

Koren Christofides:

A Medieval Modern Bestiary

Written by **Matthew Kangas**

Turning to ceramics in 2007 at Atelier Buffile in Aix-en-Provence, France, where she was encouraged by proprietors Vincent and Monique Buffile, Koren Christofides' approach to clay sculpture is bound to her background as an art historian, painter, curator and printmaker. Each experience has left its mark on her art, seen in depth in her second solo show at Gallery IMA in Seattle, Washington (USA). As an art historian married to another art historian, Constantine Christofides, the artist spent twelve years living in France, including a stint as artist-in-residence at the Institute for American Universities in Aix. Her current work combines exaggerated mask faces with spontaneous-looking hand-building that recalls Abstract Expressionist pioneer ceramist James Leedy more than his erstwhile colleague Peter Voulkos. Viola Frey (assemblage, bricolage) also comes to mind, but the frequently tilted positions and blasted passages of glaze point toward indigenous or folk ceramics, as in North Carolina face jugs, Mayan tripod vessels, and Japanese *mingei* wares. Ultimately, Christofides (who now lives in Manhattan) has achieved the "complex narrative in three-dimensional form" she desires, albeit with a series of delightfully distracting detours that form the central viewing experience.

Earlier, collaborating with her husband on a monumental volume of the fables of Jean de la Fontaine (University of Washington Press, 2006), the artist's role was to find and commission artists from all over the world to illustrated newly translated (by Constantine) fables such as *The Grasshopper and the Ant*. She hastened to add that the darker side of the author is featured, as well as the beloved instructional tales. If anything, the 2006 book triggered her own responses to literary

inspirations such as La Fontaine, Aesop, and the Brothers Grimm, all of whom are generously, if obliquely, scattered throughout the grouping of 22 sculptures and vessels on view in Seattle.

Bulging eyes, gaping mouths, exposed breasts, grasping fingers and clenched fists are all parts of a 'continuous narrative' that flows from piece to piece. When each sculpture is isolated, its own top-heavy symbolism kicks in. For example, in *A Woman Can Turn a Man into Anything She Wants* (2012), screaming Francis Bacon mouths are beneath painted-nail hands and a vicious grin, like de Kooning's *Marilyn Monroe*. And that's just one side. The temptation of feminine allure suggests Medusa, the Sirens, or a burlesque queen. An inverted women's head in a see-through cage peeks out at us from *Grimm's Fairy Tale* (2013), summoning up any number of maidens trapped by jealous witches as they stray into the woods. The snatch of white fleece at its base suggests a violent outcome. Though colorful and vigorously constructed, Christofides' new work has a darker edge, tapping into secrets and taboos.

One side of *My Head in the Sea for a Year Now* (2013) is a drawing of a woman's head consuming food. An eel with a human face pokes out of the vessel interior, gazing at two pink nipples. Dislocated anatomy, cautionary titles and interaction of humans and animals assemble into the artist's mythological or symbolic vocabulary, one that is not moralizing, nor unduly specific. Surrealism is one art-historical precedent if we read the myriad images as reflections of the subconscious mind, brought up from a deep fund of informed sources that never obscure the essential informality and sloppy comedy of each work.

Such human-animal relationships recur in *What Does it Matter Who Eats You or When?* and *Chicken Little* (both 2014). Adapting the

A Woman Can Turn A Man Into Anything She Wants (front), 2012, stoneware, slips, washes and glaze, cone 10 reduction, 18 x 11 x 11 in (46 x 28 x 28 cm). Image credit: Richard Nicol.

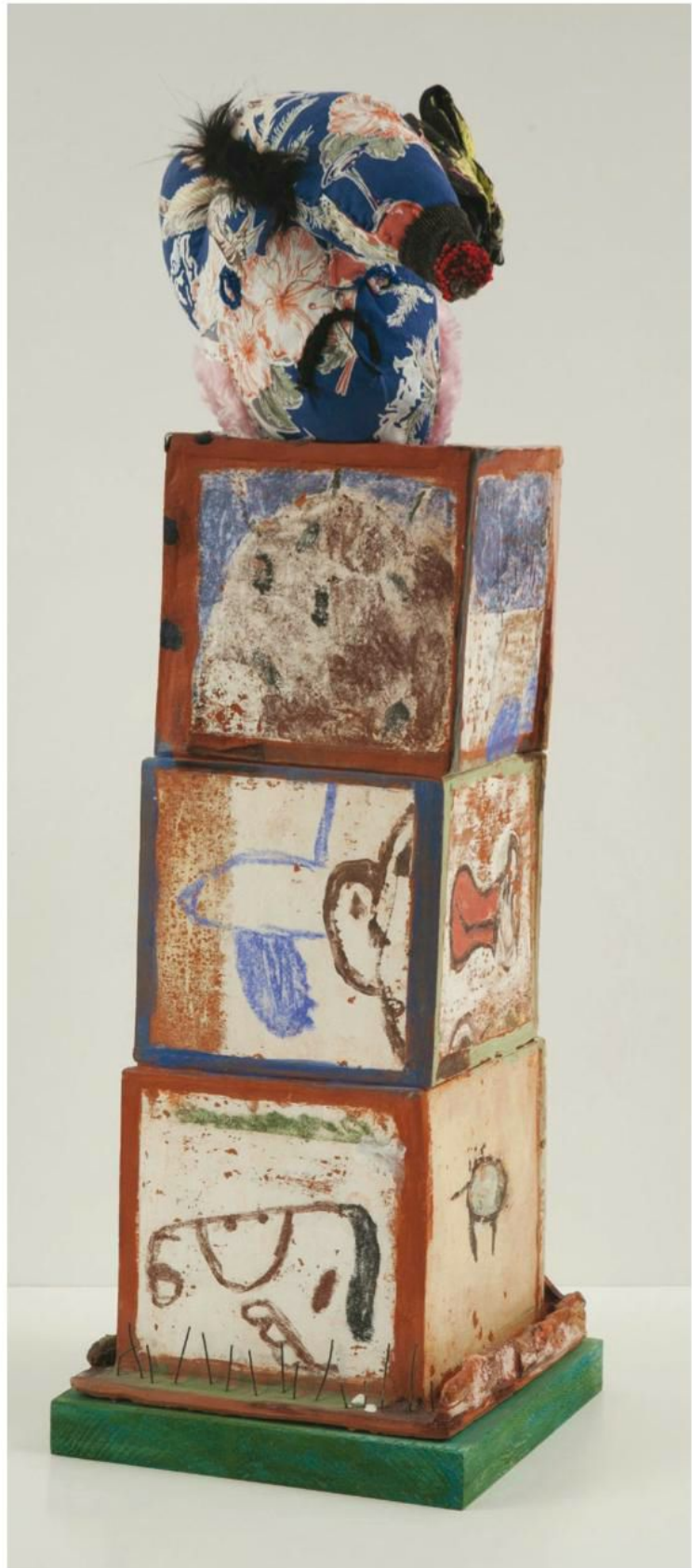


Mesoamerican tripod vessel, each of the former's three supports wear 'shoes', either for people or for an extraterrestrial navigating vehicle. The pot's decorated interior suggests mammalian viscera and udder-like appurtenances are on its underbelly. Beneath the outer lip, a blue-and-white face in relief peers out at us grinning. Awkward and gripping, such a monster also recalls surrealist sculptor Max Ernst.

Eyes without pupils in faces with gnashing teeth appear in *Jardin des Plantes* and *Lost Island* (both 2014). Covered in spots like a leopard or octopus' tentacles, *Jardin des Plantes* is stolid and dark, with colors reduced to black and white, brown and pink. The simplified reclining nudes of Rudy Autio are reduced here in *Lost Island* to big lips and teeth. Christofides' women—or feminine remnants—are more confrontational than Autio's, often dismembered and rearranged, but still pulsing with life.

Because of her background as a painter and printmaker, Christofides is comfortable with flat, two-dimensional surfaces. With a virtual *horror vacui*, every square inch seems covered. However, two works especially, *Animal(s) in the Moon* (2014) and *Shape-Shifting* (2015) confirm our examination of the painterly roots of the art of Koren Christofides. The latter work is a stack of three cubes, or dice, with a beaded, phallic topknot. The side of each cube is covered in ambiguous, glaze-spattered imagery. The shapes in question are in the process of becoming, or 'shape-shifting', in each square. *Animal(s) in the Moon* is a vase containing its own two movable flowers on long stems. Satirizing the conventional purpose of a vase, a yellow medallion sports a whimsical, sketched black animal. Collectively, the artist's notion of a 'medieval modern bestiary' accumulates an extended menagerie of non-human figures of an indeterminate nature, similar to some of the unidentifiable animals in the medieval bestiary from ancient illustrated manuscripts.

There is still a risk of incomprehensibility in such image overload, although no one ever cautioned Autio or Leedy to lighten up their over-the-top imagery. Christofides' mature style seems to be one of unconquerable excess, both in crowded compositions and potential layers of meaning. However, the difference between Leedy and Christofides is their sources of inspiration. As a former doctoral candidate in Asian art history at Ohio State University,



Shape-shifting, 2015, earthenware, slips, washes, underglaze crayons, glaze and mixed media, cone 4 oxidation, 26 x 9.5 x 9.5 in. (66 x 24 x 24 cm). Image credit: Richard Nicol.

About the Author

Matthew Kangas is an art critic based in Seattle who has contributed to Art Ltd., Art-Guide Northwest, Sculpture Magazine, The Seattle Times, American Ceramics, Artweek. He received his education from University of Oxford

Leedy's absorption of all forms of art from the East shaped and determined his practice. The younger artist's tenure in Provence, and her exposure to Picasso's Vallauris and Madoura periods, has influenced a series of sculptures that are outwardly exuberant, inwardly brooding, and Mediterranean in their mixture of vivacity and *duende*.

One final work may be a self-portrait of the artist on her path to a cultural 's paradise. *La Créatrice* (2015) is reduced to head, body and legs in the manner of West African sculpture,

hence its mask-like head and blackened skin. While a third leg sprouts pubic hair at its top, another triangular patch of hair rises above its head. An inverted bowl forms the demon's skirt. Stepping forward, announcing her progress with wide-open mouth, the sculpture's enigmatic quality only increases with the awareness of missing arms and hands.

This creator is the shape-shifter, a magical entity gathering together disparate elements, all annealed and fused in the ritualistic purification of the fiery kiln. ■



What Does It Matter Who Eats You or When, 2014, stoneware, slips, washes and glaze, cone 10 reduction.

13 x 12 x 10 in (33 x 20 x 25 cm).
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