

Artillery Magazine Gallery Rounds  
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2 Ceramics Shows: Joakim Ojanen & Max Maslansky

Richard Heller Gallery  
September 12 - October 31, 2020

Five Car Garage  
September 12 - October 18, 2020

by Jody Zellen



Stockholm-based artist Joakim Ojanen's delightful exhibition of paintings, drawings, and ceramics at Richard Heller Gallery is aptly titled: "A Show for the Lonely Distant Baby Souls." According to the artist, it is "a celebration of the human being." He goes on to say, "Let the stupid feelings take over. Get mad, get angry, get drunk, get happy, get sad! Find a friend, give them your heart, smoke a cigarette, look up in the blue sky, suck a flower, enjoy the day but also cry. Please don't forget to cry. There's many of us, we can make miracles together, beautiful things! But most of the time it's hard to understand each other, that's OK but just please be nice."

The works presented encompass a wide range of feelings and the topsy turvy emotions experienced during the pandemic. While Ojanen's drawn and painted characters express states of anger and joy, it is his three-dimensional ceramic sculptures that bring these feelings to life. In the two-dimensional works, Ojanen fashions compositions where figures with large irregularly shaped heads are intertwined, their thin, long limbs function as branches between them. These works have a cartoony simplicity and allure and in many ways beg to be seen from all directions. Ojanen delivers this through his sculptures.

In the back gallery, situated on top of an extremely large table bordered with flat metal cut-outs of people and animals, are more than twenty glazed ceramic creatures. Here, a melange of isolated, dejected, abject, droopy-eyed, long-eared, part animal, part human figures in a range of sizes wait alone or in groups for something: is it companionship, success, salvation? With titles like *Everything has two sides. There isn't always one good side, sometimes both can be bad I remembered this morning. The trick is to find that third side, I used to think life was easy too, now I know better, I can't read minds so how can I trust anybody?*, Ojanen personifies and captures a range of sentiments compounded by our current social and political situation.

Max Maslansky's exhibition of ceramic sculptures at 5 Car Garage is also titled to play into these disconcerting times: "Octopus and Vessels Pretending, Vessels of Birds Fishing and Crabs Emoting, Sardine Cans Opening, a Shell Bedroom, and Some Sea Gods that Feed on Shame." While Maslansky's floor-based works are more abstract than Ojanen's, they similarly reference human qualities and emotions. Each vessel/totem has been placed on sliced tree trunk pedestals of varying sizes and this adds to the uncanny uniqueness of the works. Simultaneously sculptures and dysfunctional pottery, Maslansky has imbued each work with a specific personality. The twenty-one inch high *Happy Crabs Sad Crabs* (all works 2020) is an ironically humorous work that stacks five "crabs." From one side they are bright and smiling, while from the other they are glazed in dark tones and frowning. *Emerging Fishing Bird (I Stay Below to Go Above)* is a fantastical thirty-six-inch tall sculpture. At the top, a fish is caught in a bird's beak as if the bird emerged from below rising up to catch the fish. The bottom portion of the vessel contains images of swimming sea creatures whereas in the upper half the fish morphs into a bird. Maslansky's menagerie of creatures imagines a world of coexistence and symbiosis that is only possible in make-believe.

Many artists working with ceramics today view clay as another material to mold into sculpture. Ceramics is no longer considered purely craft, and should be appreciated as a viable material for creating three-dimensional works of art. Another striking ceramics show, a curious pairing of ceramic works by Sterling Ruby and Masaomi Yasunaga, is on view across town at Nonaka-Hill.

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