

**The
College
of
Wooster
Art
Museum**

Ebert Art Center

Carrie Olson

FOLLIES

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Ohio artist Carrie Olson examines the social and cultural construction of visual fidelity, beauty, anxiety, and truth by mining her interest in viruses and how they impact our psyches and our material environment. Embodying magical thinking—believing images and things to be powerful—Olson crystallizes a social obsession with the pandemics that can kill us. Her ceramic-based installation parses notions of material culture, the marketing and acceptance of beauty and fear, and how they intersect within a decorative and conceptual framework.



Follies, 2008 (detail)
Hand-carved porcelain cast respirator
in artist-designed packaging
5 x 10 x 5 (inches), box

Cover: **Follies**, 2008 (detail)
H5N1 Cakewalk
Hand-carved porcelain, ink, and paper
1/2 x 23 (inches), disk diameter
120 x 36 (inches), banner

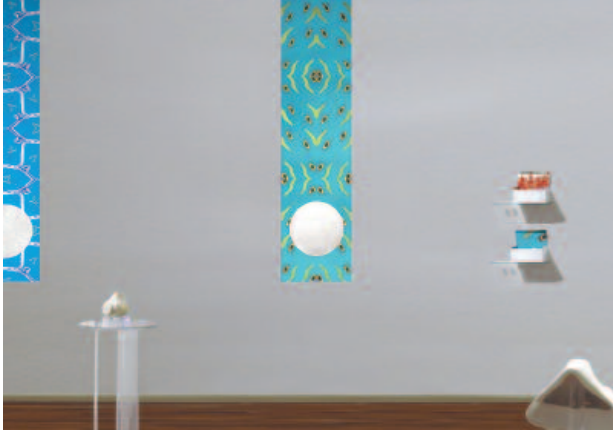
Objects are never neutral, but instead packed with meaning and often fraught with conflicting interpretations. Olson trades on the multiple meanings associated with objects and with porcelain, her chosen medium. For the past six years she has focused on making ornamental implants—simulacra of plastic surgical enhancements—which she presents in installation format. According to the artist,

This work explores issues of personal and public identity, beauty standards, ornament, the marketing of plastic surgery and a possible evolution of the decorative object. The cosmetic surgical implant is really an object intended to enhance the human form in much the same way a decorative object is meant to enhance other environments.

Olson has shifted from implants into fabricating porcelain respirators and monumental disks that resemble pills and Petri dishes. Just as we modify our bodies with surgical implants, Olson suggests that we may modify our collective psyche with fear, which like beauty, is marketed to us as real. Of the respirators she writes,

They speak to our 'orange-alert/post-9-11/pre-avian-flu-pandemic' culture, one of anxiety and paranoia, yet one that tenaciously clings to vanity and consumerism. They act as a vehicle for exploring how changes in cultural context make an object more desirable or valuable.

The white porcelain respirators are small, slick and seductive. Looking like a high fashion, high-design version of an actual respirator, they mostly imply something



Follies, 2008 (digital rendering)
Paper, porcelain, and Plexiglas
13 x 27 x 35 (feet), gallery dimensions

desirable rather than fear inducing. If we have to use a respirator to save our skins, then we might as well look good, they seem to say. And yet, they are slightly creepy, suggesting something disquieting and unknown.

While the respirators are smooth and aerodynamic, Olson enhances the white disks with designs she has culled from microscopic images of viruses. By using Limoges porcelain—associated with fine china and therefore economies of class—Olson has created objects of beauty that embody and sustain anxiety. The media fosters that anxiety, she suggests, calling into question notions of truth, and of what is “real” and what is manufactured.

To highlight that question, Olson designs the patterned disks to imply the precise social and cultural choreography the media employs to alarm the public. Her exhibition title, *Follies*, extends the idea further by referring to 1930s choreographer, Busby Berkeley, whose dance routines created patterns of humans. Olson notes, “These types of dance routines (follies) were very

tightly choreographed to create purely ornamental human formations, where the individual is only important as a component of the collective.” For Olson, the work emphasizes our media-saturated culture and the dance in which the public participates. By adding vivid banners as backdrops to the decorative disks and respirators, Olson amplifies the spectacle or elaborate folly she has staged. The patterned banners emerge



Follies, 2008 (detail)
H5N1 Cakewalk
Hand-carved porcelain
1/2 x 23 (inches), diameter

from a decorative kernel; yet refer to commercial and political practice from the mundane to the provocative: banners fly in everything from a used car lot to a political rally. Their meanings shift with each iteration and location.

The works' titles, *Ebola Moresco*, *H5N1 Cakewalk*, *Marburg Galliard*, mimic the virus's scientific names. The first part of all the titles is the official name of the virus; for instance, H5N1 is the bird flu. Yet, Olson embellishes them by adding the name of a dance to the virus. Moresco, Cakewalk, and Galliard are all dances with roots in various cultures, whose steps are aped in the patterns on the porcelain. Circling back to the choreographic nature of her work and her influences, Olson creates a tightly realized installation that expands and hones her ideas.

Visual culture is teeming with historical and contemporary images of diseased skin, sick bodies, and virulent germs. The 18th century emergence of the microscope to see and make visible things previously unseen produced a catalogue of anxiety-producing images for scientists to study and regular citizens to gape at as if in a cabinet of curiosities. Olson enlarges that conceit by making visible and large today's microscopic progenitors of disease and death. Yet, perversely, by making them beautiful through delicate porcelain and colored banners, Olson conflates beauty and danger, desire and fear, creating in us a kind of voyeuristic thrill seeking. We enjoy scrutinizing these violent offending organisms when they are rendered harmless and even attractive. Carrie Olson suggests, then, with her beautiful porcelain respirators



Follies, 2008 (detail)
Ebola Moresco
Hand-carved porcelain
1/2 x 23 (inches), diameter

and germ-ridden white disks, that the economies of beauty, self-awareness, anxiety, desire, and a cultural zeitgeist of media supremacy coexist within objects that are always changing, and never innocent nor neutral.

Dana Self
Independent Curator
and Writer
Kansas City, MO

All artist's quotes are from an email exchange between Carrie Olson and Dana Self.



Follies, 2008 (digital rendering)
Paper, porcelain, and Plexiglas
13 x 27 x 35 (feet), gallery dimensions

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Carrie Olson lives and works in Granville, OH, where she has been an assistant professor of art at Denison University since 2004. She received a BFA from the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston, in 1995, and an MFA from the University of Colorado, Boulder, in 2001.

Olson's one-person exhibitions include those at the Zentrum für Keramik Gallery, Berlin, Germany, 2008; the Carnegie Visual and Performing Arts Center, Covington, KY, and Texas Women's University, Denton, TX, both in 2007; Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, CO, 2002; and the Colorado University Art Museum, University of Colorado, 2001.

Selected group exhibitions include: The College of Wooster Art Museum and the Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH, 2006; Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design, Denver, CO, and the John Michael Kohler Center for the Arts, Sheboygan, WI, 2005; Arvada Center for the Arts, Arvada, CO, and Sangre de Cristo Arts Center, Pueblo, CO, 2003; and Gallarie Corriente Alterna, Lima, Peru, 2002.

Olson was an artist-in-residence at Zentrum für Keramik-Berlin, Berlin, Germany, 2008, the International Ceramic Research Center-Denmark, Skaelskor, Denmark, 2005, and the John Michael Kohler Arts Center's Art and Industry Program, Kohler, WI, in 2004.

Her work is included in the permanent collections of the Zentrum für Keramik, Berlin, Germany; the International Ceramic Research Center-Denmark, Skaelskor, Denmark; the John Michael Kohler Center for the Arts, Sheboygan, WI; and the Woodman Collection, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With its wealth of higher education institutions, a myriad of superb visual art organizations, and an outstanding state arts council, Ohio produces and nurtures remarkably strong visual artists.

In 2006, Wooster organized its second regional juried exhibition titled *convergence*. Although there were many excellent artists in that exhibition, Carrie Olson and Marcella Hackbardt stood out as two who merge the conceptual with the visceral in unique and compelling ways.

I thank both Carrie and Marcella for agreeing to show at Wooster and for their thoughtful contributions throughout the production of each exhibition. I am also grateful to guest essayist, Dana Self, for providing a compellingly lucid commentary illuminating Carrie Olson's mixed-media installation; and to Marcella Hackbardt for providing an extended artist's statement for her exhibition brochure.

At Wooster, Doug McGlumphy, museum preparator, and Joyce Fuell, museum administrative coordinator, along with the museum's gallery attendants, contributed to each exhibition with tremendous professionalism and good humor.

Finally, I thank the Ohio Arts Council for their vision in nurturing the state's valuable resource of visual artists.

Kitty McManus Zurko
Director/Curator
The College of Wooster
Art Museum

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