

# Nouvelle Nuptials

Article by Dennis Stevens

**A**RT IMITATES LIFE. OFTEN, PUBLIC POLITICAL EVENTS in the US are tangentially reflected in the art world and there are moments when a seemingly unrelated act sets another in motion.

Case in point, shortly into his first term as mayor of San Francisco in 2004, Gavin Newsom ordered the issuance of city marriage licenses to same-sex couples. In doing so, he publicly thumbed his nose at California's Proposition 22, a measure passed by voters in 2000 that defines marriage as a contract between a man and a woman. This event led to the union of thousands of same-sex couples at San Francisco City Hall; more than 2300 couples were wed during the Valentine's Day weekend of the same year alone. While the validity of Newsom's same-sex unions were later challenged in court, both the California Assembly and Senate eventually approved a measure that would allow gay and lesbian couples to marry. In September 2005, California's Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed this proposal.

How does this legal wrangling relate to the field of ceramics? As it turns out, the political activity and public debate on the topic of same-sex marriage established a strong context for an inaugural exhibition titled *Nouvelle Nuptials: New Visions in Wedding Traditions* which was organised and displayed by the newly-founded San Francisco Museum of Craft + Design (SFMC+D), February through June, 2005. The new museum, located at 550 Sutter Street in San Francisco's Union Square, opened its doors in February 2005 after several years of planning by a dedicated core group of visionaries, donors and volunteers. This opening exhibition, which was organised by Los Angeles, California-based, guest curator Jo Lauria, collectively examined the preconceptions and conventions of weddings within a pluralistic society through the work of 26 regional and national artists working in a variety of craft-based mediums.

In her curatorial statement for the *Nouvelle Nuptials* exhibition, Lauria discussed the traditional rituals of weddings and the layered meanings behind romance,

Left: Keiko Fukazawa. *Good Luck*. 2005. Earthenware with glazes, china paint, lustre. 152 x 55.5 x 55.5 cm.  
Photography: Anthony Cuiña.





Phyllis Green. *A New Ritual of Marriage*. Ceramic, mixed media 74 x 99 x 74 cm.

love and marriage. Within the framework of cultural systems, theologies, concepts, myths, aspirations and expectations, Lauria suggests that the objects within this exhibition were selected for the manner in which they challenged the preconceived notions regarding the wedding ceremony and marriage in the 21st century. In her exhibition statement, Lauria notes that the artists who participated in the show were of "diverse social, cultural and racial backgrounds" while also noting that the artists represented "different sexual orientations". Further, the participating artists were asked to "investigate the layered meanings of romance, love and marriage through artworks that challenge preconceptions and conventions of the dominant idealised heterosexual white wedding". However, while the same-sex marriage issue was inferred in some of the work, this exhibition did not focus primarily on same-sex marriage but rather used the universality of the wedding experience within various cultural and societal contexts as a method to engage a diverse San Francisco audience.

Ultimately, the work displayed in this exhibition offered the viewer insight into his or her own perception of weddings and marriage and provided hints about the artists' own personality as well. In some cases, the sculptural work revealed a satirical or even a cynical view of marriage; while in other cases it presented references to different cultures from an insider's or an outsider's perspective. In all of the sculptural examples reviewed within the *Nouvelle Nuptials* exhibition, the ceramic artists revealed a part of their own worldview and experiences via an object that expressed their interpretation and perceptions of the marriage ceremony. In particular, five ceramic artists expressed their interpretation of the wedding theme through an assortment of approaches, which ultimately created a dynamic visual conversation on the topic of marriage.

For her contribution to this exhibition, Los Angeles, California-based sculptor Phyllis Green created a work titled, *A New Ritual of Marriage*, which is the artist's interpretation of a new type of ritual object intended to suggest the ultimate in the combining of worldly possessions. Inspired by the artist's earlier *Breathvessel* series, she created two golden vessels that were derived from the biological depiction of a heart, presented on golden platters along with a single Petri dish. In her artist statement, Green suggests that the Petri dish on a golden platter was intended to hold and preserve the couple's stem cells. The objects were displayed on black velvet with pink frill trim, which was set on a white table. Ultimately, these farcical decorative objects reference love, the union of marriage and the science of fertilisation.

In Green's contribution, the collection, preservation and subsequent display of the cells becomes a part of the wedding ceremony wherein one of life's most valuable possessions can be preserved and later cultivated, if needed, by either party. Further, Green suggests in her artist's statement, "Should the union end by death or divorce, the personal vials will be retrieved... and the containers be broken" thus creating a new tradition, which is similar to the breaking of a glass in traditional Jewish wedding ceremonies. In this case however, rather than symbolising the fragility of marriage, the breaking of the glass becomes a final act of closure symbolising the end of the union.

Within Green's piece, the commentary on the preservation of stem cells points to larger political, cultural and social issues, some of which are being sorted out in the courts and on the political playing fields throughout the US; the issues surrounding embryonic stem cells and genetics research, therapeutic and reproductive cloning and the concept of DNA and plant seeds as potentially profitable intellectual property. The short of it is, in Green's contribution the narrative remains open, the viewer has only to insert his or her own experiences, personal knowledge and political viewpoint.

A contrasting example which points to larger political, social and cultural issues in a nostalgically ironic manner, Russell Biles' series of monochromatic tabletop figurative sculptures presented a politically-charged narrative surrounding the wedding theme within the context of American popular culture. Biles, who is currently a resident of Greenville, South Carolina, drew upon his own experiences with Southern culture to create a series of five figurative ceramic sculptures for the exhibition, entitled *The Passion of Andy*. These pieces build upon the combined, yet unlikely contexts of the 2004 Mel Gibson movie, *The Passion of Christ*, that detailed the final hours and



Karen Estelle Kobiltz. *БРАК (marriage)*. 2004-2005. Low-fire ceramics, underglaze, glaze, lustre and gold rings. 32 x 53 x 39 cm. Photography: Susan Einstein.

crucifixion of Jesus Christ and *The Andy Griffith Show*, an American sitcom television show that aired from 1960 to 1968 and represented life in the small town of Mayberry; a town which was fictionally located somewhere in the Southern US, probably not far from where Biles currently lives.

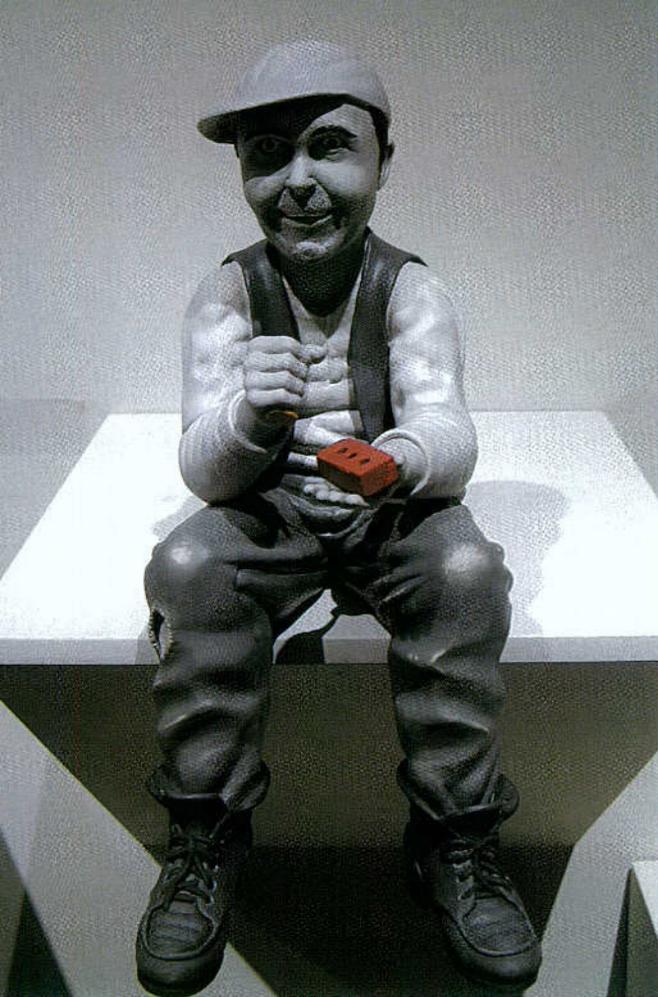
In his five pieces, Biles juxtaposes what is known about the sitcom characters and the corresponding colloquial "bless his/her heart" Southern forgiveness with a narrative that is suggestive of more modern cultural and social struggles. The outcome is a linear tableau that reveals, among other ideas, suppressed public pessimism, the consequences of blind faith and the dichotomy between the public persona and private individual.

The five pieces have subtitles which inform their meaning. *Compassion* features same-sex newlywed couple, Howard and Floyd, sitting for their wedding photograph. In *Son of God*, a mortally wounded Sheriff Andy Taylor is supported by a shocked Barney Fife. Andy is depicted with a single bullet wound to his heart and, according to Biles' artist statement, his unbuckled belt is suggestive "of the unleashing of the wrath of the Bible belt." In *Vengeance and Grace*, an elderly Aunt Bee sits in an armchair holding her purse with empty prescription drug containers in her

lap while Opie rests on the arm of the chair with a revolver in his belt. In *Faith*, Gomer Pyle is depicted as a Gulf War double amputee with prescription pill bottles in his lap and a number of small American flags in his hands. He is accompanied by Goober, who is depicted as an employee of the American super-retailer Wal-Mart. Lastly, Biles' work subtitled *Salvation*, features the former town drunk, Otis Campbell, seated on a park bench holding a memorial portrait of Sheriff Andy, while Ernest T. Bass sits nearby with torn pants and his cap on crooked, mischievously holding a prescription pill bottle and a brick.

On a socio-political level, Biles' sculptures reference 21st century issues particularly relevant to Southern US culture such as morality, sexual orientation, oxycontin and methamphetamine addiction and ultimately subversively challenge the purported truths of Southern conservatism. Admittedly, Biles' humorous, ironic and sometime disconcerting figurines present a biting sarcasm that is dangerously appealing.

Tetsuji Aono, a Los Angeles based ceramic sculptor and installation artist, offers a completely different approach in which ceramics serve only a small part of the entire piece. In his installation titled *HH JJ VR: PWR*, Aono offers a satirical perspective that places



Russell Biles. *The Passion of Andy: Salvation (Ernest T.)* 2004. Recent acquisition of the Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Charlotte, NC, US.

emphasis upon the more trivial, trite and occasionally superficial aspects of the marriage ceremony. Featuring cell phones ringing incessantly in the background and a whimsical whistling soundtrack, his work speaks of panic, gifts, money and invitations. Using objects and materials that simultaneously reference craft and anti-craft, such as handcrafted ceramic anime mask/speakers with earbud headphones stuffed in their noses, rows of plastic flowers, plastic trays, crowd control barrier posts with toilet plunger bases, metallic lighting with low strung plastic beading and low hanging reflective light bulbs capped with 30 cm (12 in) DVDs. In this piece, Aono utilised a low-tech approach that relied upon high-tech interaction to create a work intended to subvert itself in an effort to emulate the chaos of a wedding ceremony. Within Aono's installation, the larger pending question was not the typically romantic: have I picked the right person to spend the rest of my life with? Rather, his work asked: I wonder how much money is in that stack of envelopes?

In this exhibition, Aono's installation also addressed the nature of the wedding that might be disastrous; the fear of pending embarrassment and life questioning that causes future brides and grooms many sleepless nights. The installation was suggestive of how a

wedding reveals social skills, how it can bring to the surface the closeness or lack of closeness within the family, how a public ceremony of union may reveal the relative success of parenting, a family's wealth, social esteem and status – all issues that are often under tight scrutiny during a wedding. Ultimately, this installation was suggestive of how people deal with stress. Standing before the installation and listening to the accompanying soundtrack, one could feel the tension and chaotic nature of the ceremony. As the cell phones chirp and someone whistles casually in the background, viewers were led to consider superfluities of the event and sense that, if it was indeed a live event, guests would likely be perched uncomfortably on the edge of their plastic chairs, anxiously waiting for the cocktail hour to begin – an ironic representation of many modern-day weddings.

Recalling a more Eurocentric tradition, Los Angeles based ceramic artist Karen Koblitz drew upon her knowledge gained from visits to Russia under the US Department of State's ART in Embassies Program. In her piece titled *БРАК*, Koblitz focuses on the Russian wedding tradition as seen by an outsider. In Russian, the term *БРАК* has several meanings. Firstly, it is a Russian word for marriage, matrimony or wedlock. However, the same term can also be used to describe spoilage or refuse, such as a flawed or defective item that is a castoff from factory production. This double meaning is especially ironic considering the obvious handmade nature of this piece.

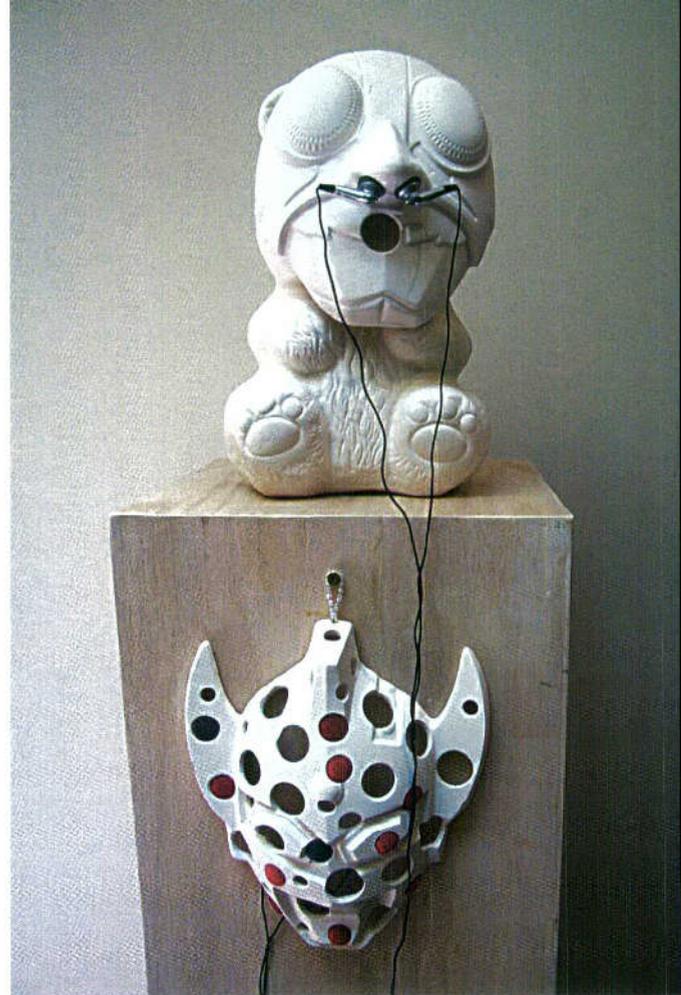
As Koblitz's piece draws upon both Russian cultural heritage and its decorative arts tradition, the artist's narrative is embedded with her personal experiences within Russian culture. When viewing this piece, it becomes obvious that the artist has taken a great deal of time to research the cultural significance of every detail that she has chosen to include. For example, her figures mimic the form of traditional Russian Matryoshka nesting dolls, which are hollow hand-painted wooden figures that when pulled apart reveal another smaller, yet identical, figure on the inside. The attire of the bride and groom figures were inspired by the assorted smiling brides and grooms that Koblitz witnessed posing for photographs before the Bronze Horseman, an equestrian statue of Peter the Great in Saint Petersburg and positioned beneath the colourful, multi-tented architecture of St. Basil's Cathedral in Red Square in Moscow. The Maid of Honour and Best Man are rendered with red sashes, which culturally suggest that these two are in charge of ensuring that wedding guests are entertained and cared for during the ceremony. Further, the ornate nature of the surface treatment, embedded with pearls and lace, reference traditional folk handicrafts, while the form of the base was derived from specific hats worn by women in traditional folk customs.

In essence, while serving as a cultural and artistic emissary of the US, Koblitz had the opportunity to observe and learn about Russian culture at a level of complete immersion. In presenting this piece in the exhibition, what the artist has given back is representative of not only what she knows both technically and tacitly about ceramics as a material but also what she learned culturally in her US Department of State's art in Embassies program visits to Russia.

Los Angeles based ceramist Keiko Fukazawa's two-part work titled *Good Luck*, consists of a 1.5 m (5ft) ceramic constructed, sculptural wedding cake and an accompanying hand painted kimono that was produced in collaboration with incarcerated youth in the Los Angeles area. These two pieces collectively address the collision of Japanese and American ideals within the wedding context while also commenting on the culture of consumerism that is openly apparent in both cultures.

The cake sculpture incorporates the repeated pattern of the *Maneki Neko*, a kitsch Japanese image of consumerism, known as the 'lucky cat' or literally translated 'the beckoning cat.' This image often greets visitors in Japanese-owned stores and restaurants and is supposed to attract either customers or money depending upon whether the left or right paw is raised. In the cake sculpture, Fukazawa assembled a series of circular layers of mould cast and handbuilt ceramic components. Within the piece, the repeating pattern of *Maneki Neko*, of assorted shapes and sizes, were chaotically arranged and glazed with a white glaze of commercial appearance. In the middle of the stacked white layers a golden layer that represents the apparent gifts of the wedding, includes items such as bottles, bowls, fish, hand fans and even a Mickey Mouse head. On the top of the piece, a bride and groom *Maneki Neko*, adorned with traditional Japanese wedding attire, wave innocuously at the viewer. The companion *Kimono* piece features a combination of American graffiti-esque surface decoration and calligraphic images derived from Japanese pop calligraphy.

In terms of comparative analysis of the ceramic sculptural works in this exhibition, Green's and Biles' work each took a political tack, wherein they both relied upon an instrumentalist approach in art making that points to larger issues than the art itself. Through their pieces in this exhibition, they both point to the political and social forces at work relevant to the wedding theme and other larger contexts. Additionally, Biles offered an insider's perspective of Southern culture that relied upon a popular culture narrative while Koblitz offered an outsider's perspective on Russian culture, which also relied upon a cultural heritage narrative. In comparison, Aono and Fukazawa, both artists with a direct relationship to Japanese culture, pursued tangentially related aspects of consumerism found in wedding celebrations.



Tetsuji Aono. *HH JJ VR: PWR*. 2005. Installation detail. Ceramic mixed media.

It comes as no surprise that each of the ceramic artists featured in *Novelle Nuptials* brought to their pieces a perspective of marriage that was derived from their individual life experiences. Within any wedding ceremony, we encounter assumptions regarding the roles of relationship, gender, identity, family bonds and rites of passage. To wit, in the act of producing objects that interpret the wedding theme, the maker further embeds the content with a distinct cultural perspective that we have observed in these ceramic works. A wedding is a life-changing event. The wedding ceremony is a universal cultural phenomenon that celebrates the beginning of marriage; the ceremony signifies the union of two lives becoming one. However, the ceramic work featured in this exhibition has demonstrated that there are as many ways to interpret the wedding theme as there are opinions about who should or should not have the right to marry.

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