

Margaret Keelan's Intimate and Universal Stories

Article by Cheryl Coon



WHERE? THE ENIGMATIC QUESTIONS THAT INFUSE the work of Margaret Keelan, invite the viewer on a journey of self-reflection and discovery. Her series of figurative doll sculptures investigates our mortality, and issues of innocence, beauty, ageing and decay. The figures act as guides, interpreters, questioners, and each viewer must then complete the riddle from his or her own personal experience.

The work is evocative, creating a sense of nostalgia or perhaps darker childhood memories. The sculptures have a poetic phrasing, using hints and intimations that indicate layers of meaning, however the narrative is never overt. In some cases the story may possess innocence and longing, in other cases there may be a more sordid scenario. One of the strengths of this series is its ambiguity and openness, leaving room for interpretation. The sculpture becomes an object of thoughtful contemplation, or a vessel for memories.

The most recent sculptures reference 19th century dolls and the Santos figures of Mexico and Central America. The faces are reminiscent of colonial times, and at first they appear familiar, disconnected and ageless. However, the startling realisation that these figures are made with clay that has been meticulously worked to create the illusion of decaying wood, disintegrating and peeling paint, pushes the work beyond mere representation. The skin-like malleability of the clay has been stained and manipulated to show all the scars and scratches and gouges. The sculptures appear to have been excavated, but not restored to any previous state of pristine beauty. They reveal their raw, exposed and broken selves.

These are not the über-perfect dolls that are given out to young girls; they are metaphors for the transformations that we undergo as we age. In childhood, dolls are playthings, and they either inspire acts of nurturing, or suffer acts of torture. Dolls by their nature are containers for intimate secrets, absorbing

Where? 2006. Clay, glaze, stains. 61 x 15 x 15 x cm.



and reflecting all of the angst of growing up. Keelan's figures reveal the process of ageing and becoming wise in the decaying surfaces of the sculptures: the hair is mussed and chopped or missing altogether; the lips show traces of chipped lipstick, and the eyes focus inward.

Many of Keelan's pieces have a strong spiritual component. After the death of her mentor and friend Marilyn Levine, Keelan created a series of figures that explored the transitory nature of death and questioned the existence of the soul. "Where?" is the question incised into the forehead of one of these figures. The doll's head is an empty shell, inviting us to contemplate its fragile hollow space. Where did the essence go? Did it contain a soul? What is it that makes us who we are? Her hands and held up with the palms open, in a gesture that could be an inquiry, or a prayer or a pushing away of something unknown. The gesture is strangely vulnerable and graceful, reminiscent of ancient Thai sculptures where the upheld hands act as a conduit for the divine.

As a young artist, Keelan was involved in a dynamic confluence of ceramic arts at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada. It was there that she first met Marilyn Levine, as well as many other prominent Canadian and Californian ceramic artists. Keelan later went on to receive her Masters of Fine Arts at the University of Utah, where Levine taught. Levine's ceramic work is indirectly figurative in that she created realistic personal objects – such as leather jackets or leather shoes – that retained the character and the body presence of the person who had originally worn the object. Her ability to create these wizened leather objects so realistically was an inspiration to Keelan who realised the potential for clay to depict a materiality other than itself. Keelan later moved to the San Francisco Bay Area because of the strong ceramic community that included Peter Voukos, Robert Arneson, Robert Brady and Stephen De Staelber. Today, she is represented by Lacoste Gallery in Concord, Massachusetts, which features a new body of her work in its January 2008 exhibition entitled *Intimate and Universal Stories*.

Keelan's realistic surfaces show the layers upon layers of stain and glazing that go into creating the illusion of the wood and decaying paint. The clay is heavily scarred, scratched and transformed using a variety of tools. The process reveals a disconcerting fragility in the peeling and cracking skin, creating a surface that is both seductive and slightly repulsive. Keelan has quoted Dolly Parton's famous saying: "It took a lot of money to make me look this cheap." And the extreme care that Keelan spends in creating surfaces that look weathered, gives the sculptures a certain ancient integrity, as if they have undergone a rite of passage.

Baby (2). 2007. Clay, glaze, stains. 68.5 x 25.5 x 20 cm.

Often, if you look at sculptors' hands, you may be able to tell the medium they work with, or their level of experience and how intensely they work. The cuts and the scars etched into the surface of the bone dry skin, the splattered hot wax and metal burns, all of the crisscrossed marks are like a roadmap showing the history and the life of the artist. The scars mingle with the wrinkles and the lifelines to show layer upon layer of events – the incidents and accidents that shape an artist's studio practice. Keelan's figurative sculptures resonate with the same resilient spirit – their peeling, decayed and scratched surfaces are powerful because they refer to a vast interior world rather than a superficial outer beauty.

This ritualistic process that goes into the creation of the work evokes an initiation or transformation. Several of the figures hold a smaller figure that could be interpreted as another doll, or another version of the self. The inference is that there is a permeable boundary between the adult and the child within. This thread of self-reflection and focusing on the interior illuminates other themes that run through the series including dreams, spiritual investigations and an emotional intensity. There is also a thread of humour, imagination, and whimsy in many of the pieces.

A menagerie of snakes, birds, butterflies and strawberries allude to complex narratives and relationships. Several of the figures have birds perched atop their heads. As symbolic companions the birds assume the role of messengers, muses, guides or harbingers. The meaning is intentionally ambiguous, although it is evident that the figure and the bird are engaging in a dialogue. The birds also might be emerging from the head of the figures, as thoughts, dreams or wishes.

The snakes, on the other hand, represent a darker threat to innocence. Several of the sculptures feature a snake draped around the neck of the figure. *Strawberry and Snake* shows a figure holding a bright, red strawberry in her hand. The work uses images from the seduction scene in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* where the young girl loses her innocence. Keelan describes the snake: "coiled to strike, phallic, muscular, but also possibly dangerous," so the tension between the two is palatable. The strawberry represents sexual pleasure, fecundity and love – the figure's hand is outstretched, but it is unclear if she is offering or taking the fruit.

The hands in Keelan's sculptures are intensely meaningful. They hold offerings, they protect, they supplicate. Their expressive poses are spiritual and nurturing as they reach out to the viewer, often holding a small gift, such as a bird. Some of the hands serve another purpose – shaped as hands/cups

Strawberry and Snake. 2006. Clay, glaze, stains 56 x 15 x 15 cm.





Left top: *Flow* (detail). 2005. Clay, glaze, stains, mixed media. 71 x 20 x 20 cm.

Above: *Boat*. 2007. Clay, glaze, stains. 35.5 x 15 x 28 cm.

Left: *Resurrection*. 2007. 45.5 x 20 x 33 cm. Clay, glaze, mixed media.

holding water. The water represents a life force, fluid and dynamic – offering sustenance and absolution. Ultimately evaporating and symbolising our ephemeral life. The water is also a metaphor for the soul, filling the vessel that contains it. In *Flow* the figure holds water which flows through hands, like the life force which will inevitably slip through our fingers.

Like the image of water flowing through the hands, the eyes also contain a certain fluidity and reflection. These water elements represent a rebirth and a renewal. The sculpture *Resurrection* has eyes that appear to be pools of water; clear resin was poured into the eyes to give the illusion of liquid. The image of its scarred wood-like face resembles many ship figureheads that traversed the oceans. The eyes seem unfocused in order to emphasise their gaze

into the interior. The sculpture explores the connection between the eyes and the soul, water and the life force.

In *Boat* we see two figures facing each other; the smaller figure could be interpreted as either a child or an earlier version of the self. Their weathered surfaces show the ageing process, the journey, and accumulated life experiences. The figures travel together on a river, which represents the flow of life or maybe the passage between one world and the next.

Margaret Keelan's figures invite introspection; we realise that the questions and the journey are more valuable than any final answers we might discover. All of those unanswerable questions flow through our thoughts like water.

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