these expressive 'character heads'— some mounted individually and others in relational groups— create an intense theatrical environment, encouraging the viewer to partake in the drama. Floating off the wall, the portraits generate a

disquieting sense of surrealism, and that's just fine with Welsh, because he wants the work to be unnerving. The artist sees his primary role as one of penitent self-scrutiny. The heads are mind-stretching exercises that communicate, with a melancholic forbearance, his personal reflections and reactions to the human condition. In this gallery of anti-heroes, the viewer becomes the urgent spectator of the oft-times disturbing *situation humane*, an uncomfortable but undeniably rewarding position. However one reacts, it is clear that Welsh's expressive portrait heads are impossible to dismiss.

The still-life tableaus that Nancy Selvin has been refining over several decades are forceful essays on the relationship between realism and abstraction, object and subject, decoration and use. Selvin's probing investigation of the vessel tradition has led her to explore, in almost infinite variety, the domestic forms of cups, tea bowls and trays, flasks and bottles. Through the strict rigour of limiting her subjects, Selvin has persevered in examining and clarifying her own poetic language. The resulting work is both elegiac and stylistically unified, exemplar of the refined calibrations an artist can achieve through years of purposeful study and execution.

The vessel has long been a touchstone and reference point in Selvin's work. Although early in her career she made substantial free standing ceramic sculptures— well trained in the medium by teacher and mentor, the late Peter Voulkos— she abandoned that pursuit in the 1980s in favour of intimately-scaled domestic wares. Selvin gravitated to the vessel as her signature theme because it offered a versatile format for wide-ranging aesthetic experiments, and it held the potential to carry complex concepts. Further, Selvin felt 'at home' using the vessel as source

Nancy Selvin. *Hargrove*. 2002. Terracotta. 51 x 122 x 15 cm.



material because she has always looked to the domestic environment for inspiration; vessels and containers offer the most direct link to that sphere because they personify the rituals of sustenance and are the essential forms of domestic use. Selvin remains true to her roots, presenting her vessels as autonomous three-dimensional sculptures, wholly disregarding their functionality. This is most emphatically emphasised in her bottles, whose openings Selvin purposely plugs with clay. "I want to make it totally clear that these bottles aren't for use," she explains. "I like the concept of referencing functional issues, but I don't want to be bound by function, which is limiting. By dealing with the bottle abstractly, I am able to transcend its reality."

Selvin's primary subject matter since 1989 has been the bottle forms – flattened, squatty, ovoid, tall, narrow and long-necked – installed in a variety of arrangements or, individually, on thin-legged tables, pristine wooden shelves and on roughly-painted sculptural ledges. Although most viewers want to make the immediate connection between Selvin's work and that of the 20th century Italian painter Giorgio Morandi – known for his inspired still-life paintings and drawings of clustered bottles – Selvin contends that she isn't channelling Morandi, although she appreciates his work. Rather, she draws more directly from the American photographer Walker Evans (1903-1975): "I admire the way Walker's photographs are about little slices of people's lives that he captures in austere, poetic compositions. I want my arrangements to possess that same quality of sparseness, leaving much unsaid, hinting at but without a direct narrative."

The bottle collections displayed in this installation demonstrate that the artist has stayed the course and



Nancy Selvin. *Kern*. 2003. Terracotta. 41 x 28 x 13 cm.

remains committed to the principles of clarity and organisation. Selvin has pared down ideas to their absolute basics until each still life composition resonates with the spare force of *haiku*. In building her still-life arrangements, Selvin considers shape, texture, colour, scale, the relationship of forms, the quantity of units, the amount of text, the overall balance.

Nancy Selvin. *Rough White*. 2003. Terracotta. 51 x 64 x 15 cm.



The slab-constructed terracotta bottles are minimally glazed leaving much of the raw clay exposed. The palette of choice is earthy yellows, white and cream tones, some with tonal accents of reds, and most evidencing overcoats of dry, milky strokes of under-glaze, emphasising the painting process and capturing the 'ease of the unfinished'. This aesthetic is manifest in *Rough White*.

The simplified bottle forms are cleared of extraneous elements in order to concentrate the viewer's energy on the loose, gestural, painterly brush strokes and graphite-like elegant markings that define the surfaces and delineate the profiles. Further, their deliberate placement on the shelf serves to establish a context and control the viewer's environment. Like the spartan three lines of a *haiku* that communicate so much with so little, these reductive bottle arrangements bespeak volumes about contemplation, interiority, rhythm and harmony. They are representations of the artist's inward thoughts, articulated with a Zen-like lucidity.

Many of Selvin's pieces are overlaid with text, a strategy the artist frequently uses to create pattern and provide visual intrigue. The text is excerpted from different sources and may include passages from the poetry of T. S. Elliot and phrases from the art essays by Marcel Duchamp. However, most often the words are transcribed from her notebooks, alluding

to fragmentary thoughts on art and philosophy, or to specific ceramic techniques and glaze calculations. The text is not to be considered in the literal sense because it is disconnected and deliberately obscured. Selvin uses it as a device to draw the viewer in at close range, demanding more time to reflect and savour the sculptural forms. By this means, the artist creates a sensual intimacy between object and observer.

It is an exhilarating experience to witness Selvin's alchemy of the ordinary into the extraordinary, as bottles, the most quotidian of forms, are transformed into painterly lyrical abstractions of rhythmic contours. Collected and marshalled into graceful, alluring arrangements, the bottles impart an almost spiritual edge of interconnectedness.

Arthur González is a figurative artist with an urge to narrate – impressions, sensations, ideas – through the media of ceramic sculpture, painting and drawing. Using myth, mythology, history and fairytales for narrative sources, González examines the fragile and emotional communion between man and woman, between man and society. González describes his artistic impulse as a passion to "explore the phenomenon of story by providing the flint for the start of a narrative". One of González' strategies is to place loaded symbols in his compositions, encouraging viewers to come up with their own interpretations. This approach allows the artist to make his figures

Arthur González. *Sprout*. Ceramic, glaze, wood, epoxy, enamel paint. 81 x 97 x 46 cm.



richly evocative, mysterious and suggestive of multiple associations, dynamically engaging the viewer's participation to complete the story. In González' words, he doesn't want to "white-knuckle the narrative" because it takes the "juice out of the story".

For the *Bay Area Ceramic Sculptors – Second Generation* exhibition at Daum Gallery in 2004, González has chosen to include wall and floor mixed-media sculptural tableaux, ceramic books treated as wall sculptures and a group of vibrantly-coloured pastel figurative sketches. González has earned a reputation for executing large-scale figurative sculptures with a directness and rawness that renders his figures richly complicated and vulnerable. The sculptures shown in this installation do not disappoint. Unique to the artist's signature work is the way he roughly handles the clay, amplifying the material's tactility and revealing the process, and in his restrained use of surface colour and decoration, frequently leaving his figures bare-boned – and all the more powerful for their simplicity.

The majority of the works on display are thematically connected as they draw on the fairytale of Pinocchio, as originally written by the Italian author Carlo Collodi in 1840. The powerful and enduring imagery of the Pinocchio fairytale holds sway over González' imagination. This is the second installation in which González has concentrated his energies on the central theme of Pinocchio – the first was a series of work grouped under the title *The Cadence of Stupidity* (1999–2000). González revisits and extends the theme in these sculptures and sketches – creating, as it were, a sequel – investing them with fresh meanings.

For González, the wooden puppet turned to flesh-and-bones young boy is the embodiment of 'stupid youth,' an adolescent who repeats the same mistakes and never advances into adulthood. In this sense, the artist sees the wooden and lifeless Pinocchio as the quintessential homo sapiens – "to err is human" – and González always portrays him with a long nose (it grows when he tells lies), as Pinocchio is trapped in a perpetual cycle of erring, not able/equipped to resist temptation. González also finds the two sub-themes of the fairytale intriguing: Pinocchio's confused relationship with his father/creator Gepetto, who lovingly carved him from a stump of wood; and Pinocchio's neo-erotic relationship to the powerful and manipulative Blue Haired Fairy, who breathed life into his wooden form and made him human, clearly has her own agenda to serve. These themes resonate most clearly in *History of Ego*, *Sprout* and *Saging*.

History of Ego is the most darkly humorous-tragic of the group, and illustrates González' "strange passion for the Baroque". The Blue Haired Fairy seems to cradle the decapitated head of Pinocchio in her hand, holding the head close to her breast, looking down upon it reflectively. On closer inspection, it

appears that the fairy is holding the head in the same position she would balance a bowling ball before flinging it down a lane towards the pins. Other images are disturbing: Pinocchio is blindfolded and a cigarette dangles from his mouth – has the long-nosed puppet been the victim of an execution? González admits that he has crafted this piece to elicit a wide interpretation of meaning.

Sprout offers an infinitely more positive read: the Blue Haired Fairy, in the guise of an innocent young girl, dreamily leans against a tree stump, her hand nearly touching (protecting?) one of the fresh saplings that has sprung from the remnant of the tree. This foretells the story of the new life of Pinocchio arising from dead wood, and is a retelling of the Catholic concept of rebirth and redemption. González, raised a Roman Catholic, acknowledges that his religious beliefs underscore many of the most poignant works.

Saging seems the logical end-piece to this series: González portrays Pinocchio as the "wandering sage", a character prominent in historic Japanese prints, portrayed as an old man, bent with age and dressed in tatters, who wanders homeless through the landscape, carrying all worldly possessions in a rucksack. This is a portrait of a noble character, a wise man who has relinquished worldly goods and has attained spiritual enlightenment. Ergo, Pinocchio, the stupid

Arthur González. *History of Ego*. 2000. Ceramic, glaze, wood. 97 x 41 x 33 cm.



flower-buds and tangled tubers of the natural world, these ceramic variants shoot up from their bases, entwine, cluster, collide and compress together to form an exaggerated exploded image of manipulated nature – an accretion of unexpected details.

Deconstructing the flora sculptures reveal that they are based on the repetitive seriality of repeated modular units. Each is assembled from individual parts resembling luscious fruits, serpentine stalks, patterned leaves and blooming flowers – shapes repeated and reformed with slight variations – and then all moulded in wet red clay and affixed to the original infrastructure that is once-fired. These sculptures are then built-up with the addition of “already fired parts, broken, reassembled, re-glazed and re-fired”, until Rosen unravels complexities and exposes “pattern where no pattern was intended”, and achieves a “rhythmic organisation not by repetition, but by accumulation”.

As evidenced in these works, the artist proves herself to be a sculptor who wields a versatile set of tools: hammer, chisel and epoxy glue are as integral to the formation of the end product as is the malleable clay that is at the core. This layered approach to her ceramic sculptures may have evolved from Rosen’s early work with costuming materials and her lifelong love of textiles. Like thousands of threads woven together to create intricate designs and multiple textures in a length of fabric, Rosen skillfully interweaves modular ceramic elements to create a dimensional field of pattern and achieve diverse tactile experiences – engaging the senses and delighting the eye.

Rosen is a master at creating a visual active surface, combining contrasting textual treatments. In some places her surfaces are mottled, chalky white and flat; in others they are chromatically juicy, glazed with a palette of rich yellows and chomes that display a sense of depth. Rosen creates this variegated splendour across her dramatic sculptural landscapes by utilising a glazing technique that she has perfected over time: she varies the thickness and amount of white slip she pours over the base coat of glaze and controls the length of time she soaks the pieces in water, allowing the soluble salts to rise to the surface and impact the ultimate outcome.

In this manner, Rosen can achieve a viscous lushness and vibrancy of glaze, rendering her sculptural surfaces lively and animated, or she can effect a blotchy, mouldy appearance to the glazed surface, calculated to impart a sensibility of decay and decomposition. *Tumulus* is exemplar of the effectiveness of this technique, as shiny, pooled yellow glazes butt up against dusty cracked white textures. As manifest in *Tumulus*, many of Rosen’s sculptures can appear to mimic the eternal life cycle, covering the spectrum from growth to deterioration.

This group of abundantly fecund sculptures signals a small step in a new direction for Rosen. The artist began to embark upon this path after her move to Northern California in 1997 when she assumed the position of the Robert Arneson Endowed Chair of Ceramics at the University of California, Davis. Leaving behind her ultra-urban and industrial neighbourhood in Philadelphia, Rosen became enraptured by the luxuriant and fertile landscape of her new environs. Since her move westward, Rosen feels she is plumbing the landscape for new imagery to incorporate in her sculptures, and she is removing the suggestion of industry and industrial findings, replacing them with works that abstract, compound and complicate the verdant surroundings of her new home. Her current exuberant assemblages of lush forms – entangled, pressed together and showing signs of stress and dissolution – reflect this investigation. This new body of work demonstrates that Rosen can indeed coax beauty out of chaos, transforming the visual bramble of organic forms and patterns into a mesmerising play of organised obsession.

Jo Lauria, writer and art critic, is former curator for Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This article is an extract from the catalogue essay for *Bay Area Ceramic Sculptors, Second Generation* exhibition, Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Missouri, in 2004.

Annabeth Rosen. Cirrus. 2002. 74 x 31 x 31 cm.

