



Exhibition | Roberta Griffith: Babydolls, Baseballs and Mortality

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GARTH CLARK-CFileonline 04.22.14

Roberta Griffith, one of eleven artists selected for the *Artists of Hawai'i 2013* exhibition at the Honolulu Museum of Art, is a painter and sculptor with a long and distinguished career who moved to Kaua'i in 2008 from upstate New York. In this Honolulu exhibition, she exhibited three ceramic sculpture installations along with related monotypes. The installations, which range from the nearly monumental to the diminutive, are conceptual/figurative in nature with a thematic thread involving infancy/childhood and play.

The largest of them, *Hung Out to Die*, is startling to encounter, with three transparent white tulle bags containing white forms hanging from a cold, industrial steel frame. Approaching closer, the viewer is surprised, perhaps horrified, to discover that the forms in the bags appear to be the dismembered body parts of infants and baseballs.

In fact they are hand-pressed porcelain elements made from molds the artist acquired from a doll manufacturer near her Otego, NY home (and where she still maintains a summer residence and studio).

Nevertheless, the illusion that Griffith creates is central to her purpose, and together with the cast shadows of the gallows-like steel stand and the sly title of the work, deliberately playing off the phrase "hung out to dry," establishes her preoccupation in her current work with notions of demise and death.

In *Hung Out to Die*, Griffith finesses a fine line between the formal aspects of her work and the psychological/political, as she performs a kind of bait-and-switch. She counts on the gestalt impact of the work to draw viewers to the notion that the work is a comment on the subject of abortion, so hot-button controversial in this time, as well as child neglect and abandonment. But is the work that? Or is it simply what it is, tulle bags containing ceramic babydoll parts suspended from a metal frame?

Griffith relies on the power of metaphor and the human capacity for imagination, maintaining a tentative ambiguity while the minds of viewers fill in blanks.

The opposite, size-wise, is the miniature installation *Debris Contained*, comprising five hand-built, fragile porcelain boxes, with sliding covers, holding sculpted porcelain elements of tiny babydoll parts and baseballs. Here, the viewer is drawn in close to admire the fine and delicate detail of the forms.

The boxes and contents charm with their intimacy, but again there is the underlying metaphor—embodied in the title—that seems to ask: “Is this the next, the last stage, for the figures in *Hung Out to Die*, shriveled to little forms, stuffed in tight coffins to be closed and put away, never again seen and touched?”

What about the baseballs? This motif appears again and more prominently in the third installation, *Stuck in the Sand*, a painted wooden sandbox of normal size with real sand and encompassing myriad elements of childhood time, such as baseballs, sticks, drawings, and babydolls, all rendered in trompe-l’oeil clay and porcelain and presided over by a ceramic facsimile of a stuffed toy aardvark named Cheryl. The installation is part autobiographical, for the artist, a tomboy growing up who played baseball and football with the boys through elementary school. There is a sense of nostalgia in this work, as Griffith evokes not only her childhood, but childhood in a broader sense, something to which all viewers can relate in some way.

So much is crammed in the space of the sandbox—more elements than one or two children could play with, no room in fact for children at all—that it takes on an aura of ruin, abandonment, loss, like a midden, or refuse heap with the leavings of a culture, just unearthed by archaeologists.

Like Cheryl, a universal avatar, we are all in a sense stuck in the sand of the past. Robert Griffith’s works in *Artists of Hawai’i 2013* exquisitely convey the familiar lament: nothing is what it seems, nothing stays the same, nothing lasts forever.

Artists of Hawai’i 2013 was an exhibition at the Honolulu Museum of Art.

Curators selected 11 artists from more than 341 applicants and gave them 10 months to create new works.

Griffith is included in a new exhibition *PRINT paper + sandbox* at Galerie 103 in Kukui’ula, Kaua’i, Hawaii until May 3. Along with other artists such as Jean Cocteau, Tom Lieber, HC. Westermann and Sally French, the exhibition examines traditional and contemporary printmaking in an effort to challenge conventional limits and technique.

James Jensen is the Curator of Contemporary Art, Honolulu Museum of Art.

Above image: Roberta Griffith, *Debris Contained*.

Any thoughts about this post? Share yours in the comment box below.



Roberta Griffith, Stuck in the Sand.



Roberta Griffith, Hung Out to Die.



A print by Roberta Griffith, continuing themes from her earlier works seen above.

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[Visit Galerie 103](#)

INSTALLATIONS + MONOTYPES
ROBERTA GRIFFITH



ARTISTS OF HAWAI'I 2013
HONOLULU MUSEUM OF ART

BABYDOLLS + BASEBALLS

Roberta Griffith, one of eleven artists selected for the *Artists of Hawai'i 2013* exhibition at the Honolulu Museum of Art, is a painter and sculptor with a long and distinguished career who moved to Kaua'i in 2008. On view are three ceramic sculpture installations and related monotypes. The conceptual/figurative installations, monumental to diminutive, encompass a thematic thread involving infancy/childhood and play. The largest work, *Hung Out to Die*, is startling with three transparent white tulle bags containing white ceramic forms hanging from a cold, industrial steel frame. Closer inspection, perhaps horrifying to the viewer, reveals that the forms in the bags appear to be the dismembered body parts of infants and baseballs. With this illusion, together with gallows-like shadows cast by the steel stand and the sly title, deliberately playing off the phrase "hung out to dry," Griffith establishes her preoccupation with demise and death. Finessing a fine line between the psychological/political and the formal aspects of her work, a bait-and-switch occurs. Griffith counts on the gestalt impact of the work to draw viewers to the notion that the work is a comment on the subject of abortion, a hot-button controversial topic, as well as child neglect. Otherwise, is it simply ceramic babydoll body parts and baseballs in tulle bags suspended from a metal frame? Griffith relies on the power of metaphor and human capacity for imagination, maintaining ambiguity while viewers fill in blanks. In *Debris Contained*, the small fragile boxes and contents of miniature babydoll parts and baseballs charm with their intimacy, drawing the viewer close in for such tour-de-force detailed forms. Again, the underlying metaphor—embodied in the title—seems to ask: "Is this last stage for the figures in *Hung Out to Die*, shriveled, stuffed in tight closed coffins, never again seen or touched? The baseball motif appears again in the third work, *Stuck in the Sand*. Trompe-l'oeil ceramic baseballs, sticks, drawings, and babydolls are presided over by a ceramic toy aardvark named Cheryl. Myriad elements of childhood and Griffith's love of baseball are autobiographical as she evokes her childhood, but also childhood in a broader sense that anyone can relate to in some way. Objects cram the sandbox—more than children could play with, really no room for children at all—so it takes on an aura of ruin, loss, abandonment, a cultural refuse heap unearthed by archaeologists. Like Cheryl, universal avatar, we are all in a sense stuck in the sand of the past: nothing is what it seems, nothing stays the same, and nothing lasts forever.

JAMES JENSEN

Curator of Contemporary Art, Honolulu Museum of Art

INSTALLATIONS + MONOTYPES

On exhibition are three installations, each accompanied by a monotype that is a 2-D response to it. In this body of work I refer to human mortality through the concept of play using children's toys. Dolls appeared in the Near East as early as 6500 BC, as fired and unfired clay figurines, fetishes and toys. Ceramic dolls, and parts of dolls, along with baseballs for a contemporary note, are an integral part of each installation. Titles of two of the installations, *Hung Out to Die* and *Stuck in the Sand*, are plays on words from the children's games, *Hung Out to Dry* and *Stuck in the Mud*. My two installations combine mixed-media materials with objects made of clay. Non-ceramic materials used are brushed steel, fabric, wood and sand. The installation *Debris Contained* is made entirely of hand-sculpted porcelain that has been high-fired. Each of the five very small boxes contains similar miniature dolls, doll parts and baseballs. Although the containment differs, the tiny boxes, with identical miniature contents, are a microcosm of the three identical suspended fabric bundles of *Hung Out to Die*. The ceramic objects in all three installations represent debris that alludes to the universal cyclical nature of life and death. The installations themselves are a metaphor for the detritus of broken toys, broken lives, and unfulfilled promise, whether from politics, strife, wars, human intervention or natural disasters.

MONOTYPES



Hung Out to Die II



Contained



Stuck in the Sand... Cheryl







ARTIST STATEMENT

I draw, paint and work with clay by hand and on the potter's wheel. In addition, I create art using printmaking, and working with hot glass. I combine materials into mixed-media installations to tell stories. I make 2-D art, 3-D art and installations as vehicles for exploring deeper levels of meaning that the viewer may approach from his or her perspective, and level of understanding. I often combine collage and mixed media in my 2-D art (drawing, painting, printmaking) to create images. Interestingly, the ceramic process lends itself to multiples, repetition, and variations on a form. In making 3-D art forms I use that orientation to develop not only ceramic objects, but also sculptures, hot glass and installations. These artworks may combine functional objects with non-functional objects, and figurative, recognizable images, or non-figurative elements to present my vision. Recently, many images, objects and installations I create relate to play via toys, doll body parts, dolls and baseballs that encompass various layers of meaning for different people. I want to evoke associations of places and their cultural manifestations that I have come across through research, archaeology, and world travel, as well as allude to human foibles, human mortality, the cyclical nature of life and death, and universal natural or man-made shortcomings. Material metaphors I create are repositories for my thoughts and reflections.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Roberta Griffith, b. 1937, Hillsdale, MI. Education: 1960 BFA, Chouinard Art Institute; 1962 MFA, SIU-Carbondale; 1962-1964 Fulbright Grant, Barcelona, Spain, study with José Loréns Artigas; 1975 K-12 Art Certification NYS. Roberta is an award-winning artist and educator. She has exhibited work in ceramics, drawing, painting, hot glass, mixed-media and installation art nationally and internationally for over five decades in 34 individual shows, 134 invitational shows, and 95 juried shows. Her artwork is included in books, museums, public and private collections in England, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Spain, Sweden, and the United States of America.

Website: www.RobertaGriffith.com

Gallery Representation: www.galerie103.com

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS + SELECTED HONORS

Collections: The Honolulu Museum of Art, Honolulu, HI; Museum of International Ceramic Art-Grimmerhus, Denmark; ASU Museum of Art, Tempe, AZ, The American Museum of Ceramic Art (AMOCA), Pomona, CA; Museu de Cerámica, Barcelona, Spain; Kutani Museum, Ishikawa, Japan; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY; Roberson Museum and Science Center, Binghamton, NY; Munson-Williams Proctor Museum of Art, Ithaca, NY; SIU Museum Gallery-Carbondale, Carbondale, IL; Yager Museum of Art and Culture Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY; SUNY Gallery, and First Albany Corporation, Albany, NY; East Stroudsburg State University Gallery, East Stroudsburg, PA; Instituto de Estudios Norte-Americanos, and L'Escola Massana, Barcelona, Spain; U of M School of Art Gallery, Ann Arbor, MI.

Honors: Marquis Who's Who in America, 68th Edition, 2014, Marquis Who's Who in American Art, 33rd Edition, 2013. Recipient of *The Jim Winters 3-D Design Award* for innovative exploration of structure, form and space in sculpture, Honolulu Museum of Art, 2013, and the *Sharon and Thurston Twigg-Smith Purchase for the Collection of the Honolulu Museum of Art, Debris Contained*, 2013.

CHECKLIST

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| 1.  <i>Hung Out to Die</i>
2010-2012. Ceramic, fabric, steel
78.0 x 66.0 x 32.0 inches | 4.  <i>Hung Out to Die II</i>
2013. Monotype. Ink, paper
31.25 x 23.25 x 1.5 inches |
| 2.  <i>Debris Contained</i>
2012-2013. Porcelain, Keraflex
1.0 x 2.5 x 1.5 inches | 5.  <i>Contained</i>
2013. Monotype. Ink, paper
31.25 x 23.25 x 1.5 inches |
| 3.  <i>Stuck in the Sand</i>
2013. Ceramic, wood, sand
8.0 x 36.0 x 36.5 inches | 6.  <i>Stuck in the Sand...Cheryl</i>
2013. Monotype. Ink, paper
23.25 x 31.25 x 1.5 inches |

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Griffith Artworks catalog design 2013
E-Mail: griffithr138@yahoo.com