The Line Between Humor and Pathos

by

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DATE
Middle class families were sparse in the spectrum between the very poor and the very rich in the town of Bradford, Pennsylvania in 1973. By some stroke of fortune, I was born into one of the few middle class homes. This northwestern valley had originally hit the jackpot in 1901 when settlers struck oil. As the oil flowed from the rigs, the money flowed into the hands of the local families who built what would become Pennzoil and Kendall Oil. George G. Blaisdell, founder of Zippo Lighters, was simultaneously forging his business of wind-proofing flame into a huge corporate success. Over time, the oil wells were inevitably exhausted and this boom town found itself in an economic depression. As a young girl, I could sense the success Bradford once enjoyed, but I witnessed the results of its deterioration.

Bradford was and is beautiful for its picturesque rolling hills and untouched forests. I loved growing up there and will always call it home. The Zippo Manufacturing plant was built across the street from the house I lived in and where my father still resides. Though it seems undesirable to live beside a factory, the Zippo campus was spacious, clean, and welcoming to kids on their bikes. Summers were spent with my family on the Allegheny reservoir near the Kinzua Dam on my father’s houseboat. Much of the lake was on the Seneca Nation Indian Reservation; therefore, the land was undeveloped, and the water was clean and full of fish.

My grandmother on my father’s side was an untrained painter and a great lover of the arts. My grandfather’s occupation as an attorney afforded my grandmother the opportunity to acquire art. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Salvador Dali were among the artists she collected. Her house was filled with interesting treasures from around the world, and she lived just eleven houses down the street from my family and I. Painting and drawing lessons were frequent for me, as were trips to Buffalo, New York to visit the Albright Knox Art Museum.
At times, the good things about Bradford were easily forgotten, especially when I looked at it as merely a backdrop for a dilapidated industrial hole brimming with scores of welfare families. It really was one or the other: old rich folks, or overweight townie goofballs without jobs, but with plenty of mouths to feed. My awareness of the class differences was compounded by my father’s harsh, yet hysterical commentary from which no one was exempt. For example, a forty-something year old woman was referred to in town as “Hollywood Helen” for her tasteless and revealing wardrobe. It was known by all that she had given birth to many babies over the years, fathered by as many different men. My father, who had been adopted by his family, joked about being one of “Hollywood Helen’s” children. Upon sighting her, he might state, “Christ, your grandmother looks like a fucking tart.” My mother quit her job with learning disabled kids when she started to get their learning disabled offspring in class. She was always very compassionate, but at times needed to make fun of people too. Though both of my parents have great senses of humor, I definitely inherited my father’s, if that’s what you want to call it.

I was eager to leave Bradford for art school at Alfred University located in southwestern New York. Figurative painting and drawing was my course of study, but the University’s reputation and history as a ceramic arts hub prompted me to take a clay class. I became hooked on making functional pots, and graduated with a double major in painting and ceramics.

The University of Georgia accepted me into the graduate ceramics program based on a portfolio of pottery forms, which I continued with through the duration of my first semester. I have an inexplicable attraction to the material of clay and making pottery connected me to it in an intimate way and served my desire to produce something that is tangibly useful. However, it became clear that was no longer enough for me. Though formal elements like line, form, and
proportions were in the work, the essence of the things that mattered to me about the world, and the things I considered internally were not being addressed through the production of pottery. I began to bring personal content into the work by connecting my prior interests in figurative painting to my pots. A palette of slips were developed to supply me with the kind of vibrant and painterly colors I was accustomed to as a painter. These slips fire to temperatures ranging from cone 04 to cone 6. The images on the pots were arbitrary faces applied with mostly bold palette knife marks using the slips in a thick consistency. They were fired to cone 6 in the salt kiln. These pots served as an impetus to leave function behind and focus on forms that best served the ideas.

Hair has always been a great concern of mine because it implies a great deal about each and every individual. For example, a shaved head has associations with the military or possibly a skin head. A short haircut on a woman can have associations with lesbianism. I made a series of wigs and wig stands out of clay during my second year of school that dealt with different kinds of hair-do’s and what associations they could evoke. It was also a humorous idea to me to imitate hair, which is inherently soft and moveable, out of something hard and immobile. The forms were built with coils and then rasped for accurate proportions and fired to cone 6 in the salt kiln. The stands were voluminous forms without images that were based off of actual Styrofoam wig stands. These forms cued me into the next phase of the hair experiment. The stand became a canvas on which to incorporate the painted human face with hair-do intact.

Upon the completion of this body of work, I realized it wasn’t necessarily hair I was interested in, but the humor behind it. It was the way in which people exaggerated themselves that got my attention. I began to make connections between the types of people I found funny from my home town of Bradford, to the types of people I was studying in Athens. They were people
with exaggerated hair, body size or proportions, and lifestyles. On one hand, these elements could be comical, on the other hand they could be tragic. The tension between humor and pathos became the focus of my current work.

This body of work began with the “Big Hair Family”. They are life-sized male and female parental figures standing side by side with their smaller child standing in front of them in a classic triangular composition. (Figure 1). They are facing in a frontal position, as if they are about to be photographed. All three figures have noticeably large hair-do’s that are reminiscent of ancient Egyptian sculptures adorned with elaborate headdresses. The coil and rasping technique used for building the wig stands was again employed on a larger scale to build the “Big Hair Family”. Little anatomical detail is present allowing the figures to seem generic and abstract, like a blow-up doll would appear if its surface was blank. The figures are mainly voluminous forms which inevitably bring attention to the outer contour of each piece. Each piece in the trio was surfaced with the black and pink versions of the Forbes matte glaze and fired in an electric kiln to cone 04. A stippling action was used when applying the glaze to achieve a mottled effect. A thin layer of wax of the same color scheme was applied over the glaze for shine.

The increase in scale and the use of a grouping of figures was intended to give the piece a noticeable presence. The thought was that a person would relate well to something his or her own size, or larger, and might be more likely to catch the idea of the overstated hair-do. The way the “Big Hair Family” is understood depends entirely on the viewers point of view, whether it be in terms of brand of humor or personal historical perspective. It may be funny, or it may be freakish; it could be both, or neither.

The study of the thin line between humor and pathos was taken to a further degree with
the introduction of obesity as a topic. Given the history of the things I laugh about or take notice of, fat seemed to be an extremely appropriate next step. Fat hangs from the obese body and folds over itself. This characteristic of fat delivered me to a slightly new way of building with clay. In addition to making abstracted and contoured forms, I began to fold the clay over itself. The technique requires that the clay be built straight up about twelve inches, then pushed down over part of the vertical wall of clay while it is all still very wet. The inside of the fold of clay attaches to the outside of the vertical wall for strength. The piece is left to dry to a leather hard consistency, after which another layer of fat rolls can be added. A controlled, slow drying time is essential for the clay. This was the building technique used for the pieces titled “Calendar Girl” (Figure 2), “Light on her Feet” (Figure 3), and all three “Untitled (Head)” (Figures 4-6).

“Calendar Girl” was among the first obese figures to be completed. She stands 5 feet 2 inches tall, and her removable head rests on her shoulders. She was fired in an electric kiln multiple times using cone 04 slips, glazes, and washes. Immediately, the viewer may be reminded of the “Venus of Willendorf” or other ancient goddess or fertility figures. Though “Calendar Girl” looks much like these figures and shares the same sort of female power, she comes to encompass the idea of obesity through the repeated use of fat rolls that envelop her hair, face, and legs. The rolls rhythmically twist and climb up from her legs until they reach her large belly and breasts. Each roll of fat is covered in hatch marks which follow the direction of the roll. All together, they create a real sense of symmetry. Rolls of fat replace her facial features; thus, her identity becomes a roll of fat. The combination of the colors, chartreuse, orange, rusty red, and baby blue, create fleshy tones that give the appearance of unhealthy skin.

Actually removing a person’s facial and bodily features and replacing them with
undesirable hanging rolls is obviously an impossibility. “Calendar Girl” is an object which parodies the real existence of an obese person. If the viewer sees the piece as a satirical representation, he or she may interpret the sculpture as humorous. A person with a different sense of humor or historical perspective may find “Calendar Girl” to be an irreverent misrepresentation of an obese woman. Not only would the interpretation evoke feelings of distaste, but it may also arouse feelings of pity or sympathy. The possibility for either interpretation is what gives the piece its potency. While I am obviously rooting for the humorous interpretation, I embrace the possibility for either. The risks involved with walking the line between humor and pathos are the things that truly excite me.

The sculpture titled “Light on her Feet” (Figure 3) relies on the same possible interpretations of fat for its effectiveness. However, the scale of this piece has been taken way out of context. This single leg, which ends at the thigh and balances on its toes, stands without the rest of the body at approximately five feet tall. The jump in scale was meant to be ridiculous. The idea of big or fat is taken to the next step and hopefully heightens the tension between the things that are funny and the things that are sad.

Many issues were revealed to me through my new building methods. I became able to let go of some of the technical rules I was clinging to in ceramics. All of the pieces were large, and the areas of each were very thick with clay due to the folding technique. I could no longer be concerned with the weight of each piece; therefore, I responded to what each piece needed as it became apparent to me instead of following a blueprint for the form. A more relaxed way of building with clay helped me to improvise when it came to texture and surface. For example, in the piece titled “Untitled (Head)” (Figure 5), I used many solid rolled-up balls of clay to achieve
the texture of the hair. Many thin slabs of clay were thrown over the balls to conceal their connection to the head but still reveal a bumpy surface. This was a technique I did not use in earlier pieces because it adds considerable weight to the whole form.

My loosened grip on the rules of ceramics also encouraged me to be experimental with firing and glazing treatments. Several visiting artists I have come in contact with throughout my graduate career, like Arthur Gonzalez and Jean-Pierre Larocque, have mentioned that they fire their pieces multiple times. I adopted their idea and was able to create more depth in the surfaces of my work through applying multiple layers of slips, glazes, and washes. The sculptures were able to easily take on five to six cone 04 firings. Their strength and exterior qualities were never compromised. To my surprise, I found that I could rub my aforementioned colored slips into fired clay and glaze surfaces without the slips peeling off. The Forbes glaze essentially grabs on to the slip, gluing it to the piece while leaving the slips texture dry and scratchy. I juxtaposed a glossy and waxy surface against a dry surface to accentuate areas of form.

The head pieces (Figures 4-6) best exemplify these glazing techniques. They too are fired multiple times to cone 04 and have many layers of glazes, slips, and washes. Though these pieces are three-dimensional, I treated them like they were flat canvasses when it came to painting them. I used darker colors on the outside edge of each roll to imply shadow. As I worked toward the center of each roll, the colors gradually became brighter to imply the presence of light. These are the same techniques a painter uses to achieve three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface. The forms in clay were intensified through the use of color.

Though the building technique still emphasizes the roll of fat, the focus on the idea of fat itself is diverted through the introduction of facial features and the removal of the rest of the
body. The question becomes how does the viewer interpret the facial expressions? Perhaps the faces seem grotesque or maybe they appear solemn.

This body of work relates to the evolution of ideas in contemporary art through its social commentary and its dependence upon the viewer to activate a social discourse. I use the figure as a vehicle through which to discuss my particular ideas about the world. Jenny Seville and Ed Paschke are artists who have influenced me through their forceful and unfiltered figurative paintings. Seville with her painterly depictions of grotesque obese people, and Paschke with his hyper-colored distorted human oddities. Honore Daumier and Manuel Neri are other figurative artists I revere. I marvel at Robert Arneson’s ability to create humorous ceramic artwork without being hokey. The writing and philosophy of Joseph Campbell has also been particularly influential with his statements about pairs of opposites.

I am committed to continue my research of the line between humor and pathos. Though I have not yet exhausted the idea of obesity, I trust that my interests will naturally shift to other amusing ways in which people exaggerate themselves. Ed Paschke writes “I believe that any artist always works within the context or conditions that are indigenous to their time and, in doing so, reflects the energy, temperament and attitudes of that climate” (Adrian 3). Ultimately, I believe this is what I am doing and what I will continue to do.
Technical Information

**Clay Body - cone 04-10**

Fire clay - one 50 lb. bag  
OM-4 Ball clay - ½ of a 50 lb. bag  
Tile-6 clay - ½ of a 50 lb. bag  
Feldspar - 1 and ½ gallons  
Flint - 1 gallon  
Fine grog - 3/4 of a gallon

**Forbes Matte Glaze - cone 04**

G-200 feldspar - 30%  
Whiting - 11%  
Zinc Oxide - 5%  
Gerstley Borate - 10%  
Frit 3124 - 24%  
EPK clay - 10%  
Strontium carbonate - 10%

**Forbes Matte Glaze colors** - the items listed below are added to the base glaze above

Black- Manganese dioxide - 6%  
Copper carbonate - 5%  
Red Iron oxide - 2%  
Chromium oxide - 1%  

Orange- Orange Mason Stain - 10%  
Pink- Pink Mason Stain - 10%  
Chartreuse- Chartreuse Mason Stain - 10%

**AN Crawl Glaze - cone 04-02**

Magnesium carbonate - 25%  
Borax - 20%  
Gerstley Borate - 25%  
Flint - 5%  
Superpax - 5%  
V-gum - 1%

Only 10% Pink Mason Stain was used with the AN Crawl base glaze

**Jen's Slip Base - cone 04-6**

Grolleg clay - 40%  
Tile-6 clay - 20%  
OM-4 Ball clay - 15%  
Nepheline Syenite - 15%  
Flint - 10%

**Jen's Slip Base colors** - the items listed below are added to the slip base above

Dusty Royal Blue- Cobalt carbonate - 1%  
Copper carbonate - 3%  

Dark Blue-Green- Cobalt carbonate - 1%  
Black Nickel oxide - 2%
Tan- Black Nickel oxide - 1%
Black- Black Mason Stain - 10%
Chartreuse- Chartreuse Mason Stain - 10%
Yellow - Yellow Mason Stain - 10%
Pink- Pink Mason Stain - 10%
Orange- Orange Mason Stain - 10%
Baby Blue- Baby Blue Mason Stain - 10%
Mint Green- Mint Green Mason Stain - 10%

Ceramic Washes

Rust- Red Iron oxide - 1/3
       Gerstley Borate - 1/3
       Water - 1/3

Black- Black Mason Stain - 1/3
       Gerstley Borate - 1/3
       Water - 1/3

Tan- Rutile - 1/3
     Gerstley Borate - 1/3
     Water - 1/3

Orange- Orange Mason Stain - 1/3
       Gerstley Borate - 1/3
       Water - 1/3

Rainbow commercial glazes - cone 04

Transparent Gloss
Bead
Bibliography
