

Collection in Focus: Richard Shaw

February 12–April 27, 2014

Richard Shaw (b. 1941) is among key artists in the di Rosa collection—including Viola Frey, Robert Arneson, James Melchert, and Robert Hudson—who were part of a major change in trajectory for ceramics in the 1960s and 1970s. Along with his contemporaries, Shaw not only challenged the relegation of ceramics as craft versus fine art, but also chose the mundane objects of everyday life as his subject matter. The skill, wit, and verisimilitude in his work have established him as one of the most revered artists in contemporary ceramics.

Trompe l'oeil is an easy descriptor for the mechanics of Shaw's work, but perhaps not for its intent. Disguising porcelain in the body of books, pencils, cans, cigarettes, and other unremarkable objects, the artist allows his audience the opportunity to discover his medium, elevating it through revelation. The choice to depict the common object with a common medium is no mistake. What Shaw requires of his porcelain, he also requires of his objects—that they become extraordinary and versatile while remaining entirely subtle. The real trick of his work is his ability to subvert the humble qualities of medium and object, to seduce the viewer with promises of passive curiosities, while quietly leading them down a rabbit hole of juxtaposition and discovery.

The techniques Shaw employs to achieve the characteristic hyperrealism of his work are a combination

of molds filled with porcelain slip and silk-screened decals. Over the years, the number of object molds has increased exponentially, allowing Shaw to cast a multitude of objects that will be stacked, balanced, and assembled to create an altogether new narrative. In his figures, Shaw hints at the character of a person through the objects used in their construction—the seemingly random stacked objects are anything but things of chance. Contrast creates a rich world of symbol in the realm of the formerly mundane.

As a ceramicist and sculptor, Shaw has methodically insisted on crossing the arbitrary line between art and craft with a keen sense of humor and history. His deep grounding in and knowledge of tradition references everything from Baroque tromp l'oeil paintings to contemporary body art. Shaw's ability to seamlessly transverse across decades of iconographic detritus is informed by a recognition of a much broader culture of construction and illusion. In this sense, ordinary objects are the most perfect tool of choice. This selection of Shaw's work from the di Rosa collection was chosen for each piece's ability to highlight the artist's exceptional capacity for deception and revelation.



Richard Shaw
Muffin and Book Jar, 1987
Porcelain, decal overglazes, and china paint, 9 x 10.5 x 8 in.
di Rosa collection, Napa



Richard Shaw
Big Nose, 1997
Porcelain and overglaze transfers, 59 x 25.5 x 10 in.
di Rosa collection, Napa