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## Paradox in Paradise: A Ceramics Arts Residency in Rome

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by  
**Ginger Geyer**

Austin-based artist Ginger Geyer grew up in Arkansas, earned BFA and MFA degrees from SMU, and worked for thirteen years at the Kimbell Art Museum and Dallas Museum of Art in conservation, collection management, and planning. She received a master of arts degree in pastoral ministry from the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest. She has been an adjunct professor there and at Concordia University. Since 1999, she has served as arts consultant and gallery curator for Laity Lodge, a retreat center supported by the H.E. Butt Foundation in the Texas Hill Country. Handbuilt, glazed porcelain has been her primary medium since 1990. See <http://www.gingergeyer.com> to view her work; Valley House Gallery, Dallas, represents her work.

That paradise might be paradoxical was not a new consideration for me. But that the simple pleasures of a fruit garden could trump the grandeur of Rome—that was indeed a surprise, and one of many, in my recent three-month sojourn in Italy as an artist in residence. I went to Rome not to recover the lost chance for a semester abroad when I was a young, wide-eyed art student, nor to mimic the swagger of a Neo-classical artist on the Grand Tour, but to check off an item on my bucket list which, at sixty, is something I take seriously. The timing was suddenly right to spend an extended period of time in Italy, so when the ideal situation presented itself, and I was fortunately able to fund myself on short notice, I could not resist. I've been to Italy several times, but always at the mercy of some sort of group. Here was an opportunity to satisfy my art gluttony in the Eternal City, while making my own art in a ceramics studio in the countryside. My host was C.R.E.T.A. Rome, a small ceramics school in the historical district, with housing in the town of Anguillara.

For twenty-plus years, I have made porcelain sculptures that are realistic and quirky, combining three primary sources of inspiration—art history, religion, and the mundane world of my own upbringing within the bubble of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant American South. My work alludes to contemporary issues of spirituality and power, and there is probably nowhere on earth where these are more historically enmeshed than in Rome. Like Rome, my work is layered, with one thing erupting next to another. I find humor in these collisions and like to dig out the meanings behind clichés and kitsch. For instance, what do you make of a printed sign in San Pietro in Vincoli that points to Michelangelo and says, “One Euro to Light Up Moses”? Or Giorgio’s souvenirs, with Moses statuettes lined up by size? Are bigger commandments better commandments? What about a vintage transistor radio in the Museo dei Cappuccini? It belonged to Father Mariano of Turin; if he is sainted, will it be ensconced in some overblown Baroque reliquary, as was the poor finger of Doubting Thomas?

Just when you think the whole city is somewhere between misplaced reverence and kitsch, you find yourself actually admiring the Trevi Fountain and the Colosseum. The true grandeur of that structure surely diverted the truth that “civilized people can and will do almost anything, however strange and terrible, if they see others doing it and are persuaded of its normality, necessity, and entertainment value.”<sup>1</sup>

Any such thing I observe can be fodder for a new piece, and the recording of such tidbits is ongoing. My creative process is loosely regimented and is inseparable from my “regular” life. Story writing is part of this as I search for models in junk stores and art museums. (I admit to being a museum addict; it comes from working in them for thirteen years.) Meanwhile, something will be in process in the studio. The hands-on making part is just half of it: my work appreciates the monkey mind. My odd objects are a tiny contribution to a gigantic goal—to change the world for the better by reminding us that we are human. All too often, I let it bog me down, and I have to get away.

Because my pieces are meticulously constructed and painted, I’m often asked how long it takes to make them. The answer is my current age. This is not meant to be evasive, for it is true. Ideas stew for a long time in the conceptual phase before they finally take physical form. Pieces I hope to make someday are lined up on the tarmac, in various stages of readiness for take-off. The problem is, there is more on that flight list than I can ever get made. A residency in Rome might be a fancy form of procrastination, or it could hit the refresh button. The tension in my creative process has long been the issue of how to finish, how to bring work to fruition. No doubt, this residency would spawn a longer line for my interior airport.



Ginger Geyer

*Fruition* (in five parts)

2013, glazed Limoges porcelain with acrylic and gold; approximately 26" diameter x 5" deep,  
with adaptation from Andrea Della Robbia's *Annunciation*





Ginger Geyer  
Detail, *Fruition*

2013, glazed Limoges porcelain with acrylic and gold; with adaptation from Andrea Della Robbia's *Annunciation*

It would also allow my art-story character, Chlora, to try out a new venue. Chlora has become the organizing mechanism of my epic narratives, which have all been set in small town America. Sending her off to Europe would be a rite of passage and she might lose her innocence somewhere between the vestal virgins and the Vatican. But in that journey, Chlora would alert us to something humane within the mash-up of sacred and secular. To me, Italy is paradise; it would take Chlora's wry perception to find the ordinary there, and then to convert it into the holy.

I limit myself to porcelain, a clay body that is mistake-prone. A crucial part of my process is to read what happens in the heat of the kiln, and attempt to turn flaws into assets. Knowing full well that porcelain is prone to warp and crack, that the colors will deepen, that the entire piece will shrink about 15%, why do I persist in taking this risk? Why do I not use a clay that behaves better, or turn to oil painting which stays put? Partly because it prevents me from falling in love with my own laborious creation. I steel myself when opening the kiln, and whatever presents itself is what I get. Occasionally a “wise crack” occurs, a *felix culpa* that takes the sculpture in a whole new direction. After my initial disappointment, I wait until the piece speaks back, then I calculate repairs and listen for the new story. This tactic of engaging flaws is anathema to the craft world and particularly to porcelain artists who are into precision. Perhaps it is ironic that the Italians offered me bags of sumptuous Limoges porcelain to model. I tried to do well by it.

My arrival was mid-October, and a plentitude of ripe pomegranates and persimmons welcomed me. Nearby were the last of the grapes and the beginnings of lemons. Out of season but identifiable trees included apples, kumquats, plums, tangerines, oranges, olives, kiwi, pears, and figs; at least twelve fruit trees, surely a symbol for something. Beyond a tall iron gate were lovely fields that had been encroached upon by suburbia. There was no sign of the Etruscans who might have lived there long ago, but I bet they saw the same vivid Orion as I did in the night sky.

This made me realize that I am prone to the post-modern skepticism of natural beauty, for it brings out my vulnerability to idealism, to that wish for paradise. In many cultures, paradise is imaged as a garden, and in my own Christian tradition, as in Judaism, it all began there. As any gardener knows, however, gardens require effort, and they are not always pretty. Smashed persimmons and pomegranates drew flies and bees as they rotted on the patio. The yard was littered with debris, and the studio was cluttered with another artist’s creative residue. The nearby medieval town was far away. I was unexpectedly isolated.

Nature persisted and urged me on. I wanted to explore Rome, but with intermittent transportation, I stayed put in the studio and made the most of time. In the first week, a pretty fruit wreath presented itself, modeled in quadrants, after one of the Della Robbias who brought ceramics to a height in Renaissance Tuscany. A front door Christmas wreath had long been on my “to do” list, with a door knocker for the annunciation. “Pretty,” however, was not in my normal repertoire, and I resorted to cliché to shake it up. *Knocked Up* was the title I proposed by email to two good friends. The one who is an avowed anarchist told me to be respectful. As I detailed the fruits from looking at willing models in the yard, they reminded me of Caravaggio’s baskets of fruits, well represented in Roman collections and known for their accurate imperfections. The wreath took on the kinder title *Fruition*, teaching me that Mary’s “Yes” was both a completion and the start of newness.

The olive trees in the garden recalled a visit to the groves below Assisi where St. Francis rebuilt the ruins of an old church. With Pope Francis joyfully doing the same thing, and being named TIME’s Person of the Year, the call to humility was ever present, especially in contrast to his new home, the Vatican. I wove a rough clay basket, and filled it with apples and olive branches—symbols of the two primary gardens of the Bible: Eden and Gethsemane. What on earth did these two biblical gardens have in common? Online commentaries suggested disobedience and obedience. And running away versus standing your ground. I probed these facile polarities in

much garden-variety theology. Maybe the commonality between Eden and Gethsemane is betrayal. The primal couple was betrayed, perhaps by a God who set them up for failure, but also by theology derived from a distorted doctrine of original sin. Jesus, betrayed not just by Judas, but also by a theology of divine child abuse.



Ginger Geyer

*Gardening with Francis*

2014; glazed Limoges porcelain, 5" x 14" x 12" with adaptations from Van Gogh's *Memory of the Garden of Etten* and Gauguin's *Christ in the Garden of Olives*

Flipping around online, two paintings appeared that had strange commonalities and they were only a year apart, by the well-known pair of argumentative pals, Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin. The Van Gogh *Memory of the Garden of Etten* (often translated as Eden) and Gauguin's *Christ in the Garden of Olives* jumped onto napkins tucked into the basket of apples and olives, and Chlora embarked on a picnic in the grove.

Back in Rome, protesters were shutting down the city streets. It was a strike by transportation workers, which reminded me of the story of 1912 textile laborers whose signs demanded their right to have a life: "Give us bread but give us roses." From there, a reading of the James Oppenheim poem, *Bread and Roses*,<sup>2</sup> led to a bakery investigation of *grisseli*, or Italian breadsticks. A few December roses still hung on in the garden. I felt like a baker myself as I formed the soft clay into rosebuds and breadsticks and wrapped them up like a bouquet, bread for Jesus, roses for Mary.





Ginger Geyer

*Give Us Bread But Give Us Roses*

2013; glazed Limoges porcelain;

5.25" x 16" x 12.5" with adaptation from Ignacio Chacon's *Madonna and Child with Bird and Roses*

As I pounded the pavements looking for other props, like a wallet for St. Matthew, one noble enough to deserve a Caravaggio on it, I sensed the latent power that lies beneath those basalt cobblestones. All stone is ancient but, in Rome, stone just looks older. It felt like the empire will rise again, will march itself back under those triumphal arches to cleanse off the enemies' blood, to the wild cheers of the people who have been kept so busy by mere survival that they have not paid attention to what their leaders are up to. What did artists of that time say about this? Rome has always been a haven for artists, and its seeming lack of relevance to artists today is puzzling; there is little contemporary art to be found in public places. "It takes only two or three artists to reanimate a culture. . . . One cannot simply write off a culture because it has gone into recession, because recessions—as history amply proves—can turn out to be merely temporary."<sup>3</sup>

On a day when I felt abnormally patient, I went to the Vatican Museums. This glut of grandeur and gawking humanity proved that seeing art with a crowd is not just unpleasant; it hurts. Visual art is not like music. A hoard of people does not enhance the experience. By the time you get to the Sistine, you will wish you had a motorized wheelchair and earplugs. But before that, you must endure the poorly installed contemporary galleries which have some predictable hits but are so cluttered with bad art it might as well proclaim that art and faith are both better left in the past.

Few tourists realize they walk into the Sistine Chapel underneath a rather shocking scene that nobody today would allow inside a church, much less to the right of the altar. I had recently adapted this section of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* on my *Recycled Tricycle*. This life-sized rolling tribute to *The Divine Comedy* replicates other masterpieces, as well, with the crowning celestial white rose of *Paradiso* perched on its handlebars.





Ginger Geyer

(above) *Recycled Tricycle*

(below) detail of step plate, *Recycled Tricycle*, 2012, glazed porcelain with gold and white gold, 22" x 28.5" x 22", with adaptations: Botticelli drawing of Satan for *Divine Comedy*; Michelangelo detail of Charon from *Last Judgment*; ancient Rome She-Wolf; William Blake, *The Lustful in Purgatory*; Signorelli, *The Hard Climb up Mt. Purgatory* (on bike seat); Giovanni di Paolo detail from *Creation and Primum Mobile*; Gustave Dore detail from *Queen of Heaven*; and di Michelino's *Dante's Poem*

I found a seat on the Sistine's fifty yard line and drew gestures of the prophets and sibyls. I snuck blurry photos of the ceiling, despite stern warnings, as I needed them for my Brownie camera piece called *Shootin' Match*. In this one, Chlora challenges her sister to take pictures of naked people. While aiming at the *Drunkenness of Noah*, her sister's camera is damaged by a grabby guard. Later Chlora wins the contest by immortalizing Priapus, an outstanding fertility god, in Pompeii's *House of the Vetti*.



Ginger Geyer  
*Shootin' Match*

(two vintage Brownie cameras with flash attachments)

2013, glazed Limoges porcelain with white gold and mother of pearl

larger camera:

6.5" x 7.5" x 6.5" with adaptation from central portion of Michelangelo's *Sistine Chapel*

smaller camera: 6.5" x 5.5" x 7" with adaptation from Priapus from *Pompeii House of the Vetti*

Later, St. Peter's Basilica was remarkably quiet as a confessional mass was going on up front. Said hello to the *Pietà* from over the heads of a multitude. Ducked into the Treasury. Jewels. Gold. A huge, gold-plated Holy Baby. More smacky modern art. Lord, how did we come to this? Save us from your church.

It is in the smaller churches that you can sense the reverence accumulated over the centuries just like the soot from candles, and feel the shaping of space and time yielded by in-situ artwork. There is no way to recreate such experiences by cropping these pieces out of their settings and slapping them into an art history book. The three biggest hits of my trip were in churches. Most astonishing was the church of Santa Maria della Vita in Bologna, which quietly houses a superb set of life-sized terra-cotta figures enacting the angst of the lamentation. These are by an artist who should be better known—Niccolo dell'Arca—for the extreme expression in these works is matched by their technical virtuosity (and their sheer survival of a recent earthquake). Second, the



nondescript Santa Prassede (near Rome's Santa Maria Maggiore) houses the tiny ninth-century mosaic chapel of San Zeno. Its interior envelopes you in a warm wool carpet of color, with gold coins sparkling from within the pile. One living saint cocks his head, sporting a square halo. The Virgin smiles, a green line of tesserae down her nose, surely an inspiration to Henri Matisse. My third top hit was Caravaggio's *Calling of St. Matthew* in San Luigi dei Francesi (hence the need for a wallet). First, you have to find Jesus. Then follow the line of his pointing finger across the dark surface and see which incredulous face at the table lights up. Helpful signage says, "an act of mercy passed." Indeed. Famous artworks like this do not always live up to their billing. A case in point: Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* at Santa Maria della Vittoria. The setting is so Baroque it makes your teeth hurt. She's so elevated into the glory of it all you cannot see that orgasmic face. Her racy reputation is attributable to photography on a ladder with good lights.

Throughout the ten-week residency, I had looked for clues for a piece I had envisioned back home: *The Fall of Rome*. It would be a many layered ice cream cone splatted on cobblestones, each scoop carved to indicate an era of Roman history. I steadily reviewed images in museums and realized two things: there are more eras than a gelato cone could ever hold, even by a fat American tourist, and the current fall of Rome is just that, American. Could this sculpture transcend a paltry critique of empire? Could it offer a better alternative? Scriptures about stumbling blocks emerged, and I found three square images of Jesus falling, from a set of stations of the cross. With a few days of solitude to go, I carved these into my porcelain cobblestones, and added Jasper Johns' *Three Flags* to the ice cream wrapper. The piece exploded when fired, as it was too damp. I almost discarded it, but instead took considerable time to restore the parts. This lowly gelato became the "wise crack" of the residency, speaking to the damage all of us suffer. To top it off, the ill-fated sculpture got lost on the trip home. I suppose it is still circling the planet in a carry-on suitcase, lost in space, Paradise Lost.





Ginger Geyer  
*The Fall of Rome*

2013, glazed Limoges porcelain, with acrylic, approx. 6" x 13" x 11" with adaptations from Eric Gill's *Stations of the Cross for Westminster Cathedral*, No. 3: *Jesus Falls for the First Time*, No. 7: *Jesus Falls the Second Time*, and No. 9: *Jesus Falls the Third Time*; and Jasper Johns' *Three Flags*

Toward the end of the residency, I sensed I had been inside a paradox. Simplicity had taught me much but so had splendor. Art reveals reality; art reveals mystery. Our institutions are essential and some of them should be sacked. We need security to be vulnerable. St. Bonaventure and



others called it “the coincidence of opposites.

In the studio, three cats, a terrier I named Giotto, and music had kept me company for hours on end. I listened to Respighi’s *The Pines of Rome*, and the three tenors, and Berlioz’s *Harold in Italy*. But it was the weirdly chaotic *Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ* by Olivier Messiaen that taught me an important lesson. For in the clanging of chords and collisions of disharmony lies beauty. I wrote this jumble of Richard Rohr phrases in my sketchbook: “The people who *live the contradictions* are the saviors of the world. . . . Faith operates in chaos. . . . Chaos precedes great creativity. . . . Religion is built on purity codes, but transformation is not. . . . A paradox always demands change on the side of the observer.”<sup>4</sup> This helped validate the jumbled conundrums of Chlora.

The return home plunged me into a long recovery mode as I attempted to untangle the mass of imagery I had acquired and all that I had missed from my bucket list. How little I knew of imperial Rome and its effect on early Christian art, of the context for Paul’s letter to the Romans. In Paul’s time, Roman art extolled peace won through victory, *pax Romana*, as symbolized on the magnificent *Ara Pacis of Augustus*. Did Paul see that? Did it inspire his proclamation of Jewish covenantal *shalom* against Roman imperial *pax*?<sup>5</sup>

Stories continue to arise and I have sketched out several new sculptures. On her next trip, Chlora will roll her eyes at these ideas leapfrogging out on the tarmac, and then sneak a peek at *The Decameron* from her carry-on bag, all of it made of porcelain. Then, hoping to see Leonardo’s *Vetruvian Man* in Venice, she will copy it in her sketchbook, and consider how to keep things in proportion. Again, Chlora’s Grand Tour will take a detour somewhere, probably to Paris. The paradox the arts disclose is that the detour *is* the tour.

## NOTES

1. Robert Hughes, *Rome: A Cultural, Visual, and Personal History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 118.
2. James Oppenheim, “Bread and Roses,” in *American Magazine* 73 (December 1911), 214.
3. Hughes, 462.
4. See Richard Rohr, *Hope Against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of Saint Francis in an Age of Anxiety* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2002). See also, “Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditations,” <https://cac.org/richard-rohr/daily-meditations>.
5. John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus’ Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 183.

