

Dorothy Grostern
The Secret II

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WALTER DEXTER *BOTTLE WITH FACE – BILL*

By Brian Grisson



One of Walter Dexter's recent high-art ceramic 'bottle' sculptures, *Bottle with Face – Bill*, includes a face emerging from the chest. The bottle form, with its similarity to the human upper torso, is a project Dexter has been working on for at least fifteen years. They embody both a tenuous reference to pottery's traditional concern with function, as well as Dexter's interest in painting. As well, the bottles reference his early work in figurative sculpture. However, along with other changes, the bas-relief face is something new.

Bottle with Face was hand-built to 24 ¼ inches high, 16 inches across and 6 ½ inches deep. Though it is not a closed form, the bottle does not include the neck that is common in most of these sculptures. Instead the neck supporting the face is included as a long spine-like engaged column rising from the base of the bottle. The spine often appears in Dexter's bottles, though they usually continue up through and become the neck. The neck supporting the face in *Bottle with Face* suggests that the figure they imply is actually positioned in front and slightly below the bottle, and

that the bottle itself is actually another figure standing protectively behind the face.

The oval form of the face is largely pushed out from inside the bottle with anatomical details added with clay or carved or scratched into it. The slightly masculine face gazes forward with a calm expression. On the other hand, the scratches that help delineate the face and extend down the neck have an expressive, even violent quality that contradicts the peace in the face.

After being bisque-fired and glazed, *Bottle with Face* was fired only once, an unusual restraint in Walter Dexter's bottle sculptures. Often after the standard single firing, Dexter will continue glazing and re-firing, sometimes up to six times.

It is also unusual that the back of *Bottle with Face* is not a variation on the front. This suggests that whereas Dexter's bottles are also a way to create large flat ceramic surfaces that he can accost with colour, brushwork, textures and shapes, *Bottle with Face* clearly has a more sculptural meaning.

This interpretation is supported by the subtle glazed surface. Walter Dexter's glaze decoration is more commonly applied in a sweeping gestural quality reminiscent of painting rather than calligraphy. *Bottle with Face* has almost no glaze at all, and only one colour. Using his fingers, Dexter rubbed a solution of copper, iron and water into the deep carving and scratching on the face and neck. Then he applied a clear, overall, semi-gloss glaze. The result is that the surface of the bottle is much like human skin.

The subtitle for *Bottle with Face* is a reference to Dexter's older brother, Bill Dexter, who, in his eighties, is not well. Through this sculpture, Walter Dexter might be unconsciously contemplating issues of mortality, his relationship with his older brother, and the artist's ability to turn a calm face toward all that life gives us. □

EVAN PENNY

THE DIMS OF PANAGIOTA: CONVERSATION #2

By J. Lynn Fraser

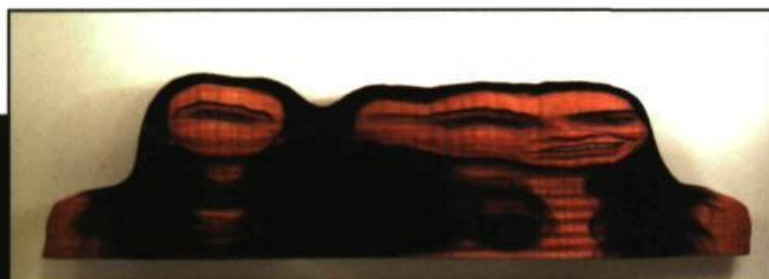
The geography of a face changes over time, not just due to external weathering and life-created fissures, but also as a reaction to the body's internal responses to life's uncertainties and joys.

Western society, however, prefers to ignore the fleshy reality of our selves in the world. We construct smooth, thin-walled façades of

DOROTHY GROSTERN *THE SECRET II*

By Lori Beaman

In *The Secret II*, (part of a pastel on paper series of the same name), Dorothy Grostern captures the moment of transference of words in the form of a secret that may be enlightening, damaging, or liberating. Her work sets the stage for various interpretive possibilities, and it is the viewer's experiences that flesh out the story. Grostern makes us witnesses to the moment of intimacy between what we imagine are friends, lovers, maybe even enemies or rivals—bodies are close, information is whispered, we are offered a glimpse of reaction whose interpretation is left to us to decipher. This is a moment we aren't



*Panagiota:
Conversation #2,
2008
Silicone, pigment,
hair, Aluminum*

perfection and in doing so we develop amnesia about our bodily reality.

"My orientation is away from idealization and toward intense specific observation and realism," Evan Penny commented about his larger than life figurative sculptures.

Penny's sculptures remind me of Lucien Freud's figurative paintings. Both artists unsentimentally explore the geography of the human form and the doughy topography of flesh. Each plays with scale and the viewer's relationship to the individual portrayed.

Freud's subjects are slathered in thick paint depicting human frailty and corporeality in subtle detail. Penny exposes our vulnerable flesh as well as our hirsute nature, which in our carefully plucked and controlled daily lives we reject.

In *The Dims of Panagiota: Conversation #2* (109" x 28" x 13") Penny explores one of

the main themes in his work: "how we see and imagine ourselves in real time and in space." Based on a photographic image created by Michael Awad, this relief sculpture is made of mohair, yak, horse and human hair, aluminum and silicone. It presents a physically – and time-distorted image of a young woman's face. It looks as if her movement has been both sped up and suspended.

The sculpture as a whole, and especially the smeared features of the woman's face in particular, repulse me. To me the woman's face no longer looks human. Penny would consider my response a success: "It is important that the work operates physically and at a gut level. It is successful if it is getting a direct physical response."

The overly pink flesh and the unnaturally long swaths of hair remind me of the cortical homunculus I studied in my psychology

classes. That illustration depicted the varying levels of importance in the human sensory-motor system by grossly distorting parts of the human body.

In Penny's 'homunculus' I am exposed to Penny's turning that which is considered valuable physical assets in society, luxuriant hair and youth, into something grossly repulsive in its uncontrolled growth. Flesh and hair become parodies of their ideals under Penny's intense observation. The elongated flesh and 'melting' of the woman's smile and eyes seem more appropriate to a Salvador Dali painting such as Dali's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans* (1936). In this homunculus I am forced to look away from what I would normally value as Penny has so successfully distorted the geography of the woman's face.

In his portrait Penny has deconstructed not just a face, but also the values we project onto it. Like a homunculus all the necessary parts are present and yet we can react with disgust. As I have asked myself, we must all ask – what it is that we really value in our selves and each other. ■

supposed to see, and from which we can normally escape; often more to avoid our own pain than to deny that of others. Grostern's work evokes the familiar and complex interfacing of pleasure and pain that we live in life. It is the intimacy of this moment that creates the discomfort—the viewer is paradoxically the interloper and the subject. The effect is similar to that created by Ron Meuck's painfully intimate sculptures.

For Grostern the face is a core focus of expression for the complexity of raw emotion that travels the space between beauty, joy and happiness and those dark moments of pain, angst, grieving, anger, and deceit. In this way, Grostern is one of a venerable tradition of the female matriarchs of Montreal (and Canadian) art, represented most famously by artists like Betty Goodwin and Ghitta Caiserman. Grostern's artistic career spans 25 years; she has exhibited her work internationally, including New York, Los Angeles, London and Taiwan, and has taught and mentored a generation of artists.

Much of Grostern's depiction of faces focuses on that blurry line between binaries like love/hate; desire/disgust, life/death, fear/curiosity. In Grostern's works we can

imagine caring and tenderness as a figure looks at a sleeping lover; or, is there an obsessiveness and malevolence in the gaze? When an old woman slouches in her chair and looks with half-open eyes as two young girls stroll by hand in hand, is she expressing perhaps a knowing or wisdom, or maybe something more malicious, such as envy or hate? Grostern is both literally and metaphorically extremely comfortable with shades of gray and it is this ambiguity, which closes in on the viewer. The certainty that one has correctly interpreted facial expression fades with careful study of Grostern's superbly executed figures.

The depth of Grostern's work is not for everyone. It forces the viewer to face, so to speak, what is often uncomfortable and that which requires a certain comfort with the gamut of human emotion. If all of this sounds too dark, rest assured there is a deep beauty in Dorothy Grostern's work that is its reflection of the complexity and wonder of the emotional spectrum we experience in life. Grostern's images defy neat categories. *The Secret II* is not about pretty faces, but is better described as beautiful, profound and provocative. □



Photo credit: Pierre Charrier.