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Collection Focus: Mara Superior

August 18, 2021 – January 15, 2022

Blending past and present day concerns, notions of Americana, and personal experience, Mara Superior playfully both challenges and adds to a history of porcelain decorative objects and tableware.

Describing herself as “extremely visually-oriented,” Superior has long been looking at things, studying them, effectively cataloguing and curating them in her head. A fan of history—art history, decorative object history, cultural history—the artist has also spent many hours in museums, absorbing objects, images, and ideas from various cultures and time periods. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in particular, played a formative role—born and raised in New York City, she was able to visit frequently in her youth.

To put it simply, Superior brings a multitude of inspirations and influences to her work—illuminated manuscripts, Persian miniatures, classical art and architecture, historical ceramics, Americana, fantasy, needlework including textile samplers, early Renaissance painting, and Egyptian hieroglyphics, to name just a few.

Superior’s work connects to other contemporary artists such as **Ann Agee**, **Christina Antemann**, and **Roberto Lugo** who self-consciously investigate the history of their chosen medium from multiple dimensions.

Describing Superior’s work in the terms of its functional inspiration—platters, teapots, vessels—is useful, but only marginally evocative of what she produces. Her work is sculptural and always narrative—with that narrative sometimes weaving in ideas of functionality.

To achieve certain shapes as well as establish her distinct color palette, Superior combines slab building and press molding with underglaze painting and the use of oxides. Her standard iconography involves animal characters, portraits, interior and exterior landscapes, greenery, text, and embellishments such as dot patterns, scrolls, and suggestions of floral sprigs.

Superior first studied painting in college as well as some printmaking. The finesse of her line drawing and handling of color—skills that would have been magnified with those studies—contribute to the distinct character of her work.

As her work is frequently autobiographical, content is shaped by both daily and dramatic circumstances.

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While a notion of Americana is not always easy to define, in Superior's hands, it is evoked in color combinations, patterns, and an emphasis on an idyllic home life—including its potential intangible associations of intimacy, comfort, and love.

Spanning over three decades, from 1982 to 2018, RAM's collection emphasizes Superior's personal history—her connection to art and ceramic history, her appreciation for “home” and ideas about the domestic, and her love of travel. While these are not the only topics Superior addresses in her work, they are foundational ones and provide a layered and nuanced accounting of the artist's approach to working with porcelain.

Being what is perhaps the largest number of works owned by a public institution, RAM's collection of Superior's work currently includes platters, teapots, vessels, and a collaborative piece with her late husband, sculptor and furniture maker, **Roy Superior**. The debut of a recent multi-piece gift from the Kohler Foundation, Inc., catapulted RAM's holdings of work by Superior from two pieces, already gifted by other donors, to 33. In doing so, this gift establishes several milestones for Superior at RAM—making her an archive artist as well as the most collected female ceramic artist and the second most collected ceramic artist regardless of gender.

Superior, who received a BFA in painting from the University of Connecticut and an MAT in ceramics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, has achieved significant recognition in her career—including representation at prestigious craft shows in the earlier days and inclusion in numerous exhibitions. In addition, her work can be found in museum collections across the country including Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Arts and Design, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC, and the White House Collection of American Crafts, Clinton Presidential Center, Little Rock, Arkansas. She has received a National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artists Fellowship and multiple individual artist grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. In 2010, Superior was interviewed for the oral history program of the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art.