

RYAN MITCHELL

SHAN DUMONT GARR



'Everywhere Buddha'

The sculpture is one of many ready-made 'artifacts' whose apparent wear and vandalism expresses the artist's desire for exactly the opposite. The artist says "questions about compassion, whether rational or spiritual, remain central focal points in my work". Although many of Mitchell's sculptures at first resemble cultural relics or geological formations recently prized from the earth, they take on our era's inheritance of postmodern relativism and commodity culture. However, his work does not mute or undermine the inherent meanings of cultural icons as a sacrifice to aesthetic spectacle; his curiosity is sincere.

Mitchell works both in his native United States and in China where, since 2007, he has made work at three residencies in Beijing and Shaanxi and is currently the Resident Artist Director/ Program Developer at the Da Wang Culture Highland in Shenzhen.

If an artist upends a sculpture of a Buddha head, it is likely to draw far less ire than if he or she were to upend a representation of Jesus, particularly if it is exhibited at a venue in the West. While this statement seems truthful, even in the midst of globalism and international art fairs, resolving exactly why involves digging into spiritual and cultural stereotypes, no simple task. Artist Ryan Mitchell's imagination soars with the possibilities of contradictions involving faith and tolerance. He creates ceramic sculptures whose distressed surfaces and earthen tones are monuments of ambiguity and expressions of duality that are universal to the human condition.

Mitchell's sculpture *All the King's Horses and All the King's Men* is an inverted Buddha head with a pushed-in forehead and cheek. Streaks of white glaze give a patina of age to the otherwise muted moss and orange shades on its surface. Its neck is exposed upward in a clean, smooth break. A segment of kiln brick props up a portion of the damaged skull that parts from the base, presenting the ridge of a Buddha's identifying dotted coiffure. The brick's makeshift quality demonstrates Mitchell's at times absurdist sense of humor, the sources of its recent firing, and the fact that he built the sculpture with breakage integral to the finished product.

'All the Kings Horses and all the Kings Men'



His inspiration to create Asian-influenced work occurred independently of his travel to China, having previously connected with Buddhist statuary at museums in the United States and Australia and noted above all else their dislocation. His current body of work acknowledges that new contexts partly define how all art is viewed. The pieces discussed here were made at residencies at the Fu Le International Ceramic Art Museum in Fuping, China in 2009 and at the Northern Clay Centre in Minneapolis during a 2010 McKnight Foundation residency.

The sculptor directs his artistic practice with a code of self-created binaries including sincerity and irony, circumstance and intention, and symbolic and real. The binaries bring complexity to common associations surrounding familiar images and ideas, including the appropriation and integration of Asian sources into American art.

Another of Mitchell's dichotomies, not surprisingly, is artifice and artifact. With actual artifacts, missing pieces imply past violence done to them, whether by the ravages of time or theft, even as the damage enhances their authenticity.



'Colour Wolf' exhibition image

Everywhere Buddha, made in China, is upright, but a dent renders one peacefully lidded eye concave. Its rounded features and full lips resemble Tang Dynasty style. The "damage" conjures associations to plastic: despite its massive size, the head appears to have been squeezed like a little mass-produced toy doll.

Mitchell says that "religious icons are mostly aesthetic objects here [in China], void of real meaning, fetishized sometimes as they are in the west. Piled up on shelves in antique shops, or ... junk markets." Congruently, the head accentuates the materiality and malleability of pre-fired clay. The notions of spirituality and commodification seem to conflict, but in contemporary reality they are entangled. Searching for spiritual connection and grounding, life affirming practices such as meditation involves purchasing self-help books, yoga mats, or statuettes of meaningful icons while or instead of finding like-minded communities.

Mitchell's work also engages more earthy subjects such as desire. In Color Wolf, a wolf is represented with a somewhat abstracted, blocky body, with a ridge near its feet hinting at a tail, and the stature of a small dog. Its pliantly puppy-like ears curl back at two different angles, betraying its vulnerability. Titled after a Chinese slang phrase, 'color wolf' refers to a philandering playboy. In historical Buddhist terminology, color attracts and causes desire, and the wolf represents strong, potentially destructive desire. It could be interpreted as two wolves within us, and to be wary of which wolf we feed: one is dark and destructive, the other light and nurturing. As Mitchell retells the story on his terms, the wolf is not the predator.





'Colour Wolf'

Mitchell manipulates the steel to appear scrambled as though it is flimsy wire, belying its strength and departing from its intended purpose to reinforce concrete. The animals associated with national symbols masquerade here as kitsch, wings omitted, far from proud flight.

The twentieth-century spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti said, "once having created duality, conflict is inevitable. So one has to understand this whole process of duality - not that there is not man and woman, green and red, light and darkness, tall and short: all those are facts. But in the effort that goes into this division between the fact and the idea, there is the waste of energy." (Krishnamurti, June 2). With this lesson in mind, Mitchell's aesthetically unified sculptures are hopeful, Utopian acts. They represent universality by visually exemplifying how to coexist with, rather than struggle against, opposition.

It stares with furrowed brows over its little shoulder past the garland of pink roses framing one side of its face, one pigeon-like bird perches atop its head, another jauntily hanging upside down by the roses, and its mouth is frozen in silent protest. The roses function as the belittling ruff of a clown costume and our gaze, attracted to its color and texture, preys fiercely on him.

The roses, as in other sculptures by the artist, echo a contemporary practice of adding decorative artifice as a layer of incongruity. Nick Cave's Sound Suits are often boldly floral. John Bankston incorporates unexpected garnishes of floral imagery to the unsentimental subject matter of a painting. Mitchell is not alone in serving up multiple layers of meaning and toeing the continuum between sincerity and irony - another binary inspiring his work.

In the sculpture *With*, two rusticated eagle heads rest on the tips of their open beaks. Essential to expressions of American pride, the eagle is a universally totemic symbol of heroism and clear vision. In Mitchell's sculpture, the eagle heads function as found-object trophies. They form an improvisational vase for a bouquet of sweetly pink roses and concrete, haloed by loops of rebar.

'With'

