

Jeffrey Mitchell's work may appear innocent enough. And his use of cartoonish, lumpy, clay figure creatures could potentially provoke a knee-jerk reaction like "My kid could do that." But let's hope not. The Seattle-based artist was born and raised in the Midwest, where he learned the subtle art of gentility. His cut-paper installations, figures, functional ceramics and works on paper take sensitive, even taboo topics, and presents them in a most delicate manner. Viewers may not even realize that there's a subversive party going on right under their nose.



As a young gay man, Mitchell learned to "pass," thereby avoiding awkward conversations, and in worst-case scenarios, physical assault. To some extent, the same holds true of his work. His subjects are picture-perfect scenarios featuring Victorian scrollwork, flowers, friendly elephants, curious pandas, hugging bears, and other anthropomorphized creatures. So, it's no wonder that Mitchell's ceramic animals might parade as the stuff of children's imaginations. Yet, his work builds on, and responds to, art historical models that range from James Grover Thurber and Dieter Roth to Seto pottery and Jean de Brunhoff's Babar illustrations. And like Babar, Mitchell's creatures often act out adult behaviors.

In *Fat Green Stack* a hand-built glazed vessel takes its cue from, among other things, Victorian art pottery, pickle jars, and Chinese blue-and-white porcelain. His greenish-gold mound rises up from its base, lumpy, bulging, like a volcano ready to blow. Mixed in with fat burgeoning petals are a multitude of splayed cavities ready to take in, or pour out, your fluid of choice. In *Bare Backs* (2007), a wall-hung ceramic work, two bears are pictured standing on their hind feet. One bear has an arm slung casually over the other's shoulder. In spite of the fact that they've been clothed in denim, their puckish bear buttocks are on view and anatomically rendered. "Hello," reads the ceramic placard, below.

"HELLO." It's a common greeting that appears frequently in Mitchell's work, and an open invitation. An invitation to *what* is the question. In the same way that his work light-footedly tightropes between the innocent and the worldly, "hello," could be as devoid of sentiment as a grocery clerk's acknowledgement, or as suggestive as an utterance within the intimate confines of a bathhouse. Everything in his work is open for interpretation, whether it's a carefully placed opening, drips of plaster, or the very screws used to fix the work to the wall. You see what you want to see. At times this is hair, ejaculate, anuses and testicles. At other times, a rose *is* just a rose.

"This is one Jeffrey's guiding principles," writes artist Tina Hoggatt, "to introduce difficulty dressed up as comfort, in the familiar clothing of childhood or received design." We tend to think of disguise as something bad: a wolf in sheep's clothing. But in Mitchell's case it



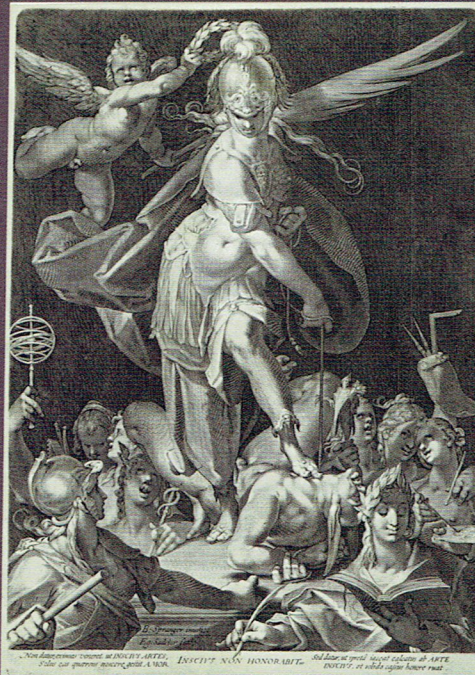
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allows us to enter these intimate spaces of our own free will. Are bunnies Easter basket-ready, or symbols of abundant fornication? Is a flower study the contemplation of nature or of budding sexuality? As Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze's performance in the 1990 supernatural romance "Ghost" attests, clay is a highly sensuous material: transformative, slick, yielding. "Those who are easily shocked should be shocked more often," said the legendary double entendre master, Mae West. Mitchell's work begs to differ. It presents hard topics—death, trauma, desire, and anxiety—in soft coverings. "So that it's not violent for the viewer or myself," Mitchell explains. He wants a respectful and gentle interaction. It's a Midwest sensibility: "A hotdish" Mitchell says.

Recent work for his upcoming exhibition "Night and Day" at PDX in Portland, Oregon includes *figurines en tableau*, and themes such as diurnal rituals: eating, working and sleeping. Sounds innocent enough. But then the questions arise: working how? Eating what? Sleeping with whom?

Paradoxically Mitchell's work was, in the course of a single season, exhibited at a religious institution (The Jewish Museum's "Unorthodox" through March 27, 2016) and heralded by Los Angeles collector Stefan Simchowitz—described in the *New York Times Magazine* as the art world's patron Satan. Mitchell magically flies between, above and below many of the art world's boundaries with work that "passes" as clichéd, sentimental, or whimsical. And it's precisely because of it that his work should be taken very, very, seriously.
—SUZANNE SHAW

"Jeffrey Mitchell: Night and Day" at PDX Contemporary Art, in Portland, OR, runs from January 12 - February 27, 2016. www.pdxcontemporaryart.com

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE:
PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

"THE FARMER," 2015
CERAMIC AND ACRYLIC PAINT, 10" x 6" x 7"

"BEARS WITH BEAR BASKET," 2015
GLAZED EARTHENWARE, 5¼" x 6½" x 4½"
PHOTOS: COURTESY PDX CONTEMPORARY ART

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