



Linda S Fitz Gibbon

Beautifully Grotesque

An article by Julia Couzens

BEAUTY, MONSTROSITY, MYSTERY AND SUBTLE SEXUAL undertones are just some of the qualities present in Linda Fitz Gibbon's breakthrough body of work presented in a solo exhibition at the Shimo Center for the Arts, Sacramento, California, US in August 2014. Fitz Gibbon has had an extensive West Coast exhibition history and has been known for making narrative-based figurative objects grounded in myth, personal stories and satire. This new work is a radical departure. Aggressively manipulating the muddy properties of clay, Fitz Gibbon now pushes, pulls, pinches and clobbers her material into abstract forms standing on the cusp between seduction and repulsion.

Born in New York in 1958, Fitz Gibbon earned a BA in art history and music at Yale University. Since the late 1980s she has been living and working in Davis, California the infamous home of California Funk that emerged in early 1960s, and where Robert Arneson remains a dominating influence to regional ceramic sculptors. But although Fitz Gibbon considers Arneson an early influence, she has always worked towards a mature voice distinctly her own.

Fitz Gibbon's early work employed skilled, if laboured *trompe l'oeil* representations of plates

and platters of fruits and vegetables piled, ala Arcimboldo, into humorous depictions of faces and figures. As she continued working within the figurative tradition she began making forms drawn from high and low culture, such as inflatable pool toys and Wedgwood china. Organised into scenarios of seduction, notably *Leda and the Swan*, upending what is normally associated with toy ducks and swans, she used myth to expose our human condition and to discourse on power.

In 2011 Fitz Gibbon returned to school to earn her MFA from the Art Institute of Boston/Lesley University. In the course of that program and with a desire to place her work within the context of contemporary sculpture she relinquished formal control, methodical layered glazes and the preconceived ideas she had used to ground her previous work. Opening herself to the process and working with the properties of clay – its gritty, muddy, sticky materiality, its acute elasticity – her attention has moved down into her hand as the means for revealing the content of her work; work that is now coming from inside sources. Fitz Gibbon challenges the deeply held belief of many that conceptual art is cognitively superior to work that



Facing page: *Shimo Center for the Arts, Installation View.*
 Top left: *Doppelgänger I (Detail).* 2013. Ceramic, steel cable, brass and steel ball chain, boat cleat. Ceramic measurement: 34 x 10 x 12 in.
 Above: *Slither (Detail).* 2012. Ceramic, welded steel and wood. 45 x 17 x 10 in.

Below left: *Portrait of the Artist: Linda & the Swan.* 2011. Ceramic. 12.5 x 13 x 3 in.

Below right: *The Artist's Signature.* *Doppelgänger and Slither can be seen in the facing page installation shot.*

is made by hand, each piece unique and imperfect. She is right on time: her work is part of the rising wave of sculpture in which the artist exploits skills, the intuitive and the ad hoc. 'Doing' has taken precedence over an approach based on theory or academics; and meaning is to be found in formal qualities, such as shape, material and colour.

As demonstrated in *Slither*, a salient feature of Fitz Gibbon's work is that it is both beautiful and grotesque. Supported within a circular steel frame, undulating ceramic forms appear to be writhing either up or down out of its metal support. The aura of unease that emanates from the sculpture is caused, in part, by questioning whether the support is a prosthetic device or an imprisoning cage. The work possesses a Gothic theatricality as the fragmented and contorted forms present effects of both horror and enchantment. The glazes swirl, co-mingle and secrete from orifices, coating her forms with fleshy sensuality reminiscent of Fragonard with its soft pinks, peaches and icy blues.

Doppelgänger I, is suspended mid-air by pulleys and wire, its tortured ceramic form punctured and twisted, dripping metal chains from protuberances, bulbous and udder-like. As with *Slither* it resonates with the aura of performance, implicating the possibility of the viewer raising or lowering the form, as if it might be a sort of abject ontological device. Yet the greenish glaze suggests the interior light of a late-night room, reminiscent of Frances

Bacon's strange chambers. And we cannot take our eyes away. The tension in this work between the artificial and the organic is another theme present in all of Fitz Gibbon's work.

These forms feel as if they were acted upon by an alien other, and hold the same nervous charge as a Cronenberg film. We are living in a time of cultural pessimism and spiritual malaise. The odd distorted, but inescapably compelling forms of Linda Fitz Gibbon's work turn the inside out, showing our fragile and increasingly vulnerable humanity.



Julia Couzens is an artist who writes about contemporary California art. She has written catalogue essays for the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento; Riverside Art Museum, Riverside; the Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena and the Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art, Las Vegas, Nevada. She currently writes exhibition reviews for SQUARECYLINDER, Northern California's leading online arts publication. All photos by Izzy Schwartz.