

A WORLD OF ABJECT BEAUTY

Misty Gamble plays with excess, opulence and Chihuahuas in her thought-provoking show.

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Wildly opulent, excessive and lavish only begin to describe Misty Gamble's ceramic work in her exhibit "Abject Reverie" at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art.

Gamble, who teaches at the Kansas City Art Institute, studies ideas about ornamentation, fetish and ideals of feminine beauty and borrows from rococo art's fantasy, wit and color palette. Think of Jean-Antoine Watteau's frothy paintings and Marie Antoinette's elaborate coiffures and dress.

Ornamentation visually communicates culture, identity, sexuality, gender or questions of gender, and social status. Gamble's oversized busts and torsos of women — the torsos look like dressmaker forms — are festooned with cupcakes, gift boxes, gigantic wigs of clay, ornate patterns and, quirkily, Chihuahuas. Gamble smartly repeats objects and forms, which strengthens the installation.

Typically, abject describes something that disrupts a social order: hair on your head is pleasing, hair on the bath soap is disgusting, crossing a boundary into abject. For Gamble, the disturbingly decorated female form perhaps takes the feminine out of the ordinary and into the grotesque of overly



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"Indulgence," by Misty Gamble, is part of her "Abject Reverie" exhibit of new ceramic works exploring ideas about ornamentation, fetish and feminine beauty, on view at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art.

and overtly constructed beauty, for Gamble's works are indeed beautiful, but they cross over to rococo artificiality.

"Covetous" is one of two ceramic dressmaker forms with a steel wire "skirt" filled, in this instance, with tumbling Chihuahuas. Its companion, "Indulgence," is filled with cupcakes and gift boxes.

In "Covetous," the life-sized Chihuahuas, in a variety of standing and sitting poses, expand the decadence Gamble portrays. The toy breed suggests, by the starlets and celebrities who often seem to own them, a status symbol. Gamble emails, "the Chihuahuas and cupcakes become the body itself and symbols of excess, absence of body, and contemporary fetish objects."

Gamble carries the fetish conceit into "Rapture," which features five wall-mounted rows of Chihuahua sculptures in cheerful

blues, greens and yellow.

Borrowing the familiar blue and white palette from delftware but the pattern from 18th-century dress textiles, "Luminosity's" delicate head has a gigantic Barbie-like ponytail coiffure, crowned by a juvenile bow. The elaborate and infantilized diadem of hair objectifies the female image, keeping it childlike and thus controllable.

Here, as in all of Gamble's busts, there are no eyes, but an elaborate wig that covers half of the face. By eschewing some facial features, Gamble suggests how femininity is constructed through elaborate decoration, which may obliterate identity. Her figures become ciphers for idealized and sexualized decorative objects.

Busts titled "Luxuriant" and "Decadence" are curiosities of bulbous and curvaceous shapes that completely obscure all facial features, suggesting that we are consumed by our desires. The work is conceptually reminiscent of 16th-century Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo's bizarre yet contemporary-looking portrait heads made of vegetables, fruits and flowers. Elaborate flocked paintings accompany the sculptures.

Constructed beauty not only triggers attention but may be a defensive posture, and Gamble's female forms both attract and repel. Their gigantic coiffures are strangely enticing and yet provide helmet-like protection, suggesting beauty and artificiality may serve multiple objectives.

The gallery also presents "Taking Aim," a three-person exhibition that trades on images of weaponry, featuring the ceramics of Seattle artist Charles Krafft and Kansas City artist Linda Lighton, and the ink drawings of Connecticut-based Jane Rainwater.

Lighton's luminously glazed sculptures include machine guns and lipstick bullets. Krafft's "Balkan Bunny" features a pleasant delft earthenware bunny that unfortunately embraces a grenade. Rainwater creates delicate black ink drawings of botanicals whose flowers are composed of weapons.

The artists' works subversively call attention to violence by rendering them in beautiful sculptures and drawings. They are, in Rainwater's words, "horrible beauty."

On exhibit

"Misty Gamble: Abject Reverie" and "Taking Aim: Linda Lighton, Charles Krafft and Jane Rainwater" continue at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, 2004 Baltimore Ave., through Dec. 22. Hours are 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and by appointment. For more information, call 816-221-2626 or go to sherryleedy.com.