

Playful/ Pensive: Contemporary Artists and Contemporary Issues

In a modern context, artists not working on a commission can choose to express whatever they desire in their work. The choice of subject matter, and how exactly it is communicated, is filtered through the artist's perspective. Concerns impacting the artist, whether internal or external, can direct decisions about what is depicted in their artwork and why.

The artworks included in *Playful/Pensive* are either playful or thought-provoking, and sometimes both—seeming lighthearted at first but ultimately speaking to deeper, more complex issues. Constructed of materials such as ceramic and glass that can withstand the demanding conditions of RAM's Windows on Fifth Gallery, these works reflect personal, social, and cultural issues and ideas in sometimes unexpected ways.

The appeal of art is, by most accounts, subjective. What draws one person in may not impact the next. Further, opinions about the value and purpose of art vary widely. If someone believes that art is meant to transcend the everyday or focus primarily on what is or is not beautiful, then the works gathered for this exhibition could fall short of their expectations. These objects are created by artists who, on the whole, use their art as a way to address thoughts and feelings about a wide range of topics including colonialism, history, relationships, childhood, consumption, domesticity, the environment, the self, communication, social expectations, and the possibilities of materials. Someone could still find something beautiful in what is being created but these artists do not specifically make work that addresses beauty as a subject. Ideally, these works would encourage contemplation and, ultimately, dialogue.

Some of these artists and some of these works have been shown in RAM's galleries before but, they have not been shown together, nor have they been shown in the Windows on Fifth Gallery. This is significant because it underscores how different meanings can be obtained through context, both relative

to the other works on display and the gallery space they occupy. Having work on full view of anyone who passes by the museum—and not just those who could come inside—opens up the potential for the object to impact, mystify, bother, or excite a layered and diverse network of people.

While each person will find something different in these works—and not always what the artist intended—it can still be useful to hear from some of the artists directly. In this case, that would mainly be through quotes that describe their concerns and inspirations.

Select Featured Artists

Born in Argentina, **Silvia Levenson** left the country in her early twenties amidst political unrest and family tragedy. While her work can deal with the domestic, daily life, childhood, social expectations, and fashion, it is rooted in her personal experiences and the universality of the human condition. Levenson uses



(above)
Viola Frey
Three Figures and the Henry Moore Monkey, 2000
Glazed white earthenware
Racine Art Museum, Gift of David and Jacqueline Charak
Photography: Jon Bolton

(bottom left)
Kukuli Velarde
Najallota Insolente Playfully disobedient.
Does not believe in hierarchies, la hija de la gran...Maya.
Mexico, 750 BC from the *Plunder Me, Baby Series*, 2006
Terracotta and paint
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Karen Johnson Boyd
Photography: Jon Bolton



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glass to reveal “those things that are normally hidden” and creates installations and objects “that state firmly what is usually felt or whispered.” She continues, stating that her work is “centralized on this unspeakable space, which is oftentimes so small, located between what we can see and what we feel.”

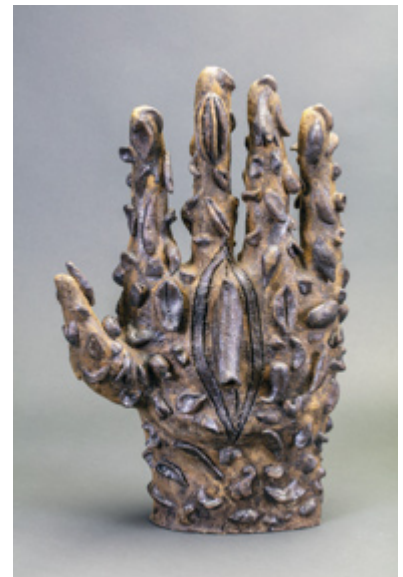
Maribel Portela, born and working in Mexico, blends nature, world views, and the relationship of human beings to the cosmos. The ceramic hand included in *Playful/Pensive* is one of two in RAM’s collection, and one of five Portela made in 2004, combining her interest in Mesoamerican civilizations and Buddhist hand gestures. About her work in general, which also incorporates paper, felt, bronze, and found natural materials, she states: “I am an artist who creates objects by manipulating common materials, situations and recognizable imaginaries, my work contains elements of science and nature, also aspects that have to do with human beings, their desires, fears, dreams. I work creating tactile surfaces, which make a playful and provocative experience.”

Sculpting figures that visually connect to fairy tales, Japanese manga, and computer games, Finnish artist **Kim Simonsson** uses clay to explore complex human dynamics. Simonsson states, “Authority in its many forms fascinates me and in my works I want to reverse the common beliefs by making the weak powerful.” For several years, he has specifically focused on creating children, using posture, gesture, or an object to suggest a larger story. The

two works by Simonsson in RAM’s collection involve characters blowing bubbles or spitting, both acts that could be construed as playful but, also saucy or disrespectful. About his first “spitting” girl, the artist states: “Next to my own studio was a glass workshop, where I made a rebellious girl sculpture – a spitting girl of white-glazed ceramic with her spit being made of glass. It was a modern and irreverent interpretation of a Meissen figurine with a manga influence in its aesthetic.”

Peruvian-American artist **Kukuli Velarde** addresses the complexities of colonization and identity in her ceramic work. Velarde focuses on Latin American history as a point of reference, describing it as “the reality with which I am familiar.” The two pieces included in this exhibition are from the same series, *Plunder Me, Baby*—a title that suggests subversion, aggression, wariness, and playfulness as well as self-awareness. Further thoughts by the artist on the work in the series illuminate the intensity of her message: “They are awakened and they are aware of being watched. They may be very well taken care of, as exotic animals in a zoological entertainment center, but they are trapped, estranged of context and stripped of all meaning. Each is titled with pejorative names, the same ones you, and many like you and I have endured because of our indigenous ancestry. They all have my face for I had to become each of them to reclaim ownership and to take the name calling with defiance. They show in their attitudes and gestures the rebellious spirit that should never abandon our hearts. Not anymore passive pawns of their own history they are us.”

Interested in big picture issues like relationships and “the intense search for balance and purpose despite our human failings and fragility,” **Janis Mars Wunderlich** uses clay to create playful narrative sculptures that, in essence, address the human condition. Wunderlich creates animal/human hybrid characters that speak to personal and collective identity. Her inspirations reflect the world views that have encouraged her explorations: “As a child, my Cherokee Grandpa would use animal characters in legends to explain nuances of human relationships, mysterious spiritual concepts, natural phenomena, and our essential connection to nature. As an art student, I discovered that numerous ancient civilizations shared similar mythologies, many recorded on ceramic artifacts. Our earliest civilizations appear to have turned to the female figure to visualize the mysterious and sacred complexities of humanity. These powerful forms and narratives inspire me, and resonant themes of fertility, sexuality, gender, connection to nature, and nurturing relationships are certainly relevant and even urgent in contemporary context.”



(top left)
Janis Mars Wunderlich
Family Supports, 2001
Glazed earthenware
Racine Art Museum, Purchased with income from the Veronica D. Regas Fund, and gifts from Dale and Doug Anderson, Karen Johnson Boyd, and Lisa Englander and Bruce W. Pepich
Photography: Courtesy of the Artist

(above)
Maribel Portela
Caricios de Recuerdos I (Fond Memories I), 2004
Glazed earthenware
Racine Art Museum, Gift of Karen Johnson Boyd
Photography: Jon Bolton