

TOBY BUONAGURIO

Clay art is literally as old as the hills and riverbeds from which clay comes. The most malleable art material there is (it can take any shape and retain it forever), it's also the most permanent since it's as easily repairable as it is breakable. Ancient though its history may be, some of the newest, most futuristic products of contemporary studios—like Toby Buonagurio's streamlined hotrods, rhinestone cowboys, and glittering robots—are being made of fired clay.

A material so cheap and versatile should seem an obvious favorite among sculptors, but clay's longstanding associations with craft and utilitarian functions, as well as traditional limits on size, have tended to dampen their enthusiasm for the medium. The use of molds to cast duplicates has borne the additional stigma of not even being handcrafted. Three factors have changed this situation dramatically in the last 25 years, making clay a highly attractive medium for sculptors like Buonagurio: first, larger kilns and greater expertise have all but eliminated the size limit; second, Pop art and verism demanded the machined look and the easy replication mold casts so readily supply; third, a rising disdain for the "well-crafted" look and a desire

to junk the rules of traditional ceramics have gained momentum since their beginnings in California during the '50s. Buonagurio takes full advantage of the liberties these developments encourage a sculptor to take today in the clay medium.

Buonagurio fashions her outrageous pieces out of low-fire white-ware that has been slip cast (thinned clay is poured into a negative mold, then fired after drying and hardening enough for removal), as well as handbuilt. She glues the fired casts together with epoxy, then assembles these units into the whole piece by a series of ingenious interlockings once the underglazes and glazes (especially the lusters she adores) have been fired as well. Amid final touches of acrylic she airguns flocking and metalflake glitter on for highlights; finally, she glues on rhinestones to highlight the highlights. It is as though once she commits the pure white-ware to color she goes berserk, clutched in the paranoia of horror-vacui, fearing that one small glimmer of the white-ware (the clay structure) will remain to do her in.

Buonagurio's gold-lustered disco-boots and pink velvet-flocked flamingos are so encrusted with embellishment they seem more pictorial than sculptural. Ritual ob-

jects for the bored, TV-bred, surface-oriented punk generation of the '80s, their fetishistic flashiness represents a 360° turnabout from the cooled-out days of Minimalism and even most post-Minimalism. The feast she provides for the eyes must give a hearty dose of indigestion to visual faculties adjusted to monochrome grids and serial structures. Her irreverent sense of humor, and her fusion of Pop, Art Deco, and Surrealism, would lead one to think she belongs with the California school of iconoclastic ceramists, but she was born and trained right here in New York. On closer sight, an eastern-urban aura can be detected floating around her pieces. The hot and garish glow seems closer to Alfonso Ossorio than Peter Voulkos; the caricatural quirkiness closer to Saul Steinberg (who also adores shoes) than to Robert Arneson; and the obsessional fetishism of personal artifacts closer to that of Richard Lindner than, say, Marilyn Levine or Chris Unterseher.

Guns, particularly ray guns (sci-fi hard ones, not Oldenburgian softies) cast from dimestore toys; flamingos, toucans, and fish cast from family kitsch treasures; dice; stars which abound in piece after piece, their meaning altered by each new location—

all figure prominently in her drawings. The futuristic lines of force, windswept like feathers or scarves in the breeze, which characterize her robots, shoes, and monuments also provide the dynamism that activates her symmetrical, tightly structured drawings. This neo-Futurism (which she is not the only contemporary artist to rediscover) is so basic to her conception that when *Star Wars* came out after she'd done a whole series of wing-footed, mechanical, monster-faced robots in 1978, she was afraid to see the movie lest her images be shattered for her ever after. *Bionic Toby with Repair Kit and Replacement Parts*, which she made last year in response to a special exhibition theme, and which was a particularly and painfully revealing piece for her to execute, will probably also be mistakenly seen as a response to a popular commercial product rather than the idiosyncratic expression of a deeply integrated personal aesthetic that it is.

Followers of her work will not be surprised by *Dusy—Custom Street Rod II* in this show since it was preceded by *Custom Street Rod I* in small scale and by *Rain Rod* earlier this year, as well as by a wildly "striped" *Numbers Car* back in 1974. *Dusy* is by far Buonagurio's most ambitious work to date, however. Its nearly 8-foot length and the ceramics engineering that size demanded, as well as its accurately scaled detailing and minutely replicated engine, are unprecedented in her work, and probably also in the field of ceramics. It is a true labor of love, in response to the original automobile's great beauty; halfway between *Rain Rod* and *Custom Street Rod*, it is one of the more subdued works she has executed. *Dusy* is a monument both to American automotive engineering and design and to modern ceramics at the same time. Though nothing like it has ever been done before in the medium, I won't be too surprised if there aren't offspring of many different sorts to drive this daring doozie of an idea along the yellow brick roads of the future. (Westbroadway, April 2-30)



Toby Buonagurio, Rain Rod, 1980. 18" long. Courtesy Westbroadway Gallery.

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