

# *The Figure Untamed*



*Desire as Resistance*

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# *The Figure Untamed: Desire as Resistance*

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*Bowman~Penelec~Megahan Art Galleries at Allegheny College*

Cover Image: © Heyd Fontenot, *Aleks with Seven Others*, 2008, Oil on wood panel



*Encantadas Series: Crimson Jane, 2009, Stoneware*

### ***The Figure Untamed: Desire as Resistance***

Bodies are seen, experienced, and represented through a nexus of powerful cultural taboos designed to regulate pleasure. Even in our contemporary, western experience, ideas about decorum work to create unspoken myths and fantasies around bodies as loci of desire.

Those who are outspokenly positive regarding issues of pleasure, like advice columnist Dan Savage and performance artist Susie Bright, operate

outside of the mainstream. Despite the gains of recent decades we still live in a patriarchal society where those who demand a right to desire and pleasure are marginalized, where women are warned not to dress "slutty" or else risk "getting themselves raped," and where some American politicians continue to curtail access to reproductive health services for their constituents.

Those who succumb to the "pleasures of the flesh" are often seen as weak, wicked, sinful, sick, and in need of reformation. Take, for example, athlete Tiger Woods' tearful announcement that he was seeking "treatment" after his many extramarital affairs became public knowledge, or New York representative Anthony Weiner's resignation from Congress after sending images via text message of his shirtless torso and underwear-clad erection to young women who were not his wife. How different would public discourse be if those men had just come out and said, "I really enjoy sex." What if Bill Clinton had said, "Hillary and I have an open relationship?" And then there are the confusing, homophobic proclamations by presidential candidate Michelle Bachman's husband, Marcus Bachman. According to Mr. Bachman,

"Barbarians need to be educated. They need to be disciplined; and, just because someone thinks it or feels it, doesn't mean we're supposed to go down that road. That's what's called 'the sinful nature,' and we have a responsibility as parents and as authority figures not to encourage such thoughts and feelings to move into the action steps..."

The word barbarians in this case stands in for homosexuals, but by extending the logic of this argument, he could just as easily be talking about anyone who takes guiltless pleasure in his/her bodily existence. Eschewing pleasure, or at least expressing

one's reluctance to fully experience it, is not limited to right-wing political figures, partisan pundits, and religious fundamentalists. In a 1983 interview published in *Ethos*, radical theorist and writer, Michel Foucault admitted,

"I think that pleasure is a very difficult behaviour. It's not as simple as that to enjoy one's self. And I must say it's my dream. I would like and hope I die of an overdose of pleasure of any kind. Because I think it's really difficult and I always have the feeling that I do not feel the pleasure, the complete total pleasure and, for me, it's related to death. Because I think that the kind of pleasure I would consider as the real pleasure would be so deep, so intense, so overwhelming that I couldn't survive it."

Foucault expressed an anxiety shared by many of us as we engage in a system of commodification and commerce that is specifically designed to either help us ignore our own mortality, or to conceal the abject condition of our corporeality (think Botox, boob-jobs, and Viagra). What this exhibition explores instead are artworks that locate power in pleasure, celebrate sensuality of form, and show the human figure without the usual controlling devices of modesty, shame, and fear.

Erin Finley creates outrageous imagery with meticulous line work to bring the viewer into her compulsive, violent, gratifying dream-world, where pin-up girls unabashedly spread their legs to reveal that they are, in fact, menstruating; where innocent-looking nymphs torture hooded men; and where fresh-faced co-eds assault us with their casual disregard for themselves and others. Finley is influenced as much by Tarantino and Disney as by historical Dutch still-life painting and contemporary performance art. Each one of her discomfiting images implies multiple, non-linear narratives, and offers viewers an ambivalent, unsettling experience.

Heyd Fontenot jokingly claims to be "creat[ing] a little rest area on the highway of controlling, judgemental, porn-consuming, right-wing perversion." Using paint on panel and paper, Fontenot strives to allow people to approach the shame and dissatisfaction they feel about bodies and with empathy, kindness, and patience. The nude figures in his paintings offer seduction and eroticism in their power. Their focused stares reject objectification and suggest that our secrets are not to be found in our pants, but in our eyes instead.

Keira Sunshine Norton draws upon her experience as a sex worker when making her strange, anthropomorphic, ceramic sculptures. The works playfully encourage us to enjoy our animal natures, while also warning us of the Siren's song. In as much as the pieces evoke folk tales, they also suggest contemporary narratives about desire in which we are beset with confusion regarding how (or if) we might inhabit traditional roles.

The interviews that follow are a window into the artists' creative processes, and a venue for the artists to explain the framework of ideas that inform their practices. The following texts have been modified to fit the format of this publication. For the full interviews, please visit <http://webpub.allegheeny.edu/dept/art/artSite/figureuntamed.html>

Darren Lee Miller, Gallery Director

1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8ipCOEePS0>

2 "Michel Foucault: An Interview," *Ethos*, 1 (2), 1983, pp. 4-9.

Reprinted as "The Minimalist Self." In Lawrence Kritzman (Ed.), *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings of Michel Foucault, 1977-1984*, pp. 3-16. New York: Methuen, 1988. This quotation, and part of the title for this exhibition, also came to our attention indirectly from bell hooks in, "Eating the other: Desire and resistance." *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, pp. 21-39. Boston: South End Press, 1992.



Portrait of the artist in Louis Vuitton and maxi pad with wings, 2011.  
Bronze, iridescent, and black ink on paper

Darren Lee Miller: My colleagues and I admire your drawings, and we find them discomfiting.

Erin Finley: Perfect, that's part of the intention.

DLM: In one of your drawings, there's a woman bent in half wearing big, expensive, heels, a Yoko Ono bikini-top, and nothing else. Her head rests in a pool of her own hair, suggesting a surface on which she's doing yoga or some kind of head-stand-contortion. The focal points of the work are her vagina and anus. The pose is impossible, contorted, and creates interesting shapes in the negative spaces. In the foreground, we see tiny, little people, maybe a string duo accompanying the fat-lady as she sings, and the little people appear to be from the 19th century. The nude figure acknowledges them, and seems to use a toothpick to conduct, as if she's the conductor. A small audi-

ence watches from their balcony seats in one of the shoes, topped by a golden ribbon -- the only color in the image.

EF: Yes, you're right, it's really not the shoes and the mini-opera going on around her feet that are the focal point in *Operetta Yoko*. Instead, the eye is drawn upward toward those orifices and then cascades back down again, sort of traversing the body. I got the idea for the pose from Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, in a section about the 'Arabic Zero.' The negative spaces in *Operetta Yoko* are designed to be engaging to look at, in terms of space and line. The whole image is sort of a re-hash of an earlier drawing called *Woman with D'Orsay Manolo Blahniks and Bong*. Opera is an elevated art form and I loved the look of it in miniature scale, against the larger, pointedly offensive scenario over head. The gold ribbon is just a touch of ink bling.

DLM: You seem to play a lot with "High" vs. "Low."

EF: I'm really into clashes between polar opposites: high/low, right/wrong, light/dark.

DLM: Why do binary extremes interest you?

EF: I enjoy working with tension. I'm always looking for an ambivalent dynamic and so my tendency is to work with polarized ideas -- issues, motifs and so on -- because I like feeling unresolved tension in the work.

DLM: Personally, I find the images to be erotic, and I like that. I always want more eroticism in my world. I think that's why I'm so fascinated by popular advertising, and I'm surprised by what they can get away with, but the divide between high and low is often

not so clear. I'm thinking specifically of shoes, for which you seem to either have a fetish, or maybe you just use them as signifiers of some of the extremes you mentioned. As the world economy collapses, how do we feel about a \$1400 pair of shoes?

EF: I enjoy that people have different responses. Though, to be honest, I don't think of my drawings as erotic, and I generally feel disdain for erotic art. I prefer to think of my work as "Jackass," starring women. In the Seventies, Iggy Pop would cut himself onstage to make the audience feel bad. "I'm going to hurt their feelings," he'd say. I'm interested in cruelty and hurt feelings.

DLM: Well, whether you meant it to be erotic or not, your drawing of Rafael Nadal was my "Teenage Dream" moment.

EF: That one was fun to draw. I wanted a Sofia Coppola look for that one, very soft and cotton candy-ish. To go back to your earlier question about the shoes in my drawings, you are right to observe loadedness in terms of the shoes, particularly since I usually do mention brands in my titles. Manolo Blahnik and Louis Vuitton are status brands. I'd read an article in the *New York Times* about the height of women's platform heels and how this tends to have an inverse relationship to the performance of the stock market. But I also just really love shoes.

DLM: So there's some coded reference to economic conditions; perhaps, but what I meant by the high-low line being blurry for me is this: is it classy or trashy to spend more money than most people make in a week or two for a pair of Louboutins or Manolo Blahniks? Is conspicuous consumption high

or low? Or something else? One person's bling is another's gaudy ostentation.

EF: I don't imbue the work with judgments like that. Yes, the Louboutin shoes carry a whole array of associations surrounding the kind of people who wear them, but I prefer to have the work unapologetically shrug these determinations off. I like that the work becomes more problematic because I haven't taken a position on consumerism via the shoes. In this way the shoes are foremost beautiful pseudo-sculptural entities, and secondarily they function as a device for contrast against, say, some of the more foul aspects of the imagery.

DLM: Like exposed maxi-pads and glamorized drug use? And three hot girls in lingerie who are poised to torture a bound, hooded man in *Guantanamo Girls*? (Except there's an intimation that maybe he wants it).

EF: Yes, definitely those things. With that Guantanamo image, the man's foot is tilted just enough that we might suppose he's getting comfortable, but we can't be sure.

DLM: There's an implied narrative, as much as there can be in a single, still image, but I'm unsure of where it's going, and I'm definitely unsure of how I feel about it. Mostly, the beauty of it seduces me. I mean, I know how angry and betrayed I'd feel if a student of mine were sitting in the back of my class snorting cocaine off the table while I was lecturing, but your willingness to suspend judgment in favor of presenting a humorous, magical-realist tableau also seems to translate to a viewer's ambivalent experience.

EF: That's really the response I like best: that you feel ambivalent about the drawings because they are about really bad things, but they're also so measuredly calibrated that you're not entirely sure. This is why I stay away from employing symbols as tools of judgment, since those things would so transparently sway a viewer. I like for the images to imply certain ideas, but offer no certain narrative trajectory, no absolutely recognizable pattern.

DLM: How did you get started on this series? You play a lot with scale, line/shading/rendering and other compositional elements, and many of the images seem to be moments from a dream or some other reality.

EF: A lot of the drawings are autobiographical though, granted, they've been put through what Kurt Vonnegut called the "hocus-pocus laundromat." As an artist I want freedom and so I try to relinquish any feelings of guilt or judgment when I work. Humor is used to complicate the work a little, to make it harder to contend with all the gravitas. You're looking at macabre things and yet there's some slapstick element, or some tiny comedic vignette happening in a corner.

DLM: Can you also talk a little about the formal choices you make when building the drawings?

EF: I work on the drawings upside down as much as right side up. I flip them around because I love cutting intricate angles and working with negative spaces. Laying them out in pencil takes a good portion of the time spent on a whole piece, but in the end, I use a cartographer's pen to get the details. During the process stage, I'll draw

and erase a ton of times until the composition has the dynamism that I'm after, which is why the maxi pad image has all these tiny little renderings at the bottom of the page. Those are spots where I couldn't completely erase previous marks, so I drew in a lot of minutiae. Somewhere at the bottom of the page there's a tiny little man, he's a writer with a desk and a typewriter, and someone's got a gun to his head. That drawing has a bunch of small vignettes like this.

DLM: Are you working as much for visual harmony as to illustrate one moment of a narrative?

EF: Yes I would say that's true, though sometimes overthinking that stuff can be a handicap because it keeps me from, you know, being fluid about the process.

DLM: I once did some research to link Freud's theory of "The Uncanny" to humor, jokes. The basic gist is that some subjects are unspeakable in polite company and that we can only break the silence of decorum by making bawdy jokes. Think Sarah Silverman. So, in your work, *Sex By Proxy*, we see a transvestite licking a telephone receiver. The phone kind of looks like a cake, and it is held aloft by a little fairy in flip-flops and a bathing suit. At first I thought the main character was a flat-chested woman, but the bulging crotch gave her away. She's kneeling on some wrinkled fabric, a blanket maybe. There's a bucket of dead fish at the edge of the blanket. My first reactions to this image were: Wow, gorgeous! And what's with the bucket of fish?

EF: I love that idea about the uncanny being connected to humor. I recently had Eric Cameron (one of my MFA mentors) mention that a similar theme



(regarding Harold Bloom's thoughts on "strangeness") is present in my work. I added the bucket to *Sex by Proxy* because fish carry all sorts of religious meanings. I wanted them to suggest plentitude, or, as a motif, to recall some Renaissance still-life scene, but I also wanted them to appear un-special, so that despite the fact they are plainly visible in the composition, their function is only to accent the larger scene.

DLM: To what extent is it important for viewers to clearly understand the content of your work? The bucket of fish did bring Dutch still-life painting to my mind, but I'm trained as an artist.

EF: An audience doesn't need to get my work. I suppose there are specific nods to things other artists know about, and not just the history of art surrounding Dutch still-lives. One look at *Girl Doing Blow During an Art History Lecture*, reminds anyone who went to art school of getting sleepy, and maybe a little bored, during those darkened lectures.

DLM: How do you support yourself and your studio art practice?

EF: I teach art part-time with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, mostly anatomical drawing classes.

DLM: I can see how that level of observation and craft really plays out in your drawings, though I'd characterize the drawing style as self-referential. The outline-work and stippling acknowledges that it is drawing, rather than being photo-realistic rendering. We see your hand.

EF: I also look at Disney movies when I'm making my own artwork, because I love their use of elastic line. In *Sex by Proxy*, I designed the central figure by riffing off Goofy's long, elastic torso.

DLM: So, Disney and Warhol are in your "influence wheelhouse." What and who else?

EF: There's Laurel Nakadate and Attila Lukacs, but I also draw a lot from things that aren't art, which helps me stay receptive to all sorts of inspiration. I'll watch a Quentin Tarantino movie and think, "How can I make this happen as a drawing?"



*Sex By Proxy*, 2011, Ink on paper



Detail: *Five Panels, Six Stars*, 2009, Oil on wood panels

Valerie Gilman: Lets start with the curatorial premise of this exhibition. Do you agree with us?

Heyd Fontenot: Yes. Regarding sex scandals, people seem to be shocked when a public figure has an active sex life. We have so much shame associated with desire in American culture that many people can't enjoy anything sexual unless they configure it to be naughty and forbidden. There is no balance between desire and responsibility. These ideas are not approached reasonably by Conservatives. To them, it's all about control.

VG: You could also be talking about the dieter's fast and binge.

HF: Yes, it's a struggle to control the body, and the diet metaphor is good. We may have this ideal in

our minds, but it has nothing to do with nature and what will eventually come to pass.

VG: Would we lose the excitement, the heightened energy, without taboos?

HF: We've been programmed to act and react that which is oppressive and judgmental, so yes, we would lose that sense of excitement - that tension.

VG: How do you see your artwork playing with these ideas, if you do?

HF: I think that my work approaches these issues in a roundabout manner. Firstly, I feel that if an artist's works are figurative, and perhaps have a narrative or a political stance, they are in danger of becoming illustrations. I am careful not to spell out ideas so specifically, but I do "model behavior" in my work. I try to present the nude in an approachable, intimate, positive light, in opposition to presenting the figure as object. What's funny about this is that I'm realizing my hypocrisy, because what I call "controlling" in Conservatives, I call "behavior modeling" in myself, and it's two sides of the same coin.

VG: I had a lot of fun thinking about how your figures play for me. I was thinking they were character sketches of specific people engaged in specific narratives that I do not know the whole story of.

HF: I don't know the whole story either. Sometimes there's a vision, sometimes there is just a vague notion of the narrative. I don't think I'm writing the narrative as much as I'm experiencing it *with* you. I feel like these aren't completely articulated concepts that I am then recording, but that they accrue meaning *as* they are being made. Our bodies are tempo-

rary and of this world, so our bodies are actually not us completely. They are our physical place-holders for as long as we are part of the world. Going back to the idea of the human figure and how we are obsessed with our own images: how often do you look at a random pattern and see a human face? We have some inherent need to see ourselves, but with no loose ends, nothing out of place. We're more comfortable seeing ourselves as ideals. We have difficulty with our messiness and our uncertainty; and actually, I think that's why fundamentalism is so popular. It takes away questions. It's all answers, and if they don't have the answers, then it's God's plan.

VG: I can see something in your work and say it relates to my life, but it has nothing to do with me.

HF: I want to help people approach their own trauma with more kindness and patience. By trauma, I'm referring to how much shame and fear and dissatisfaction we feel with ourselves and our bodies, and how unfortunate that is.

VG: I see your need to make work that responds to some of the challenges of our lives, the messiness, the not knowing, and the compulsion to search instead of believing that we have the answers. On the other hand, there's the heightened sexual energy that comes with working with taboos.

HF: I've just created a little "rest area" on the highway of controlling, judgmental, porn-consuming, right-wing perversion. Certain things are sexy because someone else has described them as "wrong," but I also think there is terrific excitement about really seeing someone, and in turn, having someone really know you. What is missing from so much sexually-themed work is a sense of intimacy. Once

a woman told me, "I think your work is sexy, but it's not because of the nudity, it's because of the expressions." I loved that, and I think she totally understood my work. Our secrets are not in our pants, our secrets are in our eyes.

VG: I was just thinking about how many of your figures look out of at the viewer.

HF: I found it important when I first began working with the figure to not present the models as passive. "Oh, you want to look at me? I'm going to look back at you." They reject objectification.

VG: Much like Ingres' *Odalisque*.

HF: That was a scandalous painting in its day! I don't ask my models to "make love to the camera." I don't want them to act, I want them to be. In certain situations I will ask them to strike a particular pose, but I want the experience of modeling to be one that focuses on their being. I am careful not to sexualize my sessions with models. I think there is a popular myth of the artist being "involved" with his/her models. For the sake of up-ending that narrative, I don't often enter into sexually explicit subject matter in my work.

VG: I have wondered why I do not experience them as titillating, but rather as direct and vulnerable. Maybe vulnerable is the wrong word.

HF: Well, they *are* nude, and there's something inherently vulnerable about being uncovered. But perhaps not entirely vulnerable because they also seem to be self-possessed.

VG: They are not *just* nude.

HF: Right, nudity can be a metaphor, because what they are is "available" and "present." Some people will hesitate to model, saying "Do I have to be naked?" and I usually counter with, "No, you *get* to be naked." We are so hung up about being nude. I'm including myself, because if it weren't a powerful subject for me, why would I have engaged in this work for so long? I feel that some of my models have gone through a major transition when modeling for me. It's a powerful thing to throw out your fears about being vulnerable and exposed, and I think it's revelatory to find out that you may be exposed, but you aren't "over-exposed."

VG: Is there a moral issue with being "involved" with the model?

HF: My models are people in my life, and among those are people with whom I have had intimate relationships, but the models have to trust me, not just show up and take off their clothes. They have to *let* me see them, and I spend hours looking at someone as I'm rendering their image. I get to know them in a very specific way - not just by becoming familiar with their physical features, but I find that I meditate over their images. I didn't realize this at first, but by asking someone to model I'm agreeing to spend a long time with them. They leave the studio after an hour or two, but then I could be with their image for weeks, months, years, studying them. They are my focus.

VG: And when you see them again, after working with the images for a long time, has your relationship to them or your perception of them changed?

HF: Oh, absolutely. They are strangely familiar,

even when it's someone that's been in my life for a while, and it is jarring when I see them again. In our regular lives, we just don't spend that kind of time focused on someone in the same way. Sometimes, I think the work becomes even more real for me than the person. Sometimes I have the impulse to say, "Hey! I have a drawing in my studio that looks just like you...!"

VG: At the beginning of the interview you talked about the figure as a mirror. Do you think it is really possible for an artist to see beyond his own projection? Is it even important for him to do so in order to see the another persons reality?

HF: Well, it's all through our own filters. What I see may be specific to me, and this would *not* be a universal truth, but my experience in reporting would be a truth for me.

VG: I am thinking about the way in which looking and really seeing another person by painting them is also a way to see ourselves.

HF: Yes, absolutely, I think that's it. I'm sure that I like biographies, because in truth, I'm trying to find my *own* way through the world, and so I'm projecting myself all along *their* story. And in looking at portraits of people you don't know, people you may never meet, there is still something compelling. What is that?

VG: As audience, we get to project ourselves into your paintings and understand ourselves a bit better for the looking through a different lens.

HF: Yes, and I think that's actually been useful to me in my practice as an artist, and it's helped me recruit

models. They *can* see themselves in my work. It's like watching a ride at the amusement park: why just watch, when you can ride? I'm afraid that as I get older and lose more and more impulse control that I will start to interrupt plays and movies and performances, because I will want to join in. I can't just watch, I'll want to participate.

VG: I thought you were supposed to gain impulse control with age. It is a great image of someone climbing up on stage to be a part of it all.

HF: I think it's a bell curve. First, you don't have impulse control as a child. Then you are socialized and learn to be obedient. And finally you realize it isn't so important, you have limited time so, "Fuck it, I'm going to do what I want to do." And again we find ourselves at this topic of control. Being controlled or exercising self-control. Maybe this struggle is supposed to exist. If it's a moral question, then you have to say, "God granted us free will." The infuriating thing is that there are people who deny our free will and want to dictate "proper behavior."



*Angry Johnny*, 2007, Oil on canvas



*Encantadas Series: Peachy Jean, 2010, Stoneware*

Valerie Gilman: I thought we could start with a little bit of your background. I see that you finished an undergrad degree in Anthropology with a minor in Art, went back for BFA a few years later, and then went for the MFA at Indiana University. Can you tell me a little more about the personal journey and the decisions that you made?

Keira Sunshine Norton: It took me a while to commit to an academic career as an artist. I had the impulse to create -- to draw, sculpt, make jewelry since I was a kid -- but felt more secure going into an academic field, because I guess I wasn't ready for the commitment of pursuing art. I also spent much of my adolescence and early twenties battling depression and low self-esteem, and trying to somehow discover the key to existence through self-indulgence/self-destructive lifestyle choices. I worked for several years as a stripper, which was in some ways a waste, but has become a powerful

source of inspiration for my work. There is almost something karmic about it.

VG: Tell me more about that sense of inspiration coming from the experience, and what you mean by it being karmic.

KSN: I knew from an early age that I wanted to be an artist, but, naturally, I had not yet found my struggle, or the thing I wanted my work to be about. This would have to come with experience. It sounds easy to say in hindsight, but I was also depressed as a teen, and so my motivation to create would come and go. As I struggled with feelings of low self-worth and weirdness, I started being labeled as "sexy," and found my sexual attractiveness to be a source of confusion and power. I kind of knew that I would somehow utilize this power, that it would be something I "did," but that it was problematic and not an end in itself. The time I spent in the sex industry was in many ways wasteful. I didn't save any money, I didn't concentrate on academics, I was in some harmful and stupid relationships, but I knew that it would give me some knowledge I needed, some part I could take away when I was through, and I have. I guess I consider it Karmic because I felt that I had to do it in order to understand what I'm doing now. It was a cause and effect relationship. Despite my issues, I always felt confident that I would find my way back to art.

VG: I have spoken with women who said sex work was empowering, that there is a way in which owning the stage with your sexual presence is powerful. It does seem complex though. Can you tell me about how you see these pieces playing with the ideas?

KSN: For me, these sculptures transmit a sense of the power of the seductive woman, both individually, and multiplied several times as it is in the club setting, where you have several simultaneous public and private performances. When working in such a competitive setting, you spend as much time observing other performers as you do wrapped up in your own performance. However, when most people encounter my sculptures, they probably do not put them in this context. The essential impact I aim to make is that they be both sexually captivating, and confusing. Seductive and dangerous. I want them to remind the viewer of his/her own animal nature.

VG: I see them as both very provocative and also very approachable. In a way, I think that the animal aspect makes them feel less threatening, more mythic, less taboo. They allow me to enjoy my sexual animal nature. I am intrigued by the choice of the dolphin. In your artist's statement you talk about the "Legendary half-human, half-dolphin tricksters of the Amazon river, Los Encantados (the Enchanted Ones). Can you tell me more about the legend and how your work relates to it?

KSN: Yes, they are approachable, even humorous. I'm making fun of the whole sexy woman thing, and also saying that it can be fun and powerful. I chose dolphins as a subject of exaggerated sexuality because they are one of the few species of animals that are both self-aware and highly sexual. The danger that my pieces convey is supposed to come from their teeth, and I've heard (usually men) say that they felt them to be disturbing, though this is mostly due to their overtly sexual nature. The legend of the Encantado comes from the Amazon regions, where the Boto, or Amazon River dolphin

lives. There are many versions of this legend, but my favorite is a popular one, wherein the Boto transforms into a tall, light-skinned man, who wears a big woven hat to conceal the blow hole in his forehead. This good-looking, charming man likes to party, and he usually leaves the party with a woman, whom he transports to the underwater regions, the Encante, a kind of watery paradise. Though it involves a male figure, I connect this with mermaid fables, which warn about the consequences of temptation, and the fear that too much pleasure could be dangerous. I particularly enjoy this version for its humorous details and modern context.

VG: In the Boto legend aren't there also love children that come of the escapades in pleasure?

KSN: Yes, I think so, but my Encantadas are not these. They refer more to the partially transformed animal or human. They are chimeras, siren-like.

VG: The sirens were fabled to lead sailors to their deaths on the rocky islands as I recall. Do you have a sense of the narratives that your female version of the Encatados (las Encantadas?) are playing in? How does the female version differ from the traditional male version of the story, and how might it function in our culture?

KSN: My Encantadas are not intended to function strictly in any one specific narrative, but a modern siren narrative from my own experience might play out as follows: a cute stripper takes money from a lonely customer. She doesn't hurt him physically, but he could be emotionally wounded, and feel as exploited as she does. A continuation of the war

of the sexes, but also commentary on the performative nature of gender. The stripper plays some form of extreme femininity; the customer plays the dominant through his ability to provide.

VG: So is it important to you that the viewer see these in the context of stripper and john?

KSN: Not necessarily, they can attach their own narrative; but, the basic male/female archetypes are the same. I want my work to appeal to people, regardless of their experiences, by raising questions about these archetypes, and by expressing basic themes like the mutability between animal and human nature, and the strangeness of sexual desire.

VG: I am thinking about what you said in your artist statement, "By merging the human with the animal, the beautiful with the bestial, I aim to articulate a feminist stance more humorous than didactic. Yet my critique is motivated by earnest questions about the relationship between sexual exhibitionism and empowerment." Tell me more about how you see feminism today, or how you position your work in a feminist dialogue?

KSN: By using an animal figure to represent the female nude, I aim to engage a feminist response, which has, with the benefit of my words, been a positive one. Feminism is very important today as always, but mainstream heterosexual feminism seems very muted right now. I agree with Darren's points about the importance of embracing pleasure, and how repressed we still are. I spoke of my ambivalence about stripping- a lot of that comes out of the fact that as a society we are still contending with the fear of sin.

VG: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about heterosexual feminism as opposed to I am guessing queer feminism?

KSN: Obviously the feminist movement is not exclusively hetero-identified, but it seems to me that the GLBTQ movement (of which hetero women are a part) has a stronger pulse right now than the mainstream feminist movement. Of course, these movements are increasingly melding, and the ideas that I find most interesting come from this mix: ideas about the mutability and performative aspects of gender and sexuality, and about the ways in which the separation between sex and gender expression is relevant to the conditions of women's everyday lives, both within and outside the GLBTQ community.

KSN: It seems like a lot of heterosexual women are disclaiming feminism.

VG: Why do you think heterosexual women are disclaiming feminism and why do you think feminism is still alive for you, if it is?

KSN: In my experience at universities in the midwest, you have to really search to find someone who'll come out and say she's a feminist. It seems like there are a lot of people who see feminism as either a pass for women who act "unethically," or a form of political correctness. Of course, feminism can be both and neither of these things. I think the turn away from interest in feminism is part of the conservative spirit of the youngest generation, exacerbated by our poor economy, which makes people a little less idealistic. Feminism is still alive for me because I feel burned by male privilege, by gender entrapment, and by misogyny and homophobia still being casually accepted prejudices.



VG: How does this suffering in our genders relate to the performative nature of gender that you refer to earlier?

KSN: I think that it is very empowering (and confusing at times) for us to realize the non-essential nature of gender. Yes, our sex does influence the roles we take, but these change according to our own choices based on situations, not to mention hormonal aspects of aging and pregnancy, etc. We suffer less when we can poke fun at these roles, or at least choose how to make use of them.

VG: Thus the making fun of the mud flap girl and the other classic sexualized roles. I love how playful this feminist critique is.

KSN: It almost seems as if there is a bit of built in tongue-in-cheek mockery in some of the classic pin-ups themselves, especially in the work of Gil Elvgren, though maybe I give too much credit.

VG: I wonder if we can shift gears for a moment and talk about some of the more practical ends of the work. Can you describe briefly how you constructed the forms?

KSN: I built these pieces solid using an additive method, then cut them apart, hollowed them out, and re-attached the pieces.

VG: Did they have any armature structure?

KSN: Maybe one or two of them.

VG: The close ups on your web site show a very beautiful glaze surface?

KSN: This is a glaze recipe that I developed from a I found online, maybe from Val Cushing. I added a few things to bring down the temperature, and to cause very slight reticulation. I tested its application many times before applying it to my thesis work. I want to stress the importance of getting technical experience (in addition to life experience), as a means to finding your voice as an artist. It is frustrating when you know that you are capable of making the work you want to make, but not until you develop more skills. Ceramics takes loads of patience, and the fact is that you have to choose what you are going to become good at. You can't expect to be great at everything; you must devote major time to a limited thing to make it really good.



*Encantadas Series: Cherry Baby, 2009, Stoneware*

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

**Erin Finley** is an emerging Canadian artist whose drawings have been exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum (New York), Sienna Art Institute (Sienna, Italy), Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center (Buffalo, NY, USA), Femina Potens (San Francisco, USA), Syracuse University (Syracuse, NY, USA), Sarah Lawrence College (Bronxville, NY, USA), the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (Toronto, ON, CA), Peak Gallery (Toronto, ON, CA), Paul Petro Special Projects (Toronto, ON, CA), the Nickel Arts Museum (Calgary, ON, CA) and others. In 2004, she earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada. She has recently received grants and support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Toronto Arts Council, and the Ontario Arts Council.

**Heyd Fontenot** is a designer, art director, producer, filmmaker and painter. His work has been shown at James Baird Gallery (Austin, TX, USA and Newfoundland, CA), Lawndale Art Center (Houston, TX, USA), Ninth Street Market (New York, NY, USA), Green Papaya Art Projects (Manila, Philippines), Artisima (Turin, Italy), and many others. He is represented by Inman Gallery in Houston, Texas, USA. He currently lives and works in Austin, Texas.

**Keira Norton** is a clay and mixed media artist whose works have been exhibited at the Fuller Gallery (Bloomington, IN, USA), ROYGBIV Gallery (Columbus, OH, USA), the Ohio Art League (Columbus, OH, USA) and others. Originally from Buffalo, New York, Keira recently received her MFA in ceramics from Indiana University in Bloomington.

All images in this catalogue courtesy of the artists.

## ABOUT THE CURATORS

**Valerie Gilman** is a clay and mixed media artist whose works have been shown at the Erie Art Museum (Erie, PA, USA), the Arts Center of Estes Park (Estes Park, CO, USA), Arts on 5th (San Bernardino, CA, USA), and others. She teaches in the department of Art at Allegheny College, where she is the technical assistant for sculpture.

**Darren Lee Miller** is an artist and activist whose works have been shown at the Erie Art Museum (Erie, PA, USA), the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center (New York, NY, USA), Birmingham-Southern College (Birmingham, AL, USA), the Art Institute of Boston (Boston, MA, USA), Like the Spice Gallery (Brooklyn, NY, USA), and others. He is director of the *Bowman-Penelec-Megahan* Art Galleries of Allegheny College, where he teaches photography and seminar classes.

**Allegheny College**, founded in 1815, is a private liberal arts school with a total undergraduate enrollment of about 2100 students. The *Bowman-Penelec-Megahan* Art Galleries of Allegheny College present exhibitions and other visual arts programming for diverse audiences including students, educators, emerging and established artists, and other residents of northwestern Pennsylvania. Sponsored by the College's Art Department, gallery programs are designed to promote active learning and interdisciplinary exploration of the visual arts and culture. All programs are offered free of charge.

# *The Figure Untamed: Desire as Resistance*

January 24 - March 11, 2012

*Bowman~Penelec~Megahan Art Galleries at Allegheny College*

**Opening Reception**

Wednesday, January 25th, 7:00 - 9:00PM

**Closing Reception**

Friday, March 9th, 5:00 - 8:00PM

Doane Hall of Art (a wing of the campus center)  
east of North Main St, between College and John Sts

814.332.4365

Free and open to the public

## **GALLERY HOURS**

12:30 - 5:00 PM, Tuesday - Friday

1:30 - 5:00 PM, Saturday

2:00 - 4:00 PM, Sunday

Closed Monday

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## The Figure Untamed: Desire as Resistance Exhibition Dates: January 24 - March 11, 2012

- Wednesday, January 25  
Opening Reception and Artists' Talks  
with Erin Finley and Keira Sunshine Norton
- Friday, March 9  
Closing Reception and Lecture with Patricia Ulbrich,  
Curator, *In Sisterhood: the Women's Movement in Pittsburgh*
- Saturday, March 10  
Activism and Advocacy Workshop with Patricia Ulbrich

### GALLERY HOURS

12:30 - 5:00 PM, Tuesday - Friday

1:30 - 5:00 PM, Saturday

2:00 - 4:00 PM, Sunday

Closed Monday

Groups and tours welcome

Please call ahead to confirm

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