“Repeat After Me”: Abstraction and Meaning in Beth Katleman’s “Folly”

Sarah Archer

If you could imagine the flora, fauna and happy peasants from the wall-coverings and textiles of Versailles had come to life on the eve of the Revolution and decided to revolt à la “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice”, it might look something like “Folly”. Beth Katleman’s delicate porcelain installation first strikes you as a lovely historicist idyll, only to be revealed on closer inspection as a landscape populated by cheeky characters from the toy bin run amok. Their innocent facial expressions seem to have been perversely frozen moments before the rebellion, giving them a quality of forced merriment reminiscent of a Meissen figurine. “Folly” is part of a tradition of contemporary sculpture that borrows motifs from the world of design and decoration to establish its subversive point of view. Like Andy Warhol’s “Cow” Wallpaper from 1966, “Folly” taps the rich visual vocabulary of domesticity and a certain uncritical, bourgeois love of beauty to weave a layered narrative of dark humor. The revelation of “Folly”’s complexity is a total surprise because it must be viewed close up after an initial, overall impression of delight and whimsy.

Viewed from a distance of twenty feet or so, “Folly” looks like bright swaths of Toile de Jouy fabric that have popped into three dimensions. It has an instantly recognizable Rococo silhouette that has currency outside the context of the installation itself. Katleman uses the curious, disembodied scenes that populate fabric and wallpaper that repeat both vertically and horizontally, to make something figurative appear more like an abstract pattern. This abstraction serves to distance us and further objectify the characters populating the tiny porcelain pavilions. "Folly" is comprised forty-eight floating porcelain landscapes which appear to hover just off the wall. Surrounding the floating landscapes are arrangements of delicate foliage, also made from porcelain, which decorate the interstices between the primary scenes. The work is comprised of thousands of cast porcelain elements. Some elements, such as the dolls and tiny trees and buildings that populate the scenes, are cast individually and then assembled on a landscape that Katleman models, fired, and cast again to create the “repeat”.

“Folly” has been nearly five years in the making. After a brief hiatus to focus on raising her young twins, Katleman returned to the studio with a new repertoire of popular culture feeding her imagination: children’s toys. They show up here in the form of pencil sharpeners, Lego trees and plants, dolls and figurines. Always a fan of kitsch as a narrative tool, Katleman found herself at odds with graduate school classmates at the legendary Cranbrook Academy where she studied ceramics under Tony Hepburn. Because her work mined the brightly colored landscape of American popular culture, the look and feel of her wall plaques and sculptures stuck out like a pink flamingo in a Japanese tearoom when compared with the subdued ceramic work of her peers. Her use of store-bought glazes (always a favorite of hobbyists)drew particular ire because it raised the specter of amateurism, the robust niche industry that haunts the serious world of studio crafts like an embarrassing relative. Not coming from a ceramics background, Katleman was immune to those concerns. In "Folly," she embraces the tropes of the amateur, mining the subcultures of fairy gardens and diorama enthusiasts.

The form and narrative of “Folly” is deeply rooted in Romanticism and the cult of nature that captivated intellectuals and aristocrats in Europe during the second half of the 18th century. The piece takes its name from 18th century architectural follies, the novelty buildings that were designed to reference structures from other cultures, initially classical Greece and Rome, and later Chinese temples, Egyptian pyramids, ruined abbeys and Central Asian tents. The defining characteristic of follies is that they are purely decorative. Luxury playhouses, like Marie Antoinette’s Hameau which was actually a working farm in miniature, are not technically follies because they function as tiny versions of the real thing.

Porcelain, Katleman’s medium of choice, has the odd distinction of being a material equally associated with refinement and tackiness. For many centuries porcelain captivated the European imagination. Translucent, delicate and white, it had to be im-

ported from East Asia because kaolin, the substance necessary to make porcelain, was unknown to them. German polymath Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus developed the first European porcelain sample in 1707 after finding a kaolin deposit in Schneeberg, Saxony. Porcelain factories sprang up in Germany, France, England, Denmark and the Netherlands, many of which are still operating today. Porcelain objects became major status symbols, and firms such as Sevres and Meissen began catering to the tastes of royalty and nobility. By the 20th century, porcelain manufacture had become both less costly and less rarefied, giving rise to a trinket class of porcelain figurines and souvenir objects, heightening the perception of the material's campy sensibility. Though not exactly cheap, figurines by firms like Lladro of Spain tend to elicit a cringe from the taste-conscious. The earnest figures, some with religious overtones, seem stricken with the "failed seriousness" that Susan Sontag defined as "camp" in her classic 1964 essay. It is precisely this duality that Katleman is playing with by using toys and trinkets to cast the elements of her landscapes.

If architectural follies inspired the title of the work, its closest formal antecedents are the 18th century fabrics and wall coverings that brought ideal and exotic vistas into European interiors. The tradition of papering the walls of interiors is derived from the use of tapestries to insulate stone walls. Both useful and aesthetically desirable, tapestries provided warmth in European interiors while enlivening bare walls with scenes from mythology or history. As paper became more affordable during the Renaissance, wallpaper emerged as a less costly alternative to tapestries. The strong association between wallpaper and a particular breed of idealized landscapes has its origins in the middle to late 18th century when landscape painter Jean-Baptiste Pillement who was renowned for his landscape paintings and discovered a technique to use fast colors in 1773 and his designs gained wide popularity. His scenes of rustic landscapes were right in tune with the Romantic desire for simpler living that inspired Marie Antoinette to don peasant dresses while spending time in her Hameau. The choice of subject matter for wallpaper ranged from current events to exotic, imagined landscapes and usually reflected the values and obsessions of the time. The venerable French firm Zuber & Cie, which is still in operation, created the famous 1834 design Views of North America which is still installed in the Diplomatic Reception of the White House. Zuber remains the only company in the world that manufactures woodblocked wallpaper.

The dreamy, unreal character of "Folly"'s artificial landscapes derives in large part from the way that wallpaper and fabric are made. Generally produced in rolls that range from 20 to 30 inches, wallpaper and textiles must have a pattern that can be easily matched when it is installed. Flowers and abstract decorative patterns are thus popular choices. This section of duplicated pattern is called the "repeat". Since scenery is more complex to corral into an easily repeatable sections, designers often create tiny scenes that appear to float in space and which have defined borders or edges. Instead of a broad swath of landscape as one would find in a painting or drawing, the landscapes of fabric and wallpaper create a closed loop of reality in which the same scene appears over and over, sometimes slightly altered, sometimes identical. Instead of a scene in a history painting that expresses a complete thought or idea, the endless repetition of the tiny landscapes and interactions depicted in wallpaper and textiles make the content seem more like abstract pattern, even when real people or events are shown.

In her artist's statement, Katleman remarks that she was inspired by toile in particular because of the way that the tiny scenes seem float in a void, both out of time and unencumbered by gravity. In "Folly", tacky and commonplace objects from our time – masquerading as luxury objects – crash the party, wreaking havoc on the Romantic picnic. Two bridesmaids appear to stand by, either helpless or culpable, as a baby drowns. An elf astride a snail dwarfs the Sacre Coeur, seeming to steamroll through the landscape. A reindeer relieves itself in full view of a maiden standing on a footbridge. The sum total of these tiny scenes of irreverence is an overpowering world in decay. The decay is subtle, however; no bombs are exploding, nor are any skyscrapers crashing to the ground. "Folly" asks us to look around us and reevaluate the meaning of what we see, suggesting that if we squint, we may find that all is not well in our comfortable surroundings.

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"Folly" | February, 2011 | Beth Katleman | Porcelain Installation, Individually Mounted on Painted Wall
192" x 108" x 11" | Greenwich House Pottery, NYC | Photo Alan Weiner

"Folly" (detail) | February, 2011 | Beth Katleman | Porcelain Installation, Individually Mounted on Painted Wall
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