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Ting-Ju Shao's

Caricatures



Article by Ronald A. Kuchta

Seventy seven gentle warnings. 2002. Earthenware, metal. 360 x 360 x 15 cm.



Meeting the beautiful green light of the universe. 2002. Earthenware, feather. 60 x 41 x 21 cm.

THE PLAYFUL YET SERIOUS ISSUE-ORIENTED NARRATIVE art of Ting-Ju Shao presumes that, in spite of mankind's greediness, gluttony and slothfulness, redemption is possible. This, in effect, is an essentially optimistic, Christian dialectic or message, I believe. It is one that offers hope while alluding to some critical problems inherent in all of modern society, that is, the destruction of the natural environment, the indulgent appetites of the common man and woman, the politics of the powerful over the powerless and the impoverished, the difficulty in keeping faith alive. Such themes are given substance in her symbolic sculptures and in fabulously provocative literary and poetically conceived titles as, *Meeting the beautiful green light of the Universe* of 2002, a figurative work in which a large dark corpulent figure with big feet and tiny featureless head gazes intently at a little white angel he holds before him, and in *The respected and destroyed are mixed at the end of the century* of 1998 where seven humanoid-like fat figures also with little heads support each other like gymnasts in a totem pole fashion, standing on each others' outstretched shoulders and arms, joined, as it were, together in one harmonious structure.



Meeting the beautiful green light of the universe. 2002. Earthenware, feather. 60 x 41 x 21 cm.

Essentially humanistic, Shao's content deals with mankind's weaknesses and strengths as depicted in one of her largest and most dramatic installation works titled *Heal the World* of 1996 which toured the US some years ago. In this work each player-figure stands on a network of ladder-like wire pedestals, each figure holding a strand of wire to catch or support a collapsed ceramic heart caught in an expanded safety net, as it were, in the middle of this grand structural network. These tragic-comic figures are engaged in a quizzical drama of relationships suggesting the anonymous and varied characters' involvement with each other and with the fallen figure lying below - which they are somehow attempting to rescue.

In this and such other constructions as *Seventy seven gentle warnings* of 2002, and in *The mind's pose I saw in its dark flight from death* of 2002, installation art, conceptual art, figurative art and serial imagery are combined as concepts to produce thought-provoking, three-dimensional tableaux - arresting the attention, by their large scale, of the most casual viewer; and for their apparent fun combined with serious didactic intent - illuminated by diverting and amusing literary titles.

Shao's corpulent figures do not depict individualistic personae; they are not portraits of the famous or infamous but rather generalised types of human creatures, somewhat grotesque caricatures ludicrously representing species of humans or angels who seem to relate to one another when assembled together as representatives of some fictional comic society. Her figures are Shao's remarkably original creations and are constructed much as the Colombian painter, Botero, or the Norwegian painter, Odd Nerdrum, or the Italian painter, Mimmo Paladino, or the American, Leon Golub, have invented their unique types of prototypical human figures – in their own diverse works to portray certain of society's peculiar strange identities, all somehow fraught with rather sinister meanings or allusions and implied controversy.

In the realm of ceramics, certain comparable generalised figurative sculpture, specific to the broad and expressive intentions of their far-flung creators are the typical works of the Austrian, Gundi Dietz, the Pole, Anna-Malicka Zamorska, the Irish, Clare Curneen, the late French artist, Georges Jeanclos, the English artist, Christie Brown, and the well-known Americans, Viola Frey, Judy Moonelis, Justin Novak and Esther Shimazu, for instance. Each have their own signature style and unique figurative representation – but all allude, as Shao does, to a certain exaggerated type of human being to express a specific narrative or anecdotal theme.

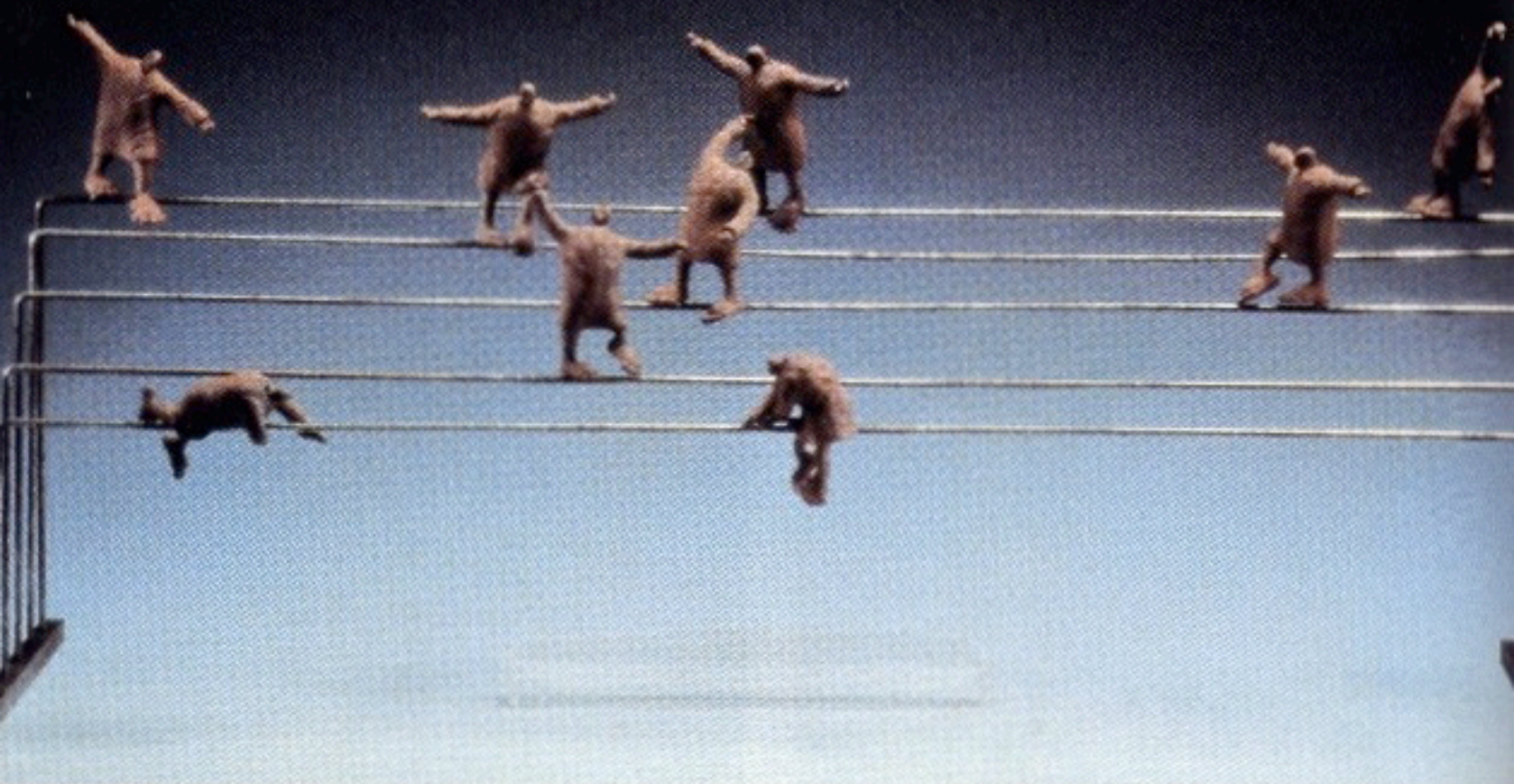
As for other large ceramics installation works with some social commentary or intent that could be compared to Shao's works I can suggest Judy Chicago's great ode to feminism, *The Dinner Party* of 1979, Sadushi Inazuka's universally appealing, *Exotic Species* and the Greek ceramist Maro Kerassioti's *In the Forest*, an ode to the conservation of our forests.

On a visit to the Whitney Museum of American Art here in New York, I noted in their permanent collection two assembled works, both of which reminded me for different reasons of Shao's sculpture. One, Alexander Calder's *Circus*, a large construction of wire and wood with moveable elements depicting a typical circus is perhaps the most popular single piece in the entire museum because of its purely playful joyful character. The other, Chris Burden's *America's Darker Moments* of 1994 is a small-scale tableau of miniature tin figures depicting police and criminals, violence and urban tragedy; a diminutised, toy-like portrayal of the darker moments of the contemporary American scene. Both contain themes inherent in Shao's sculpture – playfulness and the implication of danger.

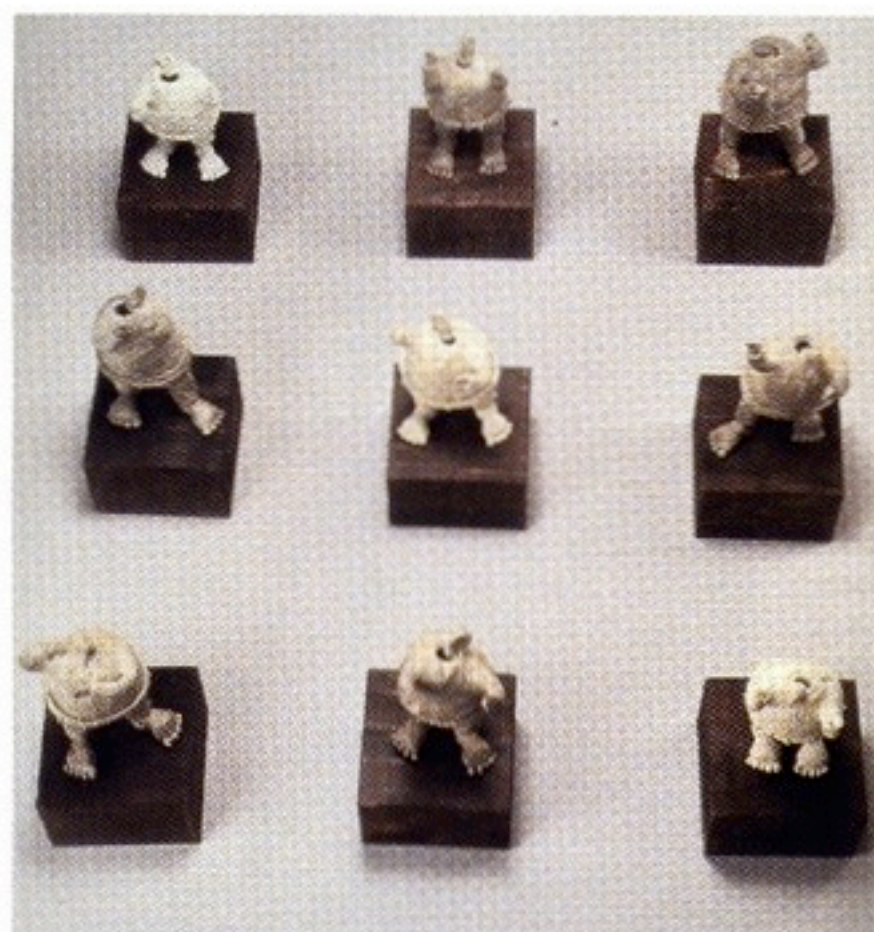
Shao's work combines the sinister, the darker side of human character with the lighter, more humorous, more positive and even angelic possibilities of humankind's essential nature. For this, for her storytelling abilities, and for her skillful manipulation of



The respected and the destroyed are mixed at the end of the century. 1998. Earthenware, metal. 140 x 38.5 x 27cm.



At Chopin's funeral, I heard Mozart's requiem. 1999. Earthenware, metal. 110 x 52 x 30 cm.



The mind's poses I saw in its dark flight from death. 2002. Earthenware, metal. 90 x 90 x 32 cm.



I see the flashing of light in the universe. 2002. Earthenware, wood. 60 x 41 x 21 cm.

her materials: clay, wood, wire and feathers, to create scenes of social drama with a personal, inventive perspective, Shao is to be appreciated as a precious illustrator (she is also a graphic illustrator of many books) commentator and artistic practitioner of the utmost interest to a world in need of her kind of perceptiveness, gentle warning and yet enduring

hopefulness – as all these qualities are manifested in Shao's prolific, sculptural assemblages of fantastically conceived symbolic figures.

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