



Ginger Geyer

Explorations and Transformations

TO EXPERIENCE A GEYER PIECE IS TO ENTER INTO A many-faceted exploration using various media: ceramic objects, painted details from old masters, biblical allusions and a narrative based on the adventures of a fictional character called 'Chlora'. Geyer's art questions received wisdom at the same time that they uncovered clues to the transcendent.

Article by Betty Sue Flowers

The complexity of this exploration arises from the interplay of five elements that are present in almost all of Geyer's work. The first is the ceramic

object itself, which is usually a lifelike replica of an everyday thing – a well-used baseball glove, a tricycle, a champagne bottle, a lunch box, a cherry pie, a rose petal. These objects elicit an initial sensation of the uncanny – the cherry pie looks delicious and we respond as we would to a 'real' cherry pie before we abruptly 'realise' that we must change categories. We internalise the softness of the old baseball glove and must perform a little bridge manoeuvre into a world where the baseball glove is hard and would shatter if it caught a ball. Geyer joins the ongoing tradition of *trompe l'oeil* (which more accurately refers to 2D, not 3D art), in which the world is not as it appears. But unlike most realistic sculpture, her work does not stop with the delight of the fooled eye.

On many of these everyday objects, Geyer has painted a detail from a familiar painting, often with a religious subject – Fra Angelico's fresco *The Sermon on the Mount* on a baseball glove; Botticelli's drawing of Satan on the license plate of a tricycle; Tiepolo's *Call of Isaiah* on an ice cream churn.

In addition to the ceramic object itself and the historical paintings on everyday objects, a third element features references to Biblical stories and verses, sometimes through the art depicted (Andrea Della Robbia's *Annunciation*) and sometimes through a combination of the art and the object (a detail from Max Liebermann's *Samson and Delilah* on a home permanent box). Occasionally, the title of the work adds yet another dimension. One of Geyer's objects



is a porcelain champagne bottle in an ice bucket. On the bottle is a detail from a mosaic depicting the wedding at Cana while adaptations of Dubuffet's *Reveler* and Frederick's Church's *Icebergs* appear on the ice bucket. The entire piece is titled *Miracle on Ice*, an allusion to the miracle at Cana where water was turned into wine.

The fourth element of a Geyer work is a background narrative that is not present in the piece itself but is to be found on her website or available on printed material that sometimes accompanies individual objects in exhibitions. In prose poems, Geyer tells the ongoing story of Chlora, a mischievous girl whose journey to wisdom through irreverent curiosity and observation is 'illustrated' by the art objects. Sometimes Chlora comments on the objects in stories that feature them. On the website these stories are richly illustrated with photographs of details from the artworks, which offers an approach to one art (ceramics) through the medium of two others (Geyer's own prose poetry, plus photographs made by her friends).

Any of Geyer's works stands on its own, but to experience the pieces together as stations on a journey of discovery adds a dimension of cohesion to years of artistic work. This spiritual probe, the fifth element of Geyer's body of work, is often couched in humour or found through the intentional use of cliché. Repeated themes emerge in many forms – for example, the paradox of everyday objects, which are seen in a spiritual light while at the same time, spiritual truisms are 'brought down to earth'.

Perhaps the most significant theme to emerge from these explorations is the possibility of transformation in response to the inevitable fragility of human life. One piece by Geyer is particularly moving in this respect – a pair of cantors modelled after two figures taken from the French Gothic alabaster tomb sculptures called *The Mourners*. As with so much of her art, these figures are incorporated into household objects; in this case into andirons, designed to be exhibited in a real fireplace, which serves as a kind of proscenium for the porcelain cinders and logs, one of which depicts an adaptation of



Facing page, above: *The Trajectory of Love*. 2005. Glazed porcelain two pieces, 4.75 x 9 x 10.25 in.

Facing page, below: *Miracle on Ice*. 2011. Glazed porcelain with palladium, gold and mother-of-pearl. 15.5 x 11 x 11 in.

Top: *The Mourners: Presence is Fire*. 2011. Glazed porcelain. Installation: 17 x 27 x 19 in.

Above: *Cold Call*. 2015. Glazed porcelain with white gold and acrylic. 14.5 x 17 x 15.5 in.

Below: *Botticelli's Satan* (Detail).

Three Hebrews in the Fiery Furnace from the catacombs of Priscilla. The Chlora story attached to this work deals with the death of a grandmother in a house fire at Christmas. Looking at the andirons/mourners in the fireplace almost inevitably leads to the realisation that this artwork, so near a potential fire, could be





Above: *Chlora's Wheelbarrow*. 2004. Glazed porcelain. 15 x 15 x 29 in.
 Inset above: *Chlora's Wheelbarrow Broken (Detail)*.
 Below: *Chlora's Reinvented Wheelbarrow*. 2015.
 Glazed porcelain with acrylic. 19 x 31 x 20 in.
 Adaptations of Georgia O'Keeffe's *Sky Above Clouds III*;
 Jasper Johns' *Device*; Jean Arp's *Torso with Buds*.
 Facing page: *Chainsaw Catechism*. 2009.
 Glazed porcelain with acrylic. 21 x 45 x 26 in.

burned and destroyed. Geyer says in response to this observation, "It already has been through the fire. And here it stands."

The theme of vulnerability and transformation is powerful in the context of porcelain as a medium because porcelain itself offers so many inherent challenges. As any ceramics artist knows, many things can go wrong in the process of shaping and drying and firing. The medium is fragile and, as with life itself, so much is out of human control. When something cracks in the firing process, the artist cannot paint over it or change a phrase on the word processor. It is as if the material itself has its own will.

What do we do in everyday life in response to these 'cracks', these perhaps internal flaws that we never noticed before? That is the deeper, spiritual question that Geyer's art leads us to ponder.

It is a question that leads to explorations in Geyer's artwork as well. One of Geyer's pieces, *Chlora's Wheelbarrow* was badly broken when someone fell on it a few years after it was made. Geyer put away the pieces but, in 2015, took them out to contemplate what might be done with a broken piece in which she played with the idea of brokenness even before it was literally broken. As she explains: "Epoxy, fills



and in-painting would be required, but having some training in art conservation, I saw it as an experiment. The accompanying story had expanded in my mind and it allowed some refiguring of the sculpture. It needed some strengthening from below, so I invented corn cobs and strategically placed them for support. The handles of the wheelbarrow had broken and gardening gloves were added. In the story I delved into a compost pile, so a small shovel came into being. The corn and shovel allowed opportunities for more art history adaptations, which was fun. The unwieldy wheelbarrow had been abused by Chlora's carelessness and greediness, and the new version seems to beg the question of generosity: what happens when greed and abundance coincide? The wheelbarrow is bewildering and busy, but it seems to bear its load with an awkward grace that has presence."

In Asian traditions, such as *kintsugi*, the crack in a vase is sometimes enamelled in gold, highlighting rather than hiding the flaw. Or sometimes the 'accidents' become part of the meaning, as in W B Yeats' poem, "Lapis Lazuli" where:

*Every discolouration of the stone,
 Every accidental crack or dent,
 Seems a water-course or an avalanche,
 Or lofty slope where it still snows.*

Because the speaker in the poem is engaged with the stone as an art object, even the accidents have become meaningful and are incorporated into the design. He does not claim that the crack was intended or was there from the beginning. But because of his aesthetic connection to the object, these accidents seem (are experienced as) part of the design.

The experience of the meaningful accident, or the golden flaw, has its theological counterpart in the

Christian notion of the *felix culpa* ('happy flaw' or 'fortunate fall'). Like Adam, whose fall from God's grace was fortunate in that it led to the incarnation of Christ (a doctrine that Geyer admittedly grapples with) the accidental crack in Geyer's work gives rise to the experience of transformation not possible without it. By dealing with the flaw, something new is created. That transformation is at the heart of all artwork, for in wrestling with the medium, something unintended and uncontrolled emerges.

Transformation in the medium leads to transformation in the eye of the beholder. After the bisque firing of *Chainsaw Catechism*, Geyer had painted two images of Jesus on the piece: a detail from Durer's *Last Supper* on the blade of the saw and a detail from a Ravenna mosaic of *Christ Separating the Sheep from the Goats* on a bag of sheep and goat feed, alluding to the separation of the sheep from the goats, the good from the evil, at the end of time. When the piece was taken out of the kiln, there was a crack down the middle of the figure of Jesus on the feed bag. Geyer calls this another "wise crack", for during the biblical last supper, Jesus breaks bread with his disciples and says, "This is my body, which is broken for you." The crack in the figure was so large that Geyer, rather than attempting to repair it, left it as a tear in the material of the bag and created pellets of feed that now spill out of the 'torn' material. The piece, which began with the broken body of Jesus near the allusion to the last supper, now alludes to a second biblical story in which Jesus tells Peter to "feed my sheep".

This discovery and transformation points to another spiritual theme found in much of Geyer's work: the abundance that is evidence of divine grace.





We see this generous overflow in the chainsaw, the wheelbarrow, a cornucopia of pomegranates, a pile of books, a box of art supplies, a fruited wreath, the bounty of a busted piñata, the large potlatch ladle attending the homemade ice cream and in the myriad embers of the fireplace. Each of these is composed of dozens of handbuilt parts, some of which can be freely arranged. This plenitude is also found in under-glazed, free-hand (and thus interpretive) adaptations of masterpieces that proliferate on an upright vacuum cleaner called *Horror Vacui*, on a folded quilt, around an oversized barrel of Tinker Toys, all over a tricycle and around a full sized porcelain scarecrow. Add to this a profusion of double entendres, puns and other wordplay, and there is a lot there alongside the recreated object.

"Make it new!" the poet Ezra Pound insists. Through her multimedia exploration of the old and the new, the sacred and the profane, the carefully wrought and the accidental, Ginger Geyer's art does just that.

Betty Sue Flowers, former director of the Johnson Presidential Library, is Professor Emerita at the University of Texas at Austin. She is also a poet, editor and business consultant, with publications ranging from poetry therapy to the economic myth, including four television tie-in books in collaboration with Bill Moyers. In addition to two collections of poetry, her books include *Browning and the Modern Tradition*; *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the*

Facing page: *Horror Vacui*. 2011. Glazed porcelain with acrylic 42 x 17 x 30 in.

Above: *Recycled Tricycle* (shown with Peter's Easter Basket and *The Divine Economy Book*). 2012.

Glazed porcelain with gold and white gold. 22 x 28.5 x 22 in.

Below: *Ginger Geyer's Signature*.

Bottom: *Ginger Geyer*.



Future; and, as editor, *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems in the Penguin English Poets series*.

There is an exhibition of Geyer's work in Washington, DC, US from 31 August through 9 October, 2015 at the Henry Luce III Center for Arts and Religion, The Dadian Gallery at Welsey Theological Seminary. For further information on Ginger Geyer's sources, her website is <http://www.gingergeyer.com>.