

AMERICAN

CRAFT

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REVIEW **ARNOLD ZIMMERMAN**

Jane Hartsook Gallery, Greenwich House Pottery, New York, NY • September 23 – November 6, 2004



Arnold Zimmerman has long been recognized for large-scale carved vessels and his work in tiles. “Parables of Folly,” at Greenwich House Pottery, was a good opportunity to see his figurative soda-fired stoneware. “I decided to try to work in a ‘figurine scale’ and context,” he has said, referring to his ceramics of the last four years. “This new work only reaffirms my deep connections to clay and its history.” Indeed, historically, figurative clay predates vessel making by aeons, and Zimmerman’s current efforts remind us that the human relationship with clay was magical or religious before it was practical.

All the sculptures in the show were groups of figures engaged in a variety of activities. The smaller works—*Monument* and *Monument Builders*, 2004, *Raftmen*, 2004, *At Rest*, *Smoking*, 2003, *Carrying Man I*, 2003 and *Color Drenched Bodies*, 2004—represent diminutive people moving, building or carrying vases (resembling the artist’s previous work) or musing and stretching.

The larger sculptures are more densely populated tableaux. In *At the Wall*, 2004, 27 similar male figures contemplate a short wall enclosing a square space; *The Quarry*, 2004, depicts industrious figures moving rough stones and then assembling them in their dressed state; the miscellaneous figures in *Miramichi*, 2003, are enjoying a day in the mountains, fishing or relaxing with family; the figures in *The Lift*, 2003, shown in a circle, are holding up an unknown, amorphous substance; and *Hell’s Gate*, 2002, is an ambitious assemblage of multiple figures cavorting on a stepped structure.

Musings by the critic Donald Kuspit in the accompanying exhibit brochure* liken Zimmerman to the painters Pieter Bruegel or Hieronymus Bosch. “On one level, Zimmerman’s sculptures are brilliant parables of folly, the oldest of human themes, most famously elaborated in Erasmus’s *In Praise of Folly*. Erasmus has the same ironical realism as Bruegel, his Northern Renaissance contemporary: their droll, pessimistic spirit is alive and well in Zimmerman’s works.”

But Kuspit has missed the opportunity to see Zimmerman as a recent entry in a long line of potters who have commented on the concerns of daily life. The title of the exhibition notwithstanding, Zimmerman’s figures are relaxed, curious, busy or playful—they hardly impress the viewer as fools. They move large pots and other heavy objects, build monuments, contemplate puzzles and enjoy spare moments. These people seem unperturbed by the monotony of their lives; and the multitudes waiting at *Hell’s Gate* are frolicking at the joy of being together. Are they engaged in purposeless, Sisyphean tasks, as Kuspit seems to suggest? Where is the folly represented?

To be sure, there are parables—moralizing narratives—in Zimmerman’s groups, but they convey little sense of true folly. Are they too stupid to know any better or is something else going on? To me, their purpose seems more like that demonstrated by the ceramic figures and groupings produced during China’s Han or T’ang dynasties that ascribe dignity to ordinary tasks and quiet family moments, or by the workers and peasants depicted in porcelain for the amusement of 18th-century European courtly diners during sumptuous feasts. Arnold Zimmerman has given us much to ponder. —ELLEN PAUL DENKER

*An eight-page brochure is available from Greenwich House Pottery, 212-242-4106.

Ellen Paul Denker, a museum consultant, was co-curator of “*The Nature of Craft and the Penland Experience*,” at the Mint Museum of Craft + Design in 2004.