

Fragile beauty

By Gordon Bowness



With their tight bodices, hoop skirts, lace trim and floral bonnets, the delicately ornate figurines created by Toronto artist Shary Boyle might at first glance seem at home in a cabinet of 18th-century Meissen porcelain. But emerging from the brittle frippery are bloody stumps, severed heads, extra limbs and shocking expressions of feminine fear and anxiety.

A few years ago, Boyle, a prolific painter and multi-disciplinary artist, turned her attention to the nearly defunct ceramic art called lace draping, a painstaking process where cotton lace soaked in liquid porcelain is arranged and fixed to greenware. In the kiln, the lace burns away, leaving the intricate pattern intact.

But Boyle's porcelains don't just pervert traditional forms; they engage the history of the craft. Porcelain, made in China for nearly two millennia, is prized for its translucence and strength. When it was introduced in Europe in the 16th century by Portuguese traders, it became all the rage in aristocratic circles.

Through the 20th century, however, porcelain figurines lost their cachet. Mass production by such companies as Royal Doulton in Britain turned the high art into mantelpiece trinkets only a grandmother could love.

Hardly anyone still manufactures the filigreed pieces of centuries past. The art is now practised mostly by hobbyists, mainly older women, who are content making fairy tale book princesses and sweet little girls, what Boyle calls "historical ideals of feminine beauty."

She studied the art in Germany, then learned a few more tricks of the trade working with a number of these women in Canada. "I was immediately seduced by their fantasy worlds," she says. To date, she has crafted 15 figurines based on the Meissen style and measuring up to 38 centimetres in height. The details she applies are intense. Some figures are covered in paper-thin butterflies, or their delicate fingers hold severed heads. Mostly they look slightly tortured—but Boyle refuses to see her porcelains as victims. "There's strength in their unflinching gazes," she says. "They refuse to be defined as damaged. What we see is their courage."

Otherworld Uprising, a book on Boyle's art, is being released this spring by Conundrum Press, Montreal.

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