

Art in America

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ACME

by *constance mallinson*

LOS ANGELES In his first solo exhibition, L.A.-based artist Christopher Miles, perhaps better known as an independent curator and critic, filled the gallery with 16 oversize “Noggins,” glazed stoneware “heads” mounted on stainless steel poles (all 2010). The initial impression was of a grisly house of horrors or a makeup shop for an alien movie, but then a wider range of references emerged—Gothic grotesques, Buddhist demon iconography, Goya’s *Caprichos*, a repertoire of Surrealist and Expressionist facial distortions, and even animated characters like Shrek and the Incredible Hulk.

Suited to such playfulness, the material allows for a spontaneous, muscular sculptural process in which Miles slaps, claws, shapes and pulls slabs of clay into lumpy forms sporting varieties of gnarly ears, clotted jowls, warty snouts, gaping mouths, jagged scars and gills. Comically Freudian touches include crooked protruding noses suggesting droopy phalluses and cyclopean eyes reading as woundlike female orifices. With each work, when viewed in the round, physiognomies morph seamlessly into one another to form freakish composites of human and beast, and present conflicting expressions of the ridiculously cartoonish and the frightfully horrific. In places, clay strips mimic mummy wrappings or bandages near ragged openings that suggest gunshot exit wounds. The severed necks are nearly all lined with bright red, further conveying a gruesome sense of trophy heads displayed on poles. Painterly glazes and textural finishes heightened with cadaverous greens, fleshy pinks, rubbed-raw reds and bruised blues and yellows impart chancrous, oozing, gangrenous effects.

Miles’s representations of disfigurement, ugliness and disease evidence (like some of Cindy Sherman’s photos) the influence of art history, real-life tragedy and lurid forms of entertainment. With their mashup of references, his sculptures could be seen as a metaphor for the toll taken by the onslaught of everyday life.

Photo: View of Christopher Miles’s exhibition of glazed stoneware sculptures, all 2010; at ACME.