

About & Around: *A Round About*

By **Paul D'Agostino** - November 17, 2016



Eight grey horizontal planes stretch from foreground to background like a wide set of stairs leading only to a wall, or like a set of bleachers pushed up against one, in the opening moments of *Buster*, a video piece by Kate Gilmore. The first seven of these steps or planes might also be likened to plinths, in a sense, since they're lined with smallish, minimally shapely, quite unadorned clay pots, about 140 in total. It's a simple setting. And a curious one. And a clean one. And a serene one. But not for long. What happens next is that a person, evidently Gilmore herself, enters the scene, or rather screen, at the top left, which is to say from the upper-left-most corner of the top step, and begins immediately to smash

the pots in generally uniform manner, one at a time, each one spewing forth oozes, squirts and gobs of purple or white paint as its destructive agent reduces it to yet another liqui-thickly bathed pile of chunks and shards. This process carries on for about eight minutes, and it is as amusing as it is brow-furrowing, as unsettling as it is exhilarating, as minimalistically composed as it is brilliant. And although it's not the first piece you'll encounter in the unwaveringly strong new exhibit at Present Company, *A Round About*, it does set the stage most perfectly for everything else in this group show of wifful works that point at, probe, bend or transcend the vocabularies, practices and associative assumptions pertaining to clay and ceramics from all manner of mediated angles.

I single out *Buster* as a particularly notable stage-setter because of the number of meta-ceramic and pictorial levels on which operates. It is at once a single-channel video piece, an act of performance, a performative document, a sound piece and, of course, a painting—call it an action painting, or call it a 'grid'-based drip painting, or just call it an abstract painting of whatever sort you find most suitable, since there are many suitable descriptors along those lines, and since the video's closing moments of relative stillness allow it to appear as a picture on the wall—that quite fully lays bare its process, all of which is fundamentally activated by those rows of color-filled pots. This conceptual stage-setter, then, also quite literally sets the stage for a number of other works around it. Right across from it, for instance, is a joyous piece by Betty Woodman, *The White and Black Set*, in which a painted backdrop, a small platform and a minor suite of of three sculptures come together to suggest a theatrical performance that has come to rest. Similarly theatrical, in a way, or at least implicitly narrative are some low-hung corner pieces by Keiko Narahashi, in which ceramic objects placed on and beneath shelves find self-reflection in paintings; Ellie Krakow's *Arm Armature #7*, a well-appendaged surrealist funbox of sorts; and Kristen Jensen's *Heavy Makes You Happy II*, a strangely adorable, awkwardly cuddly-looking coupling of a large soft support and a 'broken' pot, which I'll confess still looks like a bit like a Cimabue-era *Madonna col Bambino* when I picture it in my mind. Less narratively enigmatic yet no less visio-conceptually satisfying is a piece by a maestro of punchy sculptural witticisms, Adam Parker Smith. Here, his *Wind Chime* is a kind of disrupted ready-made whose candidly dashed utility makes it scan like a fully phrased albeit wordless idiomatic expression, or like a sound piece in wait whose acoustic potential has been bound and gagged.

The mendacity of Pinocchio and something related to the pointless stroking of an ego might come to mind as you watch *Demagogue*, a video by Deborah Castillo, in which a human hand interacts with a clay head in a way that might also make you ponder the constituent terms of the expression 'erotized nose job.' Castillo made the piece a couple years ago, and quite plausibly with a foreign figurehead of demagoguery in mind, so her implied commentary on the snowballing of political untruths wasn't necessarily meant to reflect on

the nature and tenor of discourse in this year's presidential campaigns in the U.S., but it's hard to not read it thusly. It's also hard not to appreciate its succinct statement on the underlying half-flaccidity of draconian leadership and passive-aggressiveness of misleading double-speak.

There is a great deal to take in, examine and decipher in *A Round About*, from meta-paintings to megalomania, and you'll find it well worth your time to play along with the show's sometimes complex brain games. Should you find yourself intermittently baffled, just recall that the material key to unlocking most all the show's pieces can be found in abundance in the ground beneath your feet.

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A Round About features works by Betty Woodman, Kristen Jensen, Kate Gilmore, Adam Parker Smith, Deborah Castillo, Keiko Narahashi, Elisa Soliven, Zimra Beiner, Amy Gartrell, Ellie Krakow, Leah Tacha and Jessie Rose Valla. It's on view through December 18th. More information at www.present-co.com.

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Photos by Paul D'Agostino

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