

Anne Chu  
Bonnie Collura

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*In the two North Quadrant Galleries of the Dallas Museum of Art, Anne Chu and Bonnie Collura have mounted an intelligent, thought-provoking, and playful exploration into the philosophy and phenomenon of art. In their puzzling yet engaging work, the idioms and conventions of art, most particularly sculptural history and tradition, are rigorously embraced, only to be subtly subverted.*

*Combining subjects and materials that are familiar and unfamiliar to the world of art, interweaving the sacred past and profane present, and fusing popular culture and fine art, Chu and Collura offer fascinating insights into interpreting and experiencing works of art.*

In the Northwest Quadrant Gallery, **Anne Chu** has installed life-size (approximately seven feet high) cast-paper bears, various wooden burial figures (each no taller than 29 inches), and watercolor studies. Loosely inspired by the 7,000 terracotta soldiers unearthed from the tomb of the 3rd-century B.C. Chinese emperor Qin Shihaungdi, each humanlike bear, awkward and graceful at the same time, stands in a line facing the middle of the gallery (three on each side of the entrance), their legs slightly apart and their palms out in tai chi position, with their unattached heads simply resting on their shoulders. Like the terracotta soldiers, the general form of the bear is repeated, but through handling and manipulation of paint and color Chu has imbued each with personality and presence. Moreover, each bear has been individuated with a personal chest insignia such as an all-seeing eye, the artist's name in Chinese characters, or a cartoon figure. Clearly wanting the "artist's hand" to be seen, Chu has rubbed or ground down parts of the bears, revealing the texture of the paper; on some of the bears, the feet have not been "finished" and the underlying support is plainly visible.

Fragile yet intimidating, heroic yet comic, these anthropomorphic

bears with their strange, quizzical expressions seem to be informed both by the richest traditions in figurative sculpture and by the artifacts of popular culture: cartoons, trinkets, and toys. For Chu, the image of a bear, at once a sacred, symbolic, and mythical animal, is so overloaded with contradictory symbolism, myth, and narrative as to be rendered a neutral form. Emptied of specific meaning, and functioning in a peculiar place—somewhere between high and low art, the familiar and strange—these odd, even uncanny bears serve as vehicles in which to explore and expose traditional notions of form and content in art.

At the other end of the gallery, across from the bears, stand ten wooden burial figures on a roughly constructed table, an unlikely museum platform or pedestal. Based on *ming chi*, or "spirit objects," which were placed in tombs during the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907) for the solace and use of the departed, these figures, which include *Two Guardian Figures*, *Court Lady (Butterfly)*, *Warrior*, and *Three Female Musicians*, exude a funky eloquence similar to the bears. Instead of the three-color lead glaze (*sancai*), popularized in the cosmopolitan, prosperous, and highly creative Tang dynasty, Chu has applied seemingly



arbitrary splotches of color onto roughly cut and glued blocks of wood that have been drilled and gouged with various tools. The figures' expressions and gestures recall the demeanor of the military officials, the grace of the musicians, and the power of the fierce guardians of the Tang funerary figures, but not quite. No longer warding off evil or entertaining in the after-life, these slightly askew burial figures of Chu's are divested of any spiritual meaning. Like the bears, these rough-hewn yet eloquent figures exist in a unique, "in-between" realm and render visible for questioning the structures that manipulate our perception of works of art.

Along the walls hang Chu's watercolors of bears and Chinese tomb figures; at times, only a part or fragment has been delicately rendered. In these sensuous and beautiful watercolors, there arises a wonderful, subtle tension between abstraction and representation. Chu does not use color and line in their familiar and expected roles: color does not support form, and line does not produce a three-dimensional space on a flat surface. As Barry Schwabsky describes in his insightful essay, Chu "uses line to carve the form out of a space which it somehow does not fully occupy, always remaining tentative and off-kilter in its gravity."<sup>1</sup> In essence, Chu has created form that is fleeting, disappearing as soon as it appears.

With her uncanny bears and burial figures, Chu, while playing with the conventions and conditions of art, raises critical questions regarding notions of form and content, fabricated and "handmade" work, and craftsmanship and accident.<sup>2</sup> Recalling the process-oriented camels of Nancy Graves in the early 1970s, Chu turns upside down the familiar framework of art with the use of highly unconventional forms, methods, and materials. Although her finished works reveal or record traceable actions and how they were made, Chu is not into process-for-process's-sake. Instead, Chu teases and toys with our sensory knowledge, memory, and aesthetic expectations to sharpen our awareness of the systems that aestheticize an

object—systems, basically, that direct and determine our interpretations and experience of works of art.

In a manner similar to Chu's interplay of fine art and popular culture, manufactured and handmade, **Bonnie Collura** playfully yet rigorously takes on the traditions and tenets of art. Instead of exposing interrelated and interactive systems at work, Collura thwarts the familiar parameters of art to explore structures of narrative and the function of myth.

In the DMA's Northeast Quadrant Gallery, Collura's exhibition of energetic cartoon-colored sculptural tableaux—which recall stage props for a strange and surreal theatrical production or a child's very large snapped-together model kit—and related black-and-white drawings that look like pages from a huge coloring book continue where her previous installations

left off. In her 1997 exhibition *To the third...*, Collura tells the story not only of the travels of Persephone, daughter of Demeter and Zeus, to Hades after her abduction by Pluto (the subject of one of Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini's [1598–1680] most powerful and pivotal works) but also of Persephone's travels from being a classical mythological figure to becoming the commercially successful Snow White, her embodiment in this century. Completely painted in white, *To the third...* is an engaging and fascinating journey from the Baroque theatrics in marble of Bernini to



Anne Chu, *Two Guardian Figures*, 1997–98, casein and oil on wood, 9 x 6 x 27 in. each, Mr. and Mrs. Michael Mendelson, New York, Photo: Ron Amstutz

the plastic, celluloid world of Disney. In essence, Collura told the story not only of the abduction of Persephone by Pluto but also of her "abduction" by Disney and subsequent transformation from a profoundly symbolic figure to a Disney darling, highly valued by the mass media for her marketability in the form of toys, trinkets, and souvenirs (note the ring on top of the figure's head in *White*, 1997, making her look like a giant trinket).

With the 1998 exhibition *Passage (from A to C and back again)* and her present installation at the DMA, Collura adds to this puzzle of travel and transformation a wealth of pieces, or parts of the story, to assemble and reassemble (a seemingly endless task). A rich array of figures, objects, and even colors



are characters, clues, and plot devices in different storylines.

Along with the story of Persephone's abduction to the underworld and her rebirth as fairy-tale Snow White, Collura includes references and associations to iconic figures from the inception of Christianity to popular films in the 1930s, from biblical figures to Dorothy Gale in *The Wizard of Oz* and Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*. Using nonlinear narrative, Collura interweaves the recognized with the unknown, constantly bringing us to the edge of recognition, the satisfaction of comprehension, only to thwart us with the indecipherable.

Like Bernini's art, which initiated a turning point in sculptural history by creating dramatic compositions combining ecstatic and emotional figures that twist and writhe, forcing the viewer to move around the sculpture in an unrequited search for completion of the story, Collura's lively compositions of morphing and mutating forms and figures force us into a 360° search for understanding. As we move around the sculptures (and even take another look at the drawings) in search of meaning and comprehension, we have an uneasy, disturbing sense that these forms are continually and quickly transforming without our seeing or knowing.<sup>3</sup>

Bernini may have fused figures from Greek art and mythology with

Christian subjects (compare Bernini's drawings after the Hellenistic Laocoön, 150–100 B.C., with his drawings for the sculpture of Daniel), but Collura definitely goes beyond any of Bernini's wildest Baroque combinations. Playfully combining into one tableau or drawing symbolic subjects and objects from classical mythology, Biblical stories, fairy tales, and popular film, Collura touches on the most profound underlying themes found in stories throughout time: good versus evil, death and regeneration, and transcendence, to name only a few.

Switching us back and forth between artifice and reality, time and cultures, Collura's morphing subjects in her sculptural tableaux and

drawings, while revealing the manifestation of myths, the re-presentation of mythological themes and subjects in the Bible, fairy tales, and popular culture, also point out how narrative is a "transcultural, trans-historical, and transmedial phenomenon."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, with her fantastical work Collura reminds us of the impulse toward narratives and myths, or the continuing deep desire for a good fairy tale, in contemporary society (as does, of course, the seemingly infinite number of books, articles, TV specials, and memorabilia, and even a song, about the iconic Princess Diana and her death in a car crash on August 31, 1997). But these transforming figures, which are specifically female, also raise a number of persistent questions.

Recalling postmodern artist Sherrie Levine's pithy statement that

"desire is always mediated through someone else's desire,"<sup>5</sup> we begin to ask who manufactures these myths, why do they do so, and what do these manifested myths and transformed mythological characters teach us about life, morality, and death?

Shifting the conventions and conditions of art to expose either systems or structures of narrative and the function of myth, Chu and Collura have expanded and enriched the meaning of art.

With highly unique and fresh visual aplomb and ambition, Chu and Collura

offer us insights not only into how we interpret and experience works of art but how we construct meaning and knowledge, of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

Suzanne Weaver  
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Dallas Museum of Art



Bonnie Collura, *Sleeping Death (Martyr Yellow)*, 1997, plaster gauzing, foam, paper, glue, water putty, and paint, 78 x 58 x 51 in., courtesy of the artist and Basilico Fine Arts, Photo: Adam Reich

<sup>1</sup>Barry Schwabsky, "Anne Chu," *On Paper 2*, no. 1 (September–October 1997): 21.

<sup>2</sup>Hal Foster discusses the relation between something that seems accidental but also appears repetitive, automatic, even technological as "pops"—visual equivalents of our missed encounters with the real. And he points out that the relation between accident and technology, crucial to the discourse of shock, is a great Warhol subject. *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 134.

<sup>3</sup>Collura describes how she hopes the mechanics of her sculptures, which are "inspired by lines, images, and color that seemingly move effortlessly on film, function on the same level as film. Once you see one image, the next is immediately behind it which alters your perception of the first image." Bonnie Collura, letter to the author, August 28, 1998.

<sup>4</sup>Wolfgang Kemp, "Narrative," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 60.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Shiff, "Originality," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 109.