

Ordinary/Extraordinary:
Ann Agee, Aric Obrosey, Holly Zausner

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art



Ann Agee, *Woman with Striped T-Shirt*, 1996, porcelain, 10 1/8" x 4" x 3", courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

Ordinary/Extraordinary

As we careen toward the millennium mark, listmakers are busily scratching out the litanies of important moments and crucial turning points of our eras, trying to decide which events define our decade, century (and, yes, our millennia, although that may be too much of a mouthful). Vietnam, AIDS, the Kennedy assassination, the Stonewall riots, Lady Di's death – all vie with one another to be "the" crucial event. Pop culture episodes, the Beatles, *Laugh-In*, *Never Mind the Bollocks*, *Ab Fab* – all inhabit the stage as the proper commentary or soundtrack that defined how we thought about and experienced those times we shared.

I hope amid all these suggestions to make a case for *Pee Wee's Playhouse*. Between the first broadcast and the day when Pee Wee's creator was caught with his pants down, as a nation we believed that it was indeed possible that every item in our houses could talk if you only added a "Y" to the end of their names. A chair was mute; Chairy could talk, and the same was true when the globe became Globey.

Few of us ever bought the network's line that this was a children's show – the humor was far too sophisticated and ribald for any tyke to fully comprehend. It was a near-perfect expression of our

collective dream childhood in which friends were omnipresent, our ids were desublimated and magic oozed through mundanities. After Pee Wee's bust (which for the zeitgeist of both the times and the show seemed a perfect coda) and a parental crackdown on onanistic excess, the transformational logics of the show seemed to retreat to the few more private safe spaces, game reserves for our unfettered imaginations. Three such spaces must have been the studios of Ann Agee, Aric Obrosey and Holly Zausner.

Setting the stage for this explosion of reinventiveness is an overwhelming sense that there exists at some common level a shared concept of normalcy, and that it is a fragile construct indeed. This norm could at any time fold back in on itself and become the antithesis of itself – some crazy inverted world in which every boring thing could be as spectacular as a drag queen.

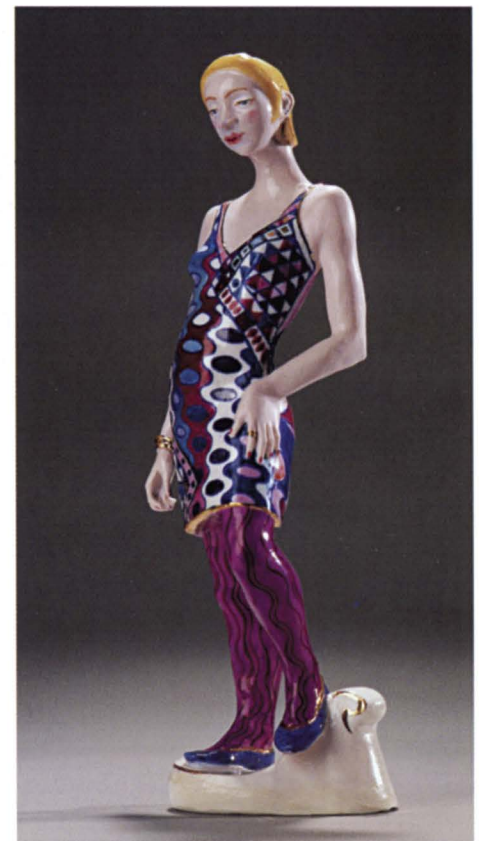
The "Normal" for these three is referenced, in order to be upended, by one of its most ubiquitous expressions – interior decorating. In one's home decor there is always a battle between a desire to be and appear normal and to be and appear special, artistic and unique, and normalcy is almost always winning, at least in terms of estimatable percentages. Outside of art school dorm rooms, in which sleeping on a bunch of bean bag chairs, painting the walls and furniture black and screwing a dinette set upside down to the ceiling (all taken from dorm rooms I have seen) can appear routine, 99 percent of our choices are for regular things in the assigned places. As we age, we adopt more normal patterns of behavior for the simple reason of desiring comfort and a good night's sleep. Primarily, we use little nonfunctional things to express our uniqueness, and the parameters of normalcy are more lenient in this area. A friend in Philadelphia began collecting '70s acrylic grapes. After amassing about 30 sets, they became the most memorable thing in his apartment, and that too was within, if barely, the boundaries of normal decor. We hope with a few carefully considered choices of decorative objects to add to our living rooms the joyful wackiness that Pee Wee captured in his playhouse.

With these three artists, things are generally right at the normal/not-normal borderline. If we forget for a moment that these things are manufactured as art and take them as the design items they mimic, they stand right at the point when you would begin to get nervous about the

person whose house you are visiting.

Ann Agee's figurines are exemplary of such bifurcated effects. "Cute" they are ... at first. Porcelain figurines on bases, they seem to yearn to join their sisters and brethren in the knickknack-laden apartments of grand dames and theatrical queens. For figurines are always theatrical. They never stand as if they are waiting for a bus, but Agee's walk a fine line. They are conspicuously contemporary: none are dressed as characters out of the commedia dell'arte, but they are dressed for something special – even if only for the drama in their little porcelain heads. While, of course, blue jeans and a white t-shirt (the international signifiers of casual but sexy attire) are every bit as understandable as costume as a top hat and feather boa, the costumes that Agee chooses for her figures set a very particular mood. Many are indeed found in the world, and are slightly eccentric choices in attire that Agee swears she spots in her Brooklyn nabe, and they bespeak a desire on the part of the wearer, flesh or figurine, to prettify, to add color, to disavow the dominant '90s minimal asceticism of black, navy and gray, simple lines and few accessories.

What makes them different from figurines we recall from museum period rooms is that their personages seem



Ann Agee, *Woman in Pucci-style Dress*, 1997, porcelain, 11 3/4" x 4 1/2" x 3 1/2", courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

magically grabbed from the street, and that quality has a most unsettling effect. We cannot avoid trotting out the over-used notion of the Freudian Unheimlich (Uncanny), and I must say that these perverse, three-dimensional snapshots in contemporary garb do creep me out. There is a long history of media representation of shrunken folks. Pee Wee had that talking genie's head in a box, and in countless B pictures of my youth, mad scientists, aliens or sorcerers succeeded in shrinking our heroes and heroines and placing them in beakers or bell jars.

I would feel unnerved if my likeness were placed on a mantle – frozen for eternity – wearing an orange safety vest, gold shirt and purple striped pants, as is one of the few male characters in Agee's ever-growing cast of players. The female figurines risk joining another already known category of objects – dolls, which are, along with mannequins, the prime exemplars of the uncanny. They avoid this due to their overwhelming sense of ordinariness, and their exuberant aura of activeness. Where a traditional figurine might at most make a theatrical bow, these ladies look like they are on their way to do something, go to the gym, go shopping. One carries a baby, some snap photos. Despite recent revisions, Barbies still are essentially best at posing for stills (not even runway), displaying their hyper-real bods. Agee's characters look as if in life they rarely get to sit still and take a load off, which makes their being frozen in time all the more bizarre.

Of course, figurines have little currency among hip decorators, except in those period homes that get high marks for fussiness. But Agee sees them in her Italian and Latino Brooklyn nabe, arranged like little dioramas on windowsills for passersby to admire. Still, were I calling on a friend and the house was suddenly populated by Agee's figurines, I would not be surprised to see Aric Obrosey's doilies. Doilies as a design statement seem to be dying off with the older population, but I do remember seeing them in my maternal grandmother's and a few assorted nutty aunts' houses.

Nearly every aspect of Aric Obrosey's project feels mad, as if a teenage nascent Martha Stewart had taken two hits of strong acid, cranked Marilyn Manson on the stereo and decided to redecorate. The *Hendrix Doily* seems the most clear example of an unlikely but not impossible object. It is not inconceivable that as the generation that first had its brain cells fused during ear-ripping renditions of



Holly Zausner, *Pink Exposure*, 1997, *Sculpey*, 48" x 112", courtesy Caren Golden Fine Art, New York

Crosstown Traffic has approached grandparent generation, a few have taken up the traditional crafts of the older population. If we ever believed our well-meaning high school drug counselor's assertion that even one hit of acid could come back to haunt you at anytime in the next 50 years, we can imagine someone must have had a flashback during an otherwise placid retirement.

Obrosey feels compelled to create webs of images of stunning, phantasmagoric complexity. Out of his static haze of detail emerge readable pictures, often imbued with a sense of charming triviality – fast-food waitresses, '70s mirrored disco balls, grandma-type dress gloves, lamb chops and steaks. While such subject matter may speak of ephemerality, by subjecting them to his labor-intensive remakings and by hybridizing them with traditional decorative items, Obrosey points to a central truth of our era, that nothing disappears – especially that which seems to.



Holly Zausner, *Altered States*, 1998, *Eames seat, Saarinen base, Sculpey*, 31½" x 29" x 19", courtesy Caren Golden Fine Art, New York

Take the recent *Fluid Flow 45*, etched onto plexiglass. The form is that of a 45 r.p.m. record. While this wonderful recording medium has been eradicated with the fervor of an exterminator dispatching cockroaches, and today's music stores treat vinyl as an anomaly for the Luddite minority, the wanton switchover to CD has been completed. But in so doing, it has turned commonplace black vinyl, 7 inches in circular formation, into a bigger-than-life icon, and, in a sense, immortal. I am not talking just about the cult for vinyl releases by those seeking a certain less shrill sound, or the omnipresent vinyl bins at flea markets, so precious to those of us who still have turntables and can appreciate unscathed great albums at 50 cents a pop. But rather, for the cusp generations that were here for the changeover, this was a fundamental change in our lifestyle, so our subconscious resists. Music will always be a "record" even when it's on a CD.

In our language, we still say, "You pick the record," even when facing a stack of jewel boxes. When we say, "The second side is lame," we are announcing, if only subconsciously, that we are proud to be the last generation whose fave tunes came on two sides. The *45 R.P.M. Doily* celebrates this transformation from ubiquitous entertainment to an icon that will be cherished and kept morbidly alive by several generations until the last DJs pass on. Of course, it's a bit of a fur teacup, unplayable except with your mind in place of the stylus. Ask yourself, "What does a doily record sound like – Strauss or Goth-rock perhaps?" Similarly, *Lace Disco Ball* depicts that icon that disappeared down the same road as the vinyl 45 a decade or so earlier, but which will live on until its campy history is forgotten in a few more generations. The artist burns it into

paper, giving us a sense that this symbol of '70s nightclub culture has fossilized.

Remember that fossils are the lucky ones – millions of dinosaurs died, and only a few get to be immortal, fascinating and frightening tykes. Hendrix, the disco ball and vinyl records are just three among the many things that went away, but they are the lucky ones. Obrosey's choosing to celebrate these lovely ghosts, in decorator object form, mimics our culture's having chosen to let these three vanish so that they may be evermore present.

Figurines and doilies both smack of pre-modernity, exactly the sort of dust-collecting ornament that modernists strove to sweep into the dustbin of history.

Curiously, as used by Obrosey and Agee, they speak of the present (Agee's characters) and the near past (Obrosey's fossils). Our third artist, Holly Zausner, employs modernist design, which, though decades old, still looks au courant, to wrestle with subject matter that is both trans-historical and very of-the-moment.

Perhaps it best then that we leave the interpretive sphere of Pee Wee's playhouse (we will return), the iconic media living room of the '80s, for its predecessor 50 years before – that of Auntie Mame (as portrayed by Rosalind Russell – never the Lucille Ball version!). Each of Mame's personal transformations came complete with a redecoration and, while she is in many ways a preposterous figure, her quest for an artful and enlightened way of life combining high modernist design and Eastern religion is hard to resist today.

That hybrid, which in perfect form manifests itself in the Shintoist design decisions of Wright's *Fallingwater*, can look pretty bizarre when the seam between its elements is even slightly visible. In one incarnation, Auntie Mame had circular hard chairs on hydraulic lifts that, if carelessly handled, would send visitors 20 feet in the air, bumping their heads on the ceiling, a leaden contrivance designed to mimic transcendent levitation.

Zausner excavates the seams between the high and low, belief and skepticism, like an F.A.A. investigator taking apart plane crash wreckage. Her *Venus of Willendorf*-esque female goddesses are fickle signposts of that seam. We can, if we are inclined to do so, see them as non-ironic fertile Earth Divas (or perhaps, given their strange Play-Doh-like coloring and hand-working, some precocious child's exaggerated version of a Shiva spotted during a field trip to the local Asian art museum), or we can see them as a fierce lampooning of the absurdities of



Aric Obrosey, *Hendrix Doily Study*, 1991, neoprene rubber, 12" diameter, collection Betsy Friedman, Bearsville, N.Y.

driving to guided meditation class in a Range Rover, chanting "Om" in designer workout clothes. If you need proof, two New York lifestyle magazines have had recent cover stories on Yoga-mania. When I take a Yoga class, and it is time to chant "Om," part of me feels the timeless sense of peace that comes from resonating together with 20 strangers, and part of me feels like some goofball Maynard G. Krebs beatnik, some parody of Westerners' spirituality envy.

In *Outer Limits*, Zausner's levitating figure hovers above a Saarinen occasional table, her distended body all boneless curves. We could think here of Ingres' *Odalisque* – so beautiful in repose, her boneless, ill-fitted body would look monstrous standing. Or we could think of all the impossible contradictions women are given to resolve with their labor of being wife, mother, lover, wage-earner, entertainer, and still looking relaxed and poised. This figure's achievement is immense, but now that she has achieved the position, maintaining the pose a few inches above the table's blue-gray surface, it is impossible to imagine her ever moving again. A perfect dismount seems unlikely.

Such is not the case with *Pink Exposure*. These 22 little pink figures seem a squiggling mess of movement, and it is tempting to read these as the same figure in 22 poses, like a vaginally explicit Lewittian system and its permutations. That we are essentially mooned seems in no way an insult; her flashing her genitals seems nearer to the Celtic Shelagh N'ge cute "See what I got, isn't it cool" than a '70s provocation meant to challenge phallogentrism. In fact, with most of Zausner's heroines, their arms and legs seem like framing devices or extensions of

the characters' labias. Gynocentrism is always in the affirmative, celebrating desires that were kept silent, and Zausner's is a particularly friendly challenge to "the fear of a female planet." A t-shirt designed by Brad Melamed made the rounds a couple of years ago that read "I survived 5,000 years of patriarchal hierarchies," and Zausner may just prove that sentiment correct. By mixing her figures with decorator objects she suggests that her pink and orange women are already with you in your living room, kitchen and bedrooms, or they may already be you, made more explicitly goddess-like.

Each of these three artists manifests a desire to be mixed into whatever living is going on in your living room. More traditional art objects want to be in your living room, but separate from it. Paintings hang on the wall – up, up and away from greasy hands and cat hair. Sculptures that look like sculpture enforce their zone of separation through our learned behavior – the "Do not touch" sign in our heads. Figurines, as Agee taught me, were meant to be placed on the banquet tables more as entertainment than art. While Obrosey's fragile and precious doilies are kept in traditional art locations, in our minds we relocate them to their traditional positions. Doilies are draped on the mantel, placed under plants, over and around. Zausner's figures wrap around chairs and hover over tables.

Although you are seeing the works in a gallery space, imagine that one collector has let all three of these artists in the door, and there is one room with all these explosive transformations which, in their exuberance, license other desublimations of interdicted behavior. We are back then to Pee Wee's playhouse. In the set decorations, each and every detail was wacky – off-kilter, oddly shaped, brightly colored. It was as if nuttiness was contagious, and that logic may be at work here. Look deep within yourself. You probably are feeling the urge to do something a little wacky yourself right now – moon the guard, disco dance to silence, wear bright colors, levitate, or something else. Agee, Obrosey and Zausner have been the catalysts for this. Who says art has no positive real world effects?

Bill Arning, critic and curator
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Cover: Aric Obrosey, *Lace Disco Ball*, 1992, burned paper, 29½" diameter, collection Eileen and Peter Norton, Santa Monica, Calif.