

Frog



Sylvie Fleury
photographed for Frog
by Flavio Karrer

“Because frogs swallow their prey whole, their digestive juices have to be potent. You’re dealing with a chemical and acidic environment that is built to pull things apart and break them down.”

Katherine J. Wu, “There Are Two Ways Out of a Frog,” The New York Times, Aug. 3, 2020



Sally Saul, “Hideout”, Almine Rech, Paris,

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707 words
by
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ne of the great joys of living in the (post-) postmodern era now that we're in the not-so-nascent-anymore 21st century is discovering practices and mediums formerly viewed as minor in the mainstream art world. For years, ceramics were relegated to craft and decorative art, and were not often exhibited in international galleries, Kenneth Price and Ron Nagle notwithstanding (artists who themselves acquired international fame late in their career).

Moreover, figurative, colorful ceramics didn't rank particularly high in an art world that from the 1990s on favored large-scale installations, video work, or more recently social practice and performance art. Maybe too redolent of garden gnomes or provincial home goods store novelties, colorful figurative ceramics often didn't even register a ripple in the international art landscape (when was the last time you saw some at, say, Documenta or a Venice Biennale?).

Now that we have finally escaped a certain conformist mind frame and that many art forms are being either reassessed or brought back into the spotlight, Sally Saul's work is finally getting the attention it deserves. Her recent solo show at Almine Rech's gallery in Paris is her first in France, after a spate of group shows in hip U.S. galleries like Canada and Venus over Manhattan over the last few years. The press release, written by her husband Peter Saul, himself no stranger to late reappraisals, presents a brief summary of her art career. After studying literature, Sally Saul worked in various administrative jobs¹ and later took up ceramics in Austin after the couple moved there in the early 1980s. It seems she worked on it for decades in a rather low-key, understated way—in another era we might have said it was an underground practice—until she was either ready for the spotlight or the art world was finally ready to catch up with her.

If *Blue Hills, Yellow Tree*, her 2019 exhibition at Pioneer Works in New York was a small survey show of sorts, including artworks created over a fifteen year period, the exhibition at Almine Rech focused on very recent works, with about eight pieces all created in 2019. Her whimsical ceramic sculptures, all shown on white

pedestals, mix seemingly charming, wondrous, and humorous figures (*Owl and Thrush*), some of them evoking childhood (*Loot*), with more ominous elements. While *Loot*, for all intents and purposes, looks like a toy treasure chest, maybe from a pretend pirate game, the objects displayed are vaguely threatening, with coins sporting skulls and an item evoking a knife. The three beaded necklaces or bracelets may appear as childlike and innocent, yet the pink and green ones end with split blue thread that evoke fantastic snake tongues. Looking closely, the chest's lock itself could be mistaken for a crude vagina. Like all great art that makes the viewer perform a double take, this diminutive artwork manages to suggest the troubled innocence of childhood and some lurking, diffuse violence.

Yet whatever imagined or real threats are present in Saul's ceramics, they never detract from their endearing appeal. There's the wise-looking owl perched on a log, complete with three orange mushrooms, with a smaller companion bird nearby standing on elongated legs (*Owl and Thrush*). *Framing* shows a group of four yellow and blue frogs around the two sides of an opening in a brick wall. It's easy to look at these and wonder about a wider narrative. Why are two frogs on one side standing on stones while the other two ones are simply laid on the pedestal? Why are these frogs on two sides of an open wall, as if engaged in a dialog? As for the owl and the thrush, would the bigger fowl be a predator for the smaller bird? Is there also an undercurrent of malevolence in these sculptures, or should the viewer just take them at face value and simply revel in their adorable cuteness?

Other figures are less equivocal at least at first glance, like *Searching*, a fig-leafed standing man, his ribcage opened, holding a bone: Adam before and after the Fall, waiting for his Eve to simultaneously be conjured out of his body and to have already eaten the forbidden fruit (his loins are already veiled). This work encapsulates, in a nutshell, the appeal of Saul's work. In response to a question from Brienne Walsh² Sally Saul stated, "I sometimes return to myths because they are such good stories, and brutal too. The punishment so often seems to outweigh the crime or simply the cheekiness or hubris of the mortal." That mankind could be expelled from the garden of Eden and consequently endure thousands of years of toil, pain, and turmoil simply for eating an

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apple seems indeed extremely disproportionate and totally absurd in regard to the sin committed. Beyond this, simply by the virtue of Adam's facial expression, *Searching* exudes a profound sadness, the sadness of the lonely man for whom the promise of a future female companion is tied with the certainty of a downfall not only for himself but for the whole of a humanity that is yet to exist. A lose-lose situation, so to speak.

Even in the animal kingdom, not everything is as idyllic as it seems. *Dog Fight*, sitting on a low plinth (at dog level rather than installed higher up for the convenience of the human gaze), shows two funny-looking canines, fangs out and engaged in what seems like a barking match, next to a conical (and comical) tree trunk with greenish tufts sprouting out here and there as an indication of foliage. The scene irresistibly conjures an imaginary vignette were the dogs embarked on a dispute over which one gets right of first refusal when using the tree as a loo. Once again the work gently alludes to the absurdity of aggression over petty motives, the stupidity of pissing contests, and the omnipresence of violence in nature.

As for ordinary humans, in this exhibition they sometimes seem absorbed in strange situations, like *Couple*, where an armless woman somewhat manages to have left a severed hand on a man green-trousered butt. Her Picasso-like face has eyes darting in two opposite directions while her unusually placed nose point toward her male companion, who's holding her. The whole scene hesitates between an embrace, a dance move, and a kitchen-sink drama. On a side table two fish-like creatures look ready to jump out of a bowl. A four-legged spotted animal with pointy ears (a dog?), indifferent to the human action happening right next to it, holds a

toy in its mouth. On the floor there is a small rug, and something else that looks like a crumpled piece of paper with writing on it, like a torn missive from an illicit lover, maybe. Is that hug consensual? Was there a fight between the man and the woman? Are they reconciling—there's a bunch of flowers that seems to be hanging from the man's hand that grasp at the woman's waist—or is she trying to escape?

Elsewhere, *Trouble* is a colored bust of a person of indeterminate gender, wearing a piece of clothing closing at the shoulder, a detail that evokes classical Roman Antiquity statuary. There is a subtle play between the material, humble colored clay, in opposition to the cold grandeur of antique sculpture, but also the almost tragic expression of the character where the viewer would remember the stoic features of Roman emperors and generals. As with *Searching*, *Trouble* exemplifies the historical and mythical references Saul packs into her work, together with an atmosphere of fairy tales and childhood drama.

More than anything, her work masterfully displays a subtle undercurrent of unease underneath its overt alluring qualities, exemplifying what Mike Kelley recognized as one of the main attributes of colored figurative sculpture in all its subversive powers: the uncanny.

1. See Scott Indrisek, "Peter and Sally Saul on How to Thrive as a Creative Couple" on *Artsy*, July 17, 2018.
2. Brienne Walsh, "In Sally Saul's Blue Hills, Yellow Tree, The Mythical and the Domestic Collide," *Forbes*, July 3, 2019 (online review).

