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Am I Here?

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AM I HERE?

By

Carla Potter

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree Master of Fine Arts

Major: Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Peter Pinnell

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Am I Here?

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University of Nebraska, 2010

Adviser: Pete Pinnell

My interest in art and figuration has its roots in a childhood where ballet classes and performing were my first love. This work is about an accumulation of experience that relates to that rich formative time in my life, so I choose a format of presenting the figure that reflects that stage of my life. I make small-scale narrative sculptures that show me at various ages with objects that are emblematic of my experiences at those times. These items, ranging from a child's car seat to the lacy veil from First Holy Communion, additionally represent those societal institutions intended to provide security for the child, whether through physical safety, moral salvation or domestic survival.

Many of these institutions are predominantly male, most especially the Catholic Church. Over the centuries the Church has also been a powerful player within the larger patriarchal structure that has defined and dictated the history of western art. Though this is changing, historically women's voices and artistic production have been excluded or marginalized. I grew up with the combined power of both of the church and a largely patriarchal society during the height of the feminist movement. The empowering perspectives of feminism led me to question many of the teachings of the church and

education in general. It made me acutely aware of the contradiction between who I thought I was (smart, attractive and artistically ambitious) and the skills and negative self image imposed by my indoctrination. The art in this exhibition explores the uncomfortable fit between what was expected of, or offered to me, and what I wanted and needed.

I have chosen porcelain as my primary medium. It is a type of clay that is traditionally associated with luxury, wealth and fineness. Nineteenth century Parian Ware figurines were made of unglazed porcelain to suggest the famous marble used for sculpture in Classical Greece. They made imagery from popular public sculpture and famous paintings more readily available at a miniaturized scale for the home. Figurines of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries depicted light-hearted genre scenes as well as historical subjects. My figures play on the viewer's expectations of the medium, by inserting complex and personal psychological content into the decorative realm of the figurine.

Porcelain's whiteness, luminosity and fragility relate to the subject of my work. White has a long history in Western Civilization of representing purity and virtue. The white wedding dress is symbolic of the virginal nature of the bride. I utilize these associations to suggest these pure values are—contrary to the doctrine of original sin—actually inherent in a child. The whiteness and fragility of porcelain also allude to the future of the child and the inevitability of transgression; the work can be so easily broken

or soiled. The luminosity of polished porcelain suggests the realm of memory and dreams. Its seemingly ephemeral surface contradicts the solidity of the material. The fine detail is inviting to the eye but too small for our fingers to experience. By using this material in a precious and detailed manner I also express my regard for craftsmanship and the subject matter.

There are iconic images from the history of art that have always filled me with a sense of possibility. In several of the works in this show, I create variations on those images (for instance, Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*, or Manet's *Olympia*). In citing them, I want to make images that question the authority of that history while simultaneously paying homage to it.