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# Art in America

## Jeffry Mitchell

SEATTLE, at Henry Art Gallery

by Matthew Kangas



This recent midcareer survey of Seattle artist Jeffry Mitchell came after two decades in which he acquired a reputation for large-scale installations (at the Seattle Art Museum, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, and the

Missoula Art Museum, among other venues). In assembling for the first time his numerous smaller pieces-prints and other works on paper, functional and nonfunctional ceramic sculptures, and light pieces, all executed between 1984 and 2011-"Jeffrey Mitchell: Like a Valentine" offered fresh insight. The works at the Henry Art Gallery, including large conglomerations of pots, figurines, cut-up paper and found objects, helped viewers tie together the various threads of Mitchell's oeuvre, with its many allusions to the histories of art and ceramics, and to theories of gender, queerness, feminism and psychoanalysis. The exhibition's curator Sara Krajewski joined a raft of friends and writers to explore the details in the accompanying monograph.

Seen in the context of Pacific Northwest art history, Mitchell's ceramics apprenticeship in Japan (with Katu Shuntu) and his subsequent emphasis on a spirituality connected to sexuality link him to such figures as Morris Graves and Robert Sperry. More broadly, the 54-year-old artist builds on the precedents of Charles Demuth, Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Cady Noland in his faux-naïf use of motifs like flowers, in the drawings, etchings and watercolors; eggs, in sculptures such as *Sextet* (1989) and *Love for John* (1992); and animals, throughout the ceramics, paper cutouts and prints in various mediums. Children's book illustrator Jean de Brunhoff, of Babar fame, is also a crucial source of inspiration.

While extraordinary objects like his patterned paper collages and freestanding sculptures with folding screens and lit lightbulbs (*White Elephant Lamps*, ca. 2000) testify to an impressive scope, Mitchell's greatest strength lies in his ceramics. Expressing a desire for his art to be learned and accessible at the same time, the artist creates hand-built glazed and lustered earthenware vessels and figures that evoke a long history of decorative arts even as their sloppy-looking construction defiantly embraces a more lowly vocabulary. They toy with historical forerunners such as Pennsylvania Dutch pickle jars, Japanese blue-and-white porcelain, heavy Victorian art pottery and Chinese temple guardian sculptures of mythical beasts, which Mitchell alludes to in *Foo Dogs* (2006). But their subjects

are those of knickknacks: elephants, bears, rabbits, monkeys, owls, dogs, rhinos, roosters, penguins. There are, as well, numerous chubby, balding naked men.

The ceramics include male figure groups in diminutive settings, such as the gay bathhouse Club Zodiac in Seattle, in *The Tomb of Club Z (Vitrine)*, 1994, wherein roofless cubicles reveal isolated nude men as well as couples and multiple figures having sex. In *Good Council (At the Bus Stop)* and *Good Council (On Cracked Ice)*, both 2004, nude male couples are implausibly out in public immersed in deep conversation. With stippled blue dots and delicate platinum spots, *Seasick Sailors and the Silver Cord* (2004) repeats the bus-shelter space of *Good Council*, but its single male nude conveys a sense of solitude rather than casual erotic companionship.

Mitchell uses animals as childlike emblems of innocence, but also of fecundity and pre-AIDS-era promiscuity. The artist's amalgam of a playful touch, deceptively klutzy handling and, in his prints (etchings, drypoints, engravings and lithographs), a tight, obsessive technique made for a dazzling display, ripe with both humor and erudition.

*Photo: Jeffry Mitchell: Good Council (On Cracked Ice), 2004, glazed earthenware with platinum luster, 21½ by 155¼ by 12 inches; at the Henry Art Gallery.*