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FORM AND DYSFUNCTION: THE SYNTHETIC REALITY OF SUSAN BEINER

KATHLEEN VANESIAN

For thousands of millennia, human beings have felt driven to experiment with and outright exploit the world around them. Too often, the result of such unrestricted experimentation and exploitation dead-ends in irreversible destruction.

Humanity's overall track record in this regard has been unflinchingly poor. By the late Pleistocene period, rudimentary man, armed merely with crudely sharpened flint and obsidian-tipped sticks, began his unconscious campaign to wipe out most of the megafauna roaming the earth at the time.¹ In more recent industrial days, he has gloried in creating toxic plastic substances incapable of biodegradation,² has mowed down rain forests, has burned fossil fuels at such accelerated rates that the earth's ozone layer has been diminished and wreaking havoc with global climate, and has irrevocably poisoned and polluted air, land, lakes and seas. Not content with devastating the macrocosm, post-modern techno types have begun splicing, dicing and rearranging genes, manipulating molecular structures and biochemically modifying food crops, inevitably contaminating traditional plant and animal sources and affecting consumers in yet unforeseen ways.³

It is this inexplicable and often unbridled human compulsion to experiment without regard to harmful consequences that informs the extraordinary sculptural installation of ceramic sculptor Susan Beiner in *Synthetic Reality*, an exhibition originally mounted at Arizona State University at Museum's Ceramics Research Centre in 2008. Fired by the artist's fascination with biotechnology and its untoward ramifications, *Synthetic Reality* is Beiner's first installation work and the largest piece she has ever created. Her monumental environment, composed of glazed clay, Plexiglass and polyester-filled vinyl, was made possible by the Independence Foundation grant she was awarded in Philadelphia, where she was living at the time she conceived her project.

According to the artist, *Synthetic Reality* is essentially "...about what has been happening in our world and environment, and how technology has combined with the naturally-occurring and organic. Biotechnology's current use of cloning, hybridization, artificial selection and other technologies in the quest to make 'something better' in reality has created unexpected ramifications that have and will make our world a worse place in which to live."⁴

The effect of industrialisation on her personal vision of the world is clearly evident in Susan Beiner's art. Born in Newark, New Jersey, she was raised in the mid-central New Jersey suburb of Elizabeth, which she describes as a place with a hint of industrialism, a factor she believes connects to everything in her life.⁵ Her father, a laboratory chemist in the pharmaceutical industry, hybridized and grafted flowers as a hobby when the artist was growing up; early on, Beiner shared her father's interest in growing things and manipulating nature. Later, as the artist became acutely aware of pressing environmental, health and food safety issues, father and daughter would discuss the similarity of materials used in both drugs and ceramic glazes.

Susan Beiner attended Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey (ironically, the heavily industrial birthplace of the first commercially made plastic, known as celluloid). Before the artist focused on ceramics, she had trained as a painter. Dissatisfied with the lack of dimensionality in painting, she quickly gravitated towards clay and its endless malleability and ability to render objects in three dimensions. Beiner's graduate ceramics studies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor – within easy driving distance of Detroit, America's legendary Motor City – was yet another profound visual influence for the artist.

In Beiner's visionary dystopia brought about by unchecked technological tweaking, gigantic nuts, bolts and screws as well as twisted alien life forms and sinister sword-like "grass" blossom menacingly from a 28-foot wall, transforming into mysterious, strangulating expanse sprouting against a venomous chartrouse backdrop. Disorienting and overwhelmingly chaotic, Beiner's attractively configured world morphs from land-rooted garden of mutations to swaying underwater



vista,⁶ depending on the inclination of the viewer. The artist's wry, perhaps unintentional, visual pun about "screwing with nature" is inescapable to even the most casual observer as he attempts to take in Beiner's baroque panorama. In addition, not content with merely covering a gallery wall, the artist has fashioned a field of strange, hand-sewn vinyl floral forms in Hello Kitty pink and sulfuric acid yellow that snake skyward from the floor, rooted in plexiglass domes through which the viewer, like Alice in Wonderland, must carefully navigate. These domes are suggestive of greenhouses and controlled artificial breeding, to which mollusk-like creatures (or mutant leaves or disembodied lapping tongues, depending on one's imagination) cling. Susan Beiner's seemingly limitless forms, each jockeying for a prominent position in the artist's surreal landscape, have such striking presence that the viewer might easily expect them to begin moving at any time.



Like Post-war Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, Susan Beiner is driven by obsession with the infinity of repetition and accumulation. However, in Beiner's case, it is more the infinity of non-repetitive form that powers her work, in which she continually restructures common objects the way contemporary scientists currently modify the genetic building blocks of plants and animals. And only the artist's all-consuming compulsion towards her deadly serious subject could have pushed her to complete such a physically daunting project in the less than hospitable physical environment of the Arizona's desertscape. Over an unbroken period of a year and a half, Beiner used a primitive assembly line to cast a number of individual clay bases from moulds, to which she adhered slip-cast clay objects she then individually sculpted into unique, non-repetitious shapes. For her, the ensuing forms, often beginning as scavenged trash like Styrofoam take-out containers, hardware and other found objects, are "...new hybrids of shapes that are related to technology, as well as organic shapes."⁷ Like some mad cake decorator, she wielded pastry bag-like applicators filled with clay slip and paste to affix thousands of these reshaped components to her base forms.

In a stifling spray booth under an unrelenting Arizona sun, the artist then built up multiple layers of glaze on her impenetrable thicket of futuristic forms, beginning with a white base glaze, on top of which she added various other colored glazes to reproduce the iridescence one sees on an oil-slicked puddle after a good rain. Her consequent candy-colored surfaces, nuanced and seductive, are overtly gestural and outright painterly, slipping and sliding in rivulets of luscious hues. Reminiscent of the rich, free-flowing Tang Dynasty glazes of the Sancai (literally "tri-colored") ceramic tradition (618-907 A.D.), Beiner's masterful color glazing prevents her work from being irredeemably negative or oppressively didactic.

Susan Beiner's concern with biotech tampering is nothing new in the world of the visual arts. Other artists, most notably Critical Art Ensemble, a collective of five artists working in various media, with self-proclaimed objective of "... exploring the intersections between art, technology, radical politics and critical theory," have skewered biotechnological "progress" via mordantly satirical art pieces since 1987.⁸ However Beiner's much more subtle approach is essentially antithetical to CAE's, relying on ornate, yet ominous, visual beauty, ironically grounded in the organic medium of clay as well as mythological presentation to make her well-honed point. Without judgment, she presents her vision of a world hobbled by the rush to technological testing, as alluring as it is toxic.

Synthetic Reality is an elegant, yet cautionary tale that could be considered a lyrical, post-modern take on the Greek myth of Pandora's Box. This centuries-old myth is the classic allegorical presentation of how evil, sin, disease and destruction were introduced to the world. Like Eve in Judeo-Christian history, according to the ancient Greeks, Pandora was the first woman on earth, created by order of Zeus and crafted by his son, Hephaestus, the god of fire, craftsmanship and technology, who was worshipped in early Greek manufacturing cities. All the gods in the pantheon bequeathed upon her various qualities including beauty, grace, persuasion, musical talent even deceit. Multi-talented Pandora, compelled by her sense of curiosity, another gift from the gods, eventually opened a jar⁹ she was specifically told by Zeus not to open. In doing so, she unleashed every evil and misery, known and unknown, to humankind, into the world. The only thing remaining in her jar after the escape of the horrors was hope.



Like the evils uncorked by the curious Pandora, biotechnology's tinkering with nature has set loose uncontrollable forces into the natural world, ones that cannot be stuffed back into the jar. Indestructible synthetic polymers, nuclear waste, untreatable toxic poisoning of land and water, industrial blight – the litany of technology's questionable contributions to human history is long and the prognosis for recovery not particularly sunny. Like the last remaining item in Pandora's jar, all we have is hope, which, in the face of the horrors that modern science has wrought and continues to wreck, just may not be enough.

1. For a comprehensive overview of this phenomenon, as well as other problems created by industrialization and biotechnology, see Weisman, Alan, *The World Without Us*, New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St Martin's Press, 2007. 2. According to Dr. Anthony Andrady, a senior research scientist at North Carolina's Research Triangle, " [e]xcept for a small amount that's been incinerated, every bit of plastic manufactured in the world for the last 50 years or so still remains. It's somewhere in the environment." That half-century's total production now surpasses 1 billion tons." *The World Without Us* p.126. 3. Cf. Eakin, Emily "The Way We Live Now: Questions for José Bové - Unhappy Meals," *New York Times*, January 6, 2002. 4. Interview with Susan Beiner June 10. 2008. 5. *Ibid.* 6. Beiner's installation eerily echoes man's efforts in the 1970's to rebuild dying marine reefs off the coast of Broward County, Florida, by dumping over 2 million truck tires onto the reefs, destroying the coral reefs and ecosystem in the area after storms moved the tires towards shore. See <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/waste/categories/tires/pages/osbornepilot.htm> for details of this project. 7. Interview with Susan Beiner June 10. 2008. 8. see, www.critical-art.net The group has grappled with such subjects as biological warfare agents, genetically modified food and the ethics of eugenic and transgenic research. One of CAE's artists, university professor Steven Kurtz, was arrested for bioterrorism and charged in 2004 with felony mail and wire fraud in connection with his ordering of biological materials Kurtz was using in connection with a performance/installation piece he was creating. After 4 years on May 22, 2008, Kurtz was finally acquitted of all charges, which had arisen as a result of overzealous application of the Patriot Act. 9. Controversy over the details of the Pandora myth rages on today. According to some sources, the mistranslation of the Greek word, *pitthos*, meaning jar, as "box" is usually attributed to the sixteenth century humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam when he translated Hesiod's tale of Pandora into Latin.

Kathleen Vanesian is an arts writer and critic currently living in Phoenix, Arizona. A graduate of the University of California at Irvine and Pepperdine University School of Law, Vanesian has also worked as a professional studio photographer. She has covered and reviewed the visual arts scene in the greater metropolitan Phoenix area since 1993.

Images: Courtesy of the artist.



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