



Steve Keister: *Chac Mool*, 2006, mixed mediums, 25 by 30 by 19 inches; at Feature.

Steve Keister at Feature

Over the past 15 years, the sculptor Steve Keister has amassed an authoritative knowledge of Olmec, Maya and Toltec sculpture, owing primarily to his annual visits to archeological sites in Mexico and Central America. Using castings of consumer-product packaging and information from his field-work and digital photographic notes, his works establish a strange limbo of suspended signifiers. Meso-American figuration is repositioned in the present, relieved of its sacral deployment, while Styrofoam cushioning (of the kind used for shipping commodities such as stereo equipment), plastic industrial pails and ordinary egg cartons are "elevated" from utilitarianism into integral sculptural elements.

His most recent show, installed in the gallery's mezzanine, was quietly charged. There were four freestanding sculptures, two reliefs and two segmented lengths of repeated forms that functioned as architectural embellishments. One of these, the vertebrae-like *Skeletal Frieze* (2007), a length of stylized ceramic modules, went across the wall horizontally at picture-molding height. As well as resembling bones, the small jostling shapes, similar but not uniform, also looked like the repeated letters of a severely limited alphabet. Other sculptures were assembled from wood and casts in terra-cotta, cement and plaster, selectively polychromed with acrylic paint. All retained a muffled hallucinogenic quality inherited from their source materials.

Chac Mool (2006), for example, a compact (25-by-30-by-19-inch) reclining figure, is made of naturally brick-red terra-cotta and blue-gray cement, with added

touches of turquoise, among other colors. In a statement for the exhibition, Keister cites a text noting that this type of reclining warrior representation is found throughout the region and is known for its "butterfly pectoral," which he represented by an orange-colored terra-cotta breastplate cast from Styrofoam packing material.

The figure holds on its lap a form roughly in the shape of a bowl that, historically, might have held the hearts of freshly sacrificed humans. This bowl shape matches the warrior's headgear. As Keister writes, the head's orientation, at a 90-degree angle to its body, is characteristic of this type of figure. Its knees, made of cement molded from a small bucket, are the most surprising parts of the sculpture, and provided this viewer a click of recognition much like the one elicited by the toy car that makes up the head in Picasso's sculpture *Baboon with Young*; in both, the common object seems to perfectly identify a body part.

Keister is working in a territory similar to that occupied by Philip Taaffe and Tom Sachs, both cross-cultural recyclers. Sachs's work involves replication of familiar consumer objects. Taaffe is as transhistorical as Keister but more wide-ranging. Though I admire all of these artists, I prefer Keister, whose pursuit of rhyming forms that link our culture and an ancient, adjacent one is becoming deeper and more contemplative.

—Joe Fyfe

Kukuli Velarde at Garth Clark

Garth Clark's penultimate show (the gallery, which opened in Los Angeles in 1981 and subsequently moved to New York, closed in August) featured Kukuli Velarde with a wickedly funny exhibition of ceram-

ics and paintings that scored feminist and cross-cultural points. It was titled "Plunder Me, Baby." Velarde, born in Peru, a graduate of Hunter College now living in Philadelphia, took on ethnographic objects with a display of 12 faux pre-Columbian pots (all 2007) mounted on three shelves, complete with aged-looking, tattered and stained labels; she also addressed Christian iconography with two large paintings (both 2006) on metal panels.

Best known as a figurative sculptor in clay, Velarde has previously dealt with themes drawn from her cultural legacy. Often she used a stylized infant or child figure. But something seems to have gotten her dander up, because here her female faces, busts, torsos or full figures are directly related to pot forms, and they grimace and flaunt their sexuality. The labels give each pot-woman a title and describe her personality and appetites, but while the tempers are strikingly different, they might all be the same woman. The vessels are made of black, white, red or brown clays or terra-cotta, with paints, stains and glazes; some are brilliantly colored, others intensely patterned (both geometric and floral). There is a 17-inch-tall black stirrup pot with incised designs

plus a face consisting of furiously bulging eyes and gritted teeth. The label says "*India Pacharaca* . . . Taciturn, abruptly violent. Enjoys rough handling . . ." Another is a rotund storage vessel 29½ inches tall that captures a figure down to hip level. Shown in relief, her arms are snaky, her breasts jut as aggressively as Madonna's bustie and her labia are prominently centered and protruding. The label says "*Chuncha Cretina* . . . Never know what she is thinking. Savage, simple, lascivious, muy caliente . . ." Other figures look passive, sassy, alarmed or stern.

Amazingly, Velarde paints with equal success and insouciance. On aluminum is a floral-bordered scene of an angel wearing a feathered hat and exaggerated conquistador balloon sleeves, who holds in his right hand a bloody sword and in his left the detached head of a kneeling female nude whose own hands still pray. Not the right prayer, maybe. The second painting, on steel, presents a pregnant nude woman in a chastity belt and minimally concealing green robe, whose gold-leafed ceramic heart, penetrated by nine large square-cut nails, protrudes from the surface. Her dolorous face, eyes rolled upward in supplication, a horse's bit in her mouth, is surrounded by three putti, one

of whom holds a mask of her happy face, with a dazzling smile like a toothpaste ad. At her feet are two more putti, holding a banner that identifies her as "esposa madre, servant, slave, marty[r]." All five putti have enormous penises, bringing to mind the "thir leg" joke, but Betty-Boop style faces and hair. The scene is garlanded with razor wire. This work should have been in one of the feminist shows. Velarde is a marvel.

—Janet Koplo

View of Kukuli Velarde's exhibition "Plunder Me, Baby," 2007, 12 faux pre-Columbian pots; at Garth Clark.



Collier Schorr at 303

"There I Was," the title of Collier Schorr's show, was ambiguous. Was she speaking in the first person or from the point of view of her teenage subject? At 303 she explored the short life of Charlie Snyder through dozens of pencil drawings, eight