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Em Kettner
Slow Poke: Speaking to the Fragility of the Human Condition
François Ghebaly
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by Jody Zellen



In her first Los Angeles exhibition *Slow Poke*, Em Kettner, an artist based in Northern California, presents small, fragile, ceramic and woven cloth sculptures. These pieces have a craft and folk-artsty sensibility. She draws from these disciplines, sharing affinities with the devotional aspects of creation. In this exhibition, the works are installed on and in the walls, as well as on a large, hip-high white pedestal topped with a piece of plywood. Many of the table-top sculptures are freestanding, elongated individuals, or entwined couples embedded into hand-crafted beds with heads that stick out at one end and feet that emerge from the other.

In these works, the body parts are separated by and integrated into pieces of woven fabric that become coverings akin to blankets or quilts. Although the figures are confined to their beds, their facial expressions are not always pained. In fact, many appear quite joyful: making the most of their location and enjoying the company of others. In *The Invalids* (2020), two figures cuddle in a cot. The woven fabric that connects them is decorated with a colorful pattern of triangles that is attached to similarly decorated ceramic legs rising about three inches off the table. Missing bodies, the figures are simply two heads, a single hand and a phallic bulge that emerges at the far end, as if to show that they are enjoying their time together.

While *The Swingers* (2021), *The Long Night* (2021), *The Prairie Sickbed* (2020), *The Lemon Drop Dream* (2021), *The Mending Bed* (2020) and *The Lovers' Quarrel* illustrate both the positive and negative emotions of being recumbent, other works are more about nimbleness and the imagined twists and turns of the body. Like bendy or fidget toys, Kettner's sculptures are contorted into impossible positions and relationships. Two figures often become one, joined in suggestive and erotic entanglements. These sexual gymnastics are evident in works including *The Cross* (2021) and *The Sycophant* (2019) where the figures delight in the coupling of invisible body parts.

While Kettner's bodies appear to have a doll-like innocence, they are most definitely engaging in adult activities. The installation has the playfulness of Calder's *Circus* where disparate creatures and props coexist as a table-top display, yet Kettner's figures engage in more than play. That Kettner herself is disabled (she has a rare form of muscular dystrophy) helps to fill in the backstory in this strange portrayal of both confined, as well as liberated individuals.

In many of the works, oversized feet and hands extend from porcelain bodies wrapped with woven cloth that morph in unusual and unsettling ways. For example, in *The Divining Rod* (2021), a stick-like body in the shape of a sling shot and wrapped with multi-colored yarn is topped by two heads that gaze into each other's eyes. In *The Orchard*, two long arms extend up to become a circle that surrounds a checker-patterned weaving while the head and feet dangle towards the bottom. Whereas in *The Mirror*, a head, arm and long leg with a single foot protrude from a black fabric oval that becomes the center of a non-reflective hand-mirror.

In addition to many sewn and ceramic sculptures, Kettner also embeds small (two by two inch) glazed porcelain tiles either high or low in the gallery walls so they are easy to overlook. These charming pieces depict cartoony figures in bed under blankets. With titles such as ***Grovel***, ***The Slow Poke***, ***Settle*** and ***Unfaithful*** (all 2021) they speak to the fragility of the human condition. Like the rest of Kettner's pieces, these small ceramic 'drawings' are haunting and enchanting simultaneously. As hybrid forms, her figures become stoic and humble, yet forever empowered.

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