

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

Elise Siegel

Ylise Kessler Gallery

Walking into a show of Elise Siegel's ceramic "portrait" busts can be an unsettling and awkward experience. There they are—in this case, five works on pedestals—their gazes quizzical and eager, as though you, the visitor, are expected to bring something to the conversation. They are not truly portraits, as becomes quickly apparent, and they are only borderline human. Their features are more cartoonish than representational: smudgy gashes for mouths, eyes that look to have been poked out with blunt instruments, noses and ears crudely modeled, and hair suggested through

lumpish bits of clay. Yet there's nothing comical about these heads, which are often flattened at the back, implying violence and damage, and fired in two pieces, leaving a visible crack at the base of the neck.

Siegel provides no real identities for her subjects beyond titles that reference favored colors like *Dripping Cobalt Portrait Bust* (2015) or *Pale Blue Portrait Bust with Dark Drips* (2018). And yet these are distinct individuals, some more feminine or masculine than others, and each finished in a very different glaze, from matte to highly polished. *Dripping Cobalt* is a child-like creature with plump cheeks and bright blueberry accents; *Majolica and Copper Portrait Bust with Twinkling Eyes* (2014) is unquestionably female, with Betty Boop peepers and a plump, sensuous mouth; and *Baby Blue Portrait Bust with Square Eyes* (2018), head cocked ever so slightly, has a wistfully androgynous air about him/her.

Even those with only a cursory knowledge of art history will recognize some of Siegel's antecedents, specifically the portrait busts of ancient Roman art, which were revived and given new power and meaning by artists of the Renaissance, sometimes in terra cotta and wood as well as bronze and marble. Siegel herself has written about the influence of the Jomon Dogu figures of Neolithic Japan, Haniwa funeral figures from the third to sixth century, European iron helmets, and African masks.

Since the mid-1980s,

Siegel has in one way or another worked with the human body. Some of her earliest efforts were sculptures of skirts and dresses made from wire mesh and acrylic modeling paste. Later, after the birth of a daughter, she turned to installations in clay of child-size figures, sometimes supported on metal armatures, bearing evocative titles like *Into the room of dream/dread, I abrupt awake clapping* (2001) and *I am what is around me* (2007). The earlier works alluded to poetry and literature, and were described by other reviewers as both charming and unnerving.

Siegel has changed her focus in the last 10 years or so to concentrate almost exclusively on portrait busts, and with each new show, she wrests ever more subtle variations from the theme. We no longer live in an age when memorable characters are celebrated in this hallowed and ennobling genre—there is something classic and visually satisfying about a figure cut off below the shoulders and placed on a pedestal—but Siegel has conferred dignity, understanding, and warmth on her imaginary subjects, who seem as bewildered and unnerved by their situation as the rest of us as we close out this second tumultuous decade of the 21st century.

—ANN LANDI

LONDON

Olga Jevrić

PEER

Works by the late Serbian artist Olga Jevrić (1922–

2014) are rarely exhibited outside her homeland, so this first solo show in London of 28 sculptures, in conjunction with a second show at Handel Street Projects, offered something of a treasure trove. The PEER exhibition spanned some 50 years, beginning in the mid-1950s when Jevrić turned away from figuration. Bucking Soviet-style Socialist Realism, she created abstract structures consisting of bulky forms that seem to float in space, held by nails or metal rods, which serve both to support and to trap. These works made her a pioneer in Yugoslavia as she developed her own vocabulary through the juxtaposition of mass and void, solidity and weightlessness, lines and curves.

Largely made from industrial materials such as cement, ferric oxide, and iron, Jevrić's sculptures have a brutality and roughness that reflect her formative period in the aftermath of World War II. She described her work as influenced by "war, uncertainty, the slaughter of innocent people, social upheavals, and disorder of all social norms" and cited as further inspiration medieval tombstones called *stecci* found throughout the Balkans. The show included several small-scale pieces built in the 1950s as proposals for public memorials. Although never realized—perhaps they were deemed too abstract—they display a vigor often lost in large monuments and are decidedly not bereft of emotion. *Three Elements III* (1956), for example, resembles an arching figure

Reviews

