

“Paolo Porelli: Humankind: The Sublime and The Ridiculous,” Belger Arts Center

- by Alice Thorson
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“Humankind: The Sublime and The Ridiculous” establishes Italian artist Paolo Porelli as a grand interpreter of the human condition. His aptly titled exhibit at the Belger Arts Center is also aptly timed, coinciding with an American election season showcasing human behavior and foibles at their most extreme.

By turns elegant and grotesque, playful and menacing, Porelli’s arresting ceramic figures, ranging from one to two-feet-tall, were created in part during a fellowship residency at Belger Crane Yard Studios last winter. The gig obviously suited him: the invention here is soul-stirring, from a confectionery mint-green figure with ruptured face who dangles mysterious cloud-like objects from his hands, to a horrific, red-speckled “Misogynist Demon” juggling human heads.

Mining the tradition of the commedia dell’arte, the demon wears a mask, as do many of Porelli’s characters, including “Mad Mother (Homage to Arturo Martini)” a reference to the early 20th century Italian sculptor. Porelli’s “mother” bears a striking resemblance to a Martini sculpture of a woman clasping a child who seems to subsume her, but in his homage, surrealism intervenes: The woman’s face is covered by a blobby white form that looks like batting. She walks as if blinded, grasping a child’s toy in each hand.

In figure after figure — and the exhibit features upwards of 40 of them — Porelli repeatedly alludes to the violence we live with daily in a world of terrorism and war. Figures don gas-mask like face coverings, wield projectiles or carry dead trophies or entrails in their hands.

He portrays the hapless, like the metallic-glazed figure with arms outstretched experiencing a cascade of colored balls down his front, and explores vulnerability through symbolic evocations of hidden burdens and emotional trauma. The half black/half white “Boy with the Golden Intestines” is a show stopper. All eyes rest with horror on the gilded innards he stoically holds before him, his story begging to be told. Porelli is a genius with color, splashing a face with yellow, indulging a whim for peppermint pink in “Pink Lady,” then going dark and ominous in works such as “Blue Salesman,” shown weighted down with a tinker’s wagon worth of objects and holding a placard to his chest. He removes color to striking effect in a series of ghostly grisaille

figures, confining himself to the gray of mud and stark white.

Porelli knows our masks and poses, but a thrill of the exhibit is his ability to portray unexpected dimensions of human behavior. “Twilight Zone Granny” a clownish red-aproned figure that can be seen at Belger Crane Yard, evokes a fishmonger, but is inexplicably holding a creature that resembles an alligator. The Crane Yard also displays his exquisite “Hunter,” who wields a hide embedded with colorful birds. A long spiraling pink cylinder covers his mouth, muzzling an otherwise proud moment. Nothing is simple in Porelli’s world —a suggestion of struggle subsumes all of his human surrogates. Many of them can’t see or can barely breathe, but they love their objects. Porelli describes them as “ironic commentaries on the excesses and obsessions of global society.”

Their visual charms are manifold, but decorative they are not.

“Paolo Porelli: Humankind: The Sublime and The Ridiculous” continues at the Belger Arts Center, 2100 Walnut, through Dec. 17. Hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday and Friday (9 p.m. on First Fridays), noon to 4 p.m. Saturday, and by appointment. For more information, 816.474.3250 or www.belgerartscenter.org

About The Author: Alice Thorson



Alice Thorson is the editor of KC Studio. She has written about the visual arts for numerous publications locally and nationally



Paolo Porelli, "Vortex Bearer", 2016, 12.25" x 4" x 4.5", Brown stoneware with slip.

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Paolo Porelli, "Mint and Silver Clouds", 2016, 14" x 15" x 4.75", White earthenware with glaze and luster.

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Paolo Porelli, "Mad Mother, Homage to Arturo Martini", 2016, 23.5" x 10" x 13",
Black stoneware with mixed media.

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Paolo Porelli, "Female with Tube", 2016, 12" x 6" x 5", Brown stoneware.