



Kristen Cliffl
Falling Forward



Cover:
Beacon, 2012
low fire clay, glaze and lustre,
26 x 18 x 18 in.

Above:
*We're Going to Need a
Bigger Boat*, 2013
low fire clay, glaze, lustre,
resin, 25 x 26 x 11 in.

Kristen Cliffl
Falling Forward

Jun 7–Jul 31, 2013

William Busta Gallery
2731 Prospect Avenue
Cleveland OH 44115

W williambustagallery.com
T 216.298.9071
E bustagallery@gmail.com

The Whale's Tail



Not quite ironic but far from naïve, Kristin Cliffel's toy-like ceramic sculptures revisit the colors and textures of childhood objects—those bright treasures so imbued with the spirit and the inner meaning of play. Cliffel is a story-teller in a way, but her narratives are compressed from bits and pieces of fantasy worlds left over from children's literature and entertainment, long since fractured and veined by ambivalence. And while her shiny surfaces seem candy-coated, they leave an earthy aftertaste, laced with adult challenge. The takeaway emotion here is something akin to courage; that, and a sense of questing sincerity. Cliffel's deceptively Disney-like essays in clay, steering around political or personal agendas and preconceptions, are earnestly in search of private human truths.

Cliffel depicts an ideal realm in a state of siege, eroded by need and obligation. But, initially at least, the most moving aspect of a sculpture like *We're Going to Need a Bigger Boat* is the sparkling richness of the memories it evokes—deeply physical recollections of magically shiny objects—things and materials which once seemed not so much manufactured as conjured, imbued with the delight of first-time sensations. Cliffel speaks not just of the disillusion that comes with adult responsibility, but of a long-ago time when all the colors and textures of a brand-new world could engage sentiment on an even playing field, crossing freely from taste to touch to sight. Her renditions of houses, for instance—stylishly bent and peaked as if by the gravity of a more whimsical planet than our own—express both sentimental innocence and the irreparable psychological and physiological gap that its loss represents.

Sometimes this disconnect has violent, even tragic overtones, as in the wall-hung piece *Welcome Friends*, which presents a deer who might be Bambi's mom, with huge, liquid eyes, in a macabre role as trophy décor. Beneath her graceful, severed neck are crossed a pair of toy guns with real steel barrels, and a tender bouquet of ceramic oleander. What has happened to the peaceable fantasies of yesteryear? The neglectful harshness of growing up shades into betrayal in Cliffel's conception here. Sentiment at such a late date is headed rapidly downhill into that grotesqueness which always lurks in cartoons, anyway. You can almost hear the doe muttering, "This is a hell of a way to treat Eden."



Above, left:
Caveat, 2012
low fire clay, glaze, resin,
22 x 39 x 8 in.

Above:
Welcome Friends, 2012
Low fire clay, glaze, lustre,
steel, 36 x 23 x 19 in.

We're Going to Need a Bigger Boat is a rebus-like concatenation linking several symbolic cues. A quaint fisherman's cottage is perched crookedly on a large, smooth boulder; a stone chimney runs up one side and a yellow glow is visible through the windows. But trouble has arrived on the roof of this quiet scene. A sperm whale is perched on the shingles, flopping in the embrace of the blue tongue of water that stranded him, his enormous tail trailing into the distance. Echoing various Disney movies, the lineage of this classically uncanny image runs back through the Pinocchio story by Carlo Collodi, all the way to Jonah's big fish and to Leviathan himself—not to mention Moby Dick. Chaos and the power of the unconscious to disrupt and overwhelm ideas of order, to swamp all hope of security, are the inevitable themes of Cliffel's narrative invention. That she tackles all this as concisely as she does, makes her work an exercise in wit, and in emotional poise. She proposes balancing acts, treaties between the visionary distortions of childhood and the often monstrous shape of necessity—the body of life as it must be lived.

—Douglas Max Utter

Kristen Cliffl

Born 1967, Akron, OH
Resides in Cleveland, OH

kristencliffl.com

Education

- 1990 BFA in ceramics and drawing,
Cleveland Institute of Art
1985–86 Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY

Solo Exhibitions

- 2013 Sherrie Gallerie, Columbus, OH (Fall)
2011 *Once Upon A Time*, Sherrie Gallery, Columbus, OH
2010 *Salty Sweet*, William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH
2008 *The Sweet Life*, William Busta Gallery, Cleveland, OH
1997 Gallery Dorita, Atlanta, GA
1995 The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, PA
1994 The Sculpture Center, Cleveland, OH
1991 The Other Galley, Banff Centre, Banff, Albert

Selected Recent Group Exhibitions

- 2012 *Covet*, Ferrin Gallery, Pittsfield, MA
A Feast of Beads, NCECA, Facere Gallery, Seattle, WA
2011 *Ceramics Invitational*, Borelli Edwards Gallery,
Pittsburgh, PA
21st Century Expressions of the Second Sex,
Convivium 33, Cleveland OH (also 2012, Ursuline
College, OH)
2010 *Form, Figure, Function, Contemporary Ohio Ceramics*,
Canton Museum of Art, Canton, OH; Zanesville
Museum of Art, Zanesville, OH; Springfield Museum
of Art, Springfield, OH
2009 *Spoon It, Fork It, Cut It Up...*, Baltimore Clayworks,
Baltimore, MD
Let Them Eat Cake, Southern Ohio Museum,
Portsmouth, OH
Convergence of Voices in Clay, Borelli Edwards
Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
2008 *A Compact Competition, 20x20x20*, Louisiana State
University, Baton Rouge, LA. Honorable Mention
NCECA Exhibit, Borelli Edwards Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
OBJECTIONS, Michael Berger Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA
Echoes from the Rust Belt, Planet Art, Pittsburgh, PA
*Six Degrees of Separation, A Convergence of Voices in
Clay*, Sandusky Cultural Center, Sandusky, OH
2007 *The Contemporary Drinking Vessel*, River Gallery,
Rocky River, OH
Revive, Zygote Press, Cleveland, OH

- 2006 *Into View, 15 Years of Windows
to Sculpture*, Cleveland
State University Art Gallery,
Cleveland, OH
*An Extravagance of Salt and
Pepper*, Baltimore
Clayworks, Baltimore, MD
2005 *Cleveland Craft Biennial*,
Cleveland State University Art
Gallery, Cleveland, OH
On a Pedestal, The Sculpture
Center, Cleveland, OH
2004 *A Sense of Identity:
Contemporary Ceramic Art
in the Midwest*, Indiana,
University/Purdue University,
Fort Wayne, IN
2003 *The Teapot Redefined*, Mobilia
Gallery, Cambridge, MA
*Chautauqua National, Ceramics
Award*, Chautauqua, NY
2000 *Transcending Traditions,
Ohio Artists in Clay and Fiber*,
Riffe Gallery, Columbus, OH;
Southern Ohio Museum,
Portsmouth, OH

Awards

- 2013 Creative Workforce Fellowship,
Community Partnership for
Arts and Culture, Cuyahoga
County, OH
1995 Ohio Arts Council, Individual
Artist Fellowship

Collections

Akron Art Museum
Canton Art Museum
Cleveland Art Association

Professional Experience

- 2012 Visiting Artist/Instructor,
Penland School of Crafts, NC
2001–10 Arts in Education Program
Artist, Ohio Arts Council
2007–10 Residency Artist, Young
Audiences of Northeast Ohio
2005 Ceramics Faculty, Cleveland
Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH;
2004 Visiting Artist/Instructor,
Anderson Ranch Arts Center,
Snowmass Village, CO (also
1994, 95)
1997 Cleveland Institute of Art,
Cleveland, OH; Visiting Artist
1993 Kohler Company, Kohler, WI;
Artist in Residence