

Elise Siegel

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Since 2010, I have been creating ceramic portrait busts that explore the abstract edges of figurative representation. They vary stylistically and in terms of color palette, surface and scale. They range in height from five inches to between two and three feet tall.

My most recent exhibition, *rough edges*, at Studio10 in Brooklyn, NY was comprised of twelve busts mounted on raw plywood stands that positioned each bust at eye level. They filled the entire space of the gallery and were configured randomly, approximately 3 feet apart. All the busts faced the door so that upon entering, you confronted the full gaze of the entire group. The sculptures were looking at you looking at them. The spacing made it possible to then walk into the installation as well, to experience and connect with each sculpture as an individual.





Although each of my sculptures is a distinct individual, none are portraits of specific people. Rather they are meant to embody familiar psychic states while remaining open-ended, allowing viewers to bring a wide range of projections to the encounter. The challenge for me is to imbue each piece with the immediacy of human experience, and through the process of making, allow each sculpture to project a sense of its hidden life—to create an object that comes to life while remaining a thing.



My artwork has taken various forms over the course of my career but my underlying motivation has been constant – the desire to give concrete form to fragmentary bits of consciousness: moments of inner conflict, disquiet, ambivalence and unease; and in doing this, create work that generates a psychological tension with the viewer.



My visual inspiration comes from a wide range of sources. I'm most drawn to figurative sculptures and sculptural objects that appear to have had some other cultural function, either in ritual or in daily life, in addition to being creative expressions. These are objects that humans have empowered: idols, reliquaries, masks and even toys.

I've taken formal cues from the abstracted features and exaggerated forms of the Jomon Dogu figures of Neolithic Japan, as well as the hollow eyes of the Haniwah funeral figures from the third to sixth century A.D. For me, these sculptural objects—everything from Renaissance reliquary busts to medieval European iron helmets and African masks — continue to resonate as their meanings evolve over time.







My process is primarily intuitive and spontaneous. I have strategies, but try to keep them below the level of conscious awareness. For instance, I often contrast facial features that are quite abstract, stylized or distorted, with subtle facial expressions and body language that are more convincingly accurate. I think the tension between the two can create a surprising uncanny sensation.



I sometimes use color to heighten mood and expression, and sometimes to interfere with expectations. I like to use traditional glazes, such as the thick shiny white of Majolica or the cobalt blue of Delftware. However, I employ them in non-traditional ways by smearing them and allowing them to drip and run. For me, shiny glazes suggest other ceramic objects such as vessels, and a feeling of containment. Dry, matte surfaces evoke the kind of rawness and vulnerability that I find is more conducive to personal projection. I often use both in the same piece.

The meaning of what I do is very much embedded in process—in all the ways I connect to my material. As much as possible, I want everything I perceive and feel and do in this process to be revealed in the resulting object.





From early childhood and for most of my art career I have made things out of clay. No other material rivals clay's immediacy, its capacity to register and record touch, and its ability to capture the experience of making.

I think of what I do as a kind of intimate interaction with the clay: a conversation, a dance, an exploration, or a wrestling match. Mainly, it's an engagement in the unpredictable present moment, rather than an attempt at control. Hopefully, the resulting sculptures are embodiments of this experience.





Because the portrait bust is such a familiar sculptural object, it is loaded with associations and expectations. I think that when some of these are subverted, things can shift and feel a little less certain, allowing a moment of encounter to open up, where the unexpected can occur.



My work has led me to think deeply about the transformative nature of our relationships with objects. Objects change us. We connect with them. We animate them, use them, learn from them, and empower them with all kinds of meaning and at times, even agency. This is the realm of the uncanny and the religious ritual. For me it is also the realm of art.

Education

Emily Carr College of Art, Vancouver, BC, BFA & Post-graduate study in sculpture

University of Chicago, Chicago, IL

Selected Exhibitions

- 2019 *Get Real: Figurative Sculpture by Women*, Peninsula Fine Art Center, Newport New, VA
About Face, The Painting Center, New York, NY
Solo Exhibition, Ylise Kessler Gallery, Santa Fe, NM
Salon Zürcher, Zürcher Gallery, New York, NY
rough edges, solo exhibition, Studio10, Brooklyn, NY
- 2018 *Pageant of Inconceivables*, Kleinert/James Center for the Arts, Woodstock, NY, Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York, NY, curated by Portia Munson and Katherine Umsted
Jay Clay, Jay, NY, curated by Jason Andrews
- 2017 *Morph*, Asya Geisberg Gallery, New York, NY
Home Is Where The Heart Is, Kustera Projects, Brooklyn, NY, Sheila Johnson Design Center, Parsons School of Design, 2018, curated by Andrew Robinson and James Osman
Post-Election, September Gallery, Hudson, NY, curated by Kristen Dodge and Kate Gillmore
Me/You, C2C Gallery, San Francisco, CA, curated by Kirk Stoller
- 2016 Fred Giampietro Gallery Project Room, New Haven, CT
NY, NY: Clay, Clay Art Center, Port Chester, NY, curated by Judith Schwartz
Earth, MC Gallery, New York, NY, curated by Don Porcaro
- 2015 *(self contained)*, Ventana 244, Brooklyn, NY, curated by Nina Felshin
Who, Lesley Heller Workspace, New York, NY, curated by Leslie Heller
Object/'Hood, Lesley Heller Workspace, New York, NY, curated by Gelah Penn and Inna Babaeva
Two person show, Storefront Ten Eyck, with Mie Yim, Brooklyn, NY, curated by Debbie Brown
- 2014 *The Human Condition: The Stephen and Pamela Hootkin Collection of Contemporary Ceramics*, Chazen Museum of Art, Madison, WI
- 2012 *Shifting Paradigms in Contemporary Ceramics: Garth Clark and Mark Del Vecchio Collection*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX
- 2010 *Make/Believe*, solo exhibition, Dubhe Carreno Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2008 *Confrontational Ceramics*, Westchester Arts Council's Arts Exchange, White Plains, NY, curated by Judith Schwartz
Voices, NCECA Invitational Exhibition, Pittsburg, PA, curated by Holly Hanessian and Kate Lydon
- 2008 *Wired*, Ernest Rubenstein Gallery, Educational Alliance, New York, NY
- 2007 *I am what is around me*, solo exhibition, Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York, NY
- 2005 *Trans-Ceramic-Art*, 3rd World Ceramic Biennale, Icheon, Korea
- 2004 *Twenty-one Torsos and Twenty-four Feet*, solo exhibition, Garth Clark Gallery, Long Island City, NY
Inter/Views, New Jersey Center for Visual Art, Summit, NJ

- 2003 *From the Neck Up*, Garth Clark Gallery, New York, NY
- 2001 *Into the room of dream/dread I abrupt awake clapping*, solo exhibition, Jane Hartsook Gallery, New York, NY, Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University, 2001
- 2000 *Scarecrows/Higher Elevations*, a project of College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor, ME
- 1997 *Work In Progress: Elise Siegel*, The Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MI
- 1995 *The Outer Layer*, New Jersey Center for Visual Arts, Summit, NJ
A Distinct Grace, Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, CO, travels to Firehouse Art Gallery, Nassau Community College, Garden City, NY, 1996, and to Hollins College Art Gallery, Roanoke VA, 1998
Material Identities - Elise Siegel, Claude Simard, Carolee Thea, Nicholas Alexander Gallery, New York, NY
Fashion is a Verb, The Museum at FIT, New York, NY
- 1994 *Disembodied: Recent Sculpture* by Lesley Dill, Leslie Fry and Elise Siegel, Robert Hull Fleming Museum, Burlington, VT, curated by Janie Cohen
- 1993 *Second Skin*, solo exhibition, Halsey Gallery, School of the Arts, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC, curated by Rene Paul Barilleaux
Empty Dress - Clothing as Surrogate in Recent Art, traveling exhibition circulated by Independent Curators Inc, opening at the Neuberger Museum, Purchase, NY, curated by Nina Felshin
The Rag Trade (right off the rack), InterArt Center, New York, NY, curated by Saul Ostrow
Aiming, The Shooting Gallery, New York, NY
1920, The Subtlety of Subversion, The Continuity of Intervention, Exit Art, New York, NY
American Art Today - Clothing as Metaphor, Art Museum, Florida International University, Miami, FL, curated by Dahlia Morgan
- 1992 *The Forceful Gesture - Contemporary Drawings*, Valencia College, Orlando, FL, curated by Judith Page
Fashion, Trenkmann Gallery, New York, NY
War, Trenkmann Gallery, New York, NY
- 1991 *CoVariants: Abstract Painting & Sculpture*, Tribeca 148 Gallery, Organization of Independent Artists, New York, NY
- 1989 *Emerging Sculptors*, Sculpture Center, New York, NY
Made In New York: Encounters with Contemporary Sculpture, Williams Center for the Arts, Lafayette College, Easton, PA, curated by Judd Tully
- 1988 *Black, Gray and White*, Henry Feiwel Gallery, New York, NY
Nomadic Visions, Art Gallery, Southeastern Massachusetts University, North Dartmouth, MA, curated by Lasse Antonsen
- 1987 Solo exhibition, Laurie Rubin Gallery, New York, NY
Alternative Supports, David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, Providence RI, curated by Judith Tolnick
- 1986 *Transformations*, Richard Green Gallery, New York, NY, curated by Stephan Westfall

Awards

- 2017 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship
2016 Virginia A. Groot Foundation Grant
2014 Anonymous Was A Woman Award
2007 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship
1988 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship
MacDowell Art Colony Fellowship
1986 Yaddo Art Colony Fellowship
1982 Canada Council Art Bank Purchase
1981 Canada Council Grant

Bibliography

- Maine, Stephen. *Elise Siegel and Her Inscrutable Heads*, *Hyperallergic*, January 19, 2019 [link](#)
Felshin, Nina. *The Penetrating Gaze of Portrait Busts*, *Hyperallergic*, January 17, 2019 [link](#)
Wayne, Leslie. *Immediate, physical, emotional: Studio visit with Elise Siegel*, *Two Coats of Paint*, January 6, 2019 [Link](#)
Rockefeller, Hall. *Almost Human, less than half*, December 5, 2018 [link](#)
Weiner, Daniel. *Elise Siegel*, February 18, 2015 [link](#)
Princenthal, Nancy. *The Reckoning, Women Artists of the New Millennium*. Prestel, 2013
Shuster, Robert. *The Village Voice*. May 1, 2007
Princenthal, Nancy. *Art in America*. March 2005
Princenthal, Nancy. *Into the room of dream/dread I abrupt awake clapping*. Jane Hartsook Gallery, New York, NY, 2001 (brochure)
Taplin, Robert. *Art in America*. December 2001
Barrileaux, Rene. *Work in Progress: Elise Siegel*. Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MI, Oct. 1997 (brochure)
Felshin, Nina. *Art Journal*. Spring 1995
Cohen, Janie. *Disembodied*. Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT, March 1994 (brochure)
Scott, Sue. *Art Papers*. Jan-Feb 1994
Felshin, Nina. *Empty Dress*. Neuberger Museum, Purchase, NY, 1993 (catalog)
Felshin, Nina. *Second Skin*. Halsey Gallery, College of Charleston, SC, 1993 (brochure)
Day, Geffery. *The State*. Columbia, SC, Nov 1993
Montvidias-Kutkus, Kristina. *Charlston Arts*. Dec 1993
Tully, Judd. *Made in New York*, Williams Center for the Arts, Lafayette College, 1989 (catalog)
Antonsen, Lasse. *Nomadic Visions*. Art Gallery, Southeastern Massachusetts University, 1988 (catalog)
Sofer, Ken. *Art News*. May 1987
Tolnick, Judith. *Alternative Supports*. David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University, 1987 (catalog)
Welch, Adam. *Elise Siegel: The psychoanalytic construction of the work of art*, *Clay in Art International*, 2005/2006

Elise Siegel - Artist Statement

My artwork has taken various forms over the course of my career. It has at times been more abstract or more representational, and I have employed a range of materials and processes. But my constant underlying motivation has been the desire to give concrete form to fragmentary bits of consciousness: moments of inner conflict, disquiet, ambivalence and unease; and in doing this, create work that generates a psychological tension with the viewer.

Since 2010, I have been creating ceramic portrait busts that explore the abstract edges of figurative representation. They vary stylistically and in terms of color palette, surface and scale. They range in height from five inches to between two and three feet tall.

My visual inspiration comes from a wide range of sources. I'm most drawn to figurative sculptures and sculptural objects that appear to have had some other cultural function, either in ritual or in daily life, in addition to being creative expressions. These are objects that humans have empowered: idols, reliquaries, masks and even toys. I've taken formal cues from the abstracted features and exaggerated forms of the Jomon Dogu figures of Neolithic Japan, as well as the hollow eyes of the Haniwah funeral figures from the third to sixth century A.D. For me, these sculptural objects—everything from Renaissance reliquary busts to medieval European iron helmets and African masks – continue to resonate as their meanings evolve over time.

Although each of my sculptures is a distinct individual, none are portraits of specific people. Rather, my sculptures are meant to embody familiar psychic states while remaining open-ended, allowing viewers to bring a wide range of projections to the encounter. The challenge for me is to imbue each piece with the immediacy of human experience, and through the process of making, allow each sculpture to project a sense of its hidden life—to create an object that comes to life while remaining a thing.

The meaning of what I do is very much embedded in process—in all the ways I connect to my material. As much as possible, I want everything I perceive and feel and do in this process to be revealed in the resulting object. From early childhood and for most of my art career I have made things out of clay. No other material rivals clay's immediacy, its capacity to register and record touch, and its ability to capture the experience of making.

I think of what I do as a kind of intimate interaction with the clay: a conversation, a dance, an exploration, or a wrestling match. Mainly, it's an engagement in the unpredictable present moment, rather than an attempt at control. Hopefully, the resulting sculptures are embodiments of this experience.

My process is primarily intuitive and spontaneous. I have strategies, but try to keep them below the level of conscious awareness. For instance, I often contrast facial features that are quite abstract, stylized or distorted, with subtle facial expressions and body language that are more convincingly accurate. I think the tension between the two can create a surprising uncanny sensation. I often build up complex surfaces with glaze and pigments to either exaggerate or blur

the underlying detail. I sometimes use color to heighten mood and expression, and sometimes to interfere with expectations. I like to use traditional glazes, such as the thick shiny white of Majolica or the cobalt blue of Delftware. However, I employ them in non-traditional ways by smearing them and allowing them to drip and run. For me, shiny glazes suggest other ceramic objects such as vessels, and a feeling of containment. Dry, matte surfaces evoke the kind of rawness and vulnerability that I find is more conducive to personal projection. I often use both in the same piece.

My work has led me to think deeply about the transformative nature of our relationships with objects. Objects change us. We connect with them. We animate them, use them, learn from them, and empower them with all kinds of meaning and at times, even agency. This is the realm of the uncanny and the religious ritual. For me it is also the realm of art.

Elise Siegel and Her Inscrutable Heads

Siegel's sculptures recall the great screen actors whose faces projected profound and precise shifts of feeling.

Stephen Maine January 19, 2019

Since the mid-1980s, Elise Siegel has been exhibiting her work, receiving significant institutional support, and enjoying critical notice for an oeuvre based on figurative ceramic sculpture. Yet *rough edges*, which is on view at Studio 10 through February 3, has the makings of a watershed moment for the artist.

For a decade or so, Siegel has concentrated on the genre of the portrait bust — though the subjects of these works are drawn from memory and imagination, not from a specific perceptual source or sitter. As the 13 works in this stunning show demonstrate, Siegel's narrowed focus has led her to a body of work that is both personal and universal.

Of literal “rough edges” there are few, if any, among this cohort, as these busts are soft and modeled — convincingly fleshy. They might be *roughed out*, insofar as surfaces are slightly bumpy, forms a little lumpy, and glazes as provisional-looking as the handling of the clay itself.

These glazes are mostly matte, whether they're primly tinting a coif or neckline, or running deliciously in rivulets down a torso. Hints regarding hairstyle and costume locate all but one or two figures on the female side of the gender spectrum. Each is around two feet high and placed on pedestals that bring them to around eye level. They look at you looking at them.

Their inscrutability is arresting. Mona Lisa's flickering smile seems like a chortle in comparison. But far from being expressionless, these faces seem to register complex or even equivocal emotions — hovering between stoicism and disappointment, say (“Pale Blue Portrait

Bust with Dark Drips,” 2018), or between incomprehension and muted chagrin (“Portrait Bust with Amber Shirt and Lavender Hair,” 2016).

In this narrow range of ambiguous emotional indicators, the slightly cocked head and pursed lips of “Portrait Bust with Dark Gray Bodice” (2018) registers heightened attentiveness tinged with skepticism. Nearby, the subject of “Pale and Dark Gray Portrait Bust with Dark Eyelashes” (2018), with her slightly slack jaw and distracted gaze, might be straining to remember her password. We feel her pain. The hint of raised eyebrows and an unsmiling mouth give “Baby Blue Portrait Bust with Square Eyes” (2018) the look of someone who doesn’t believe a word of your story. Paradoxically, this dampening of affect is somehow quite affecting.

Why that should be is a topic my wife and I have pondered at length, and here’s what we’ve come up with: the viewer is struck by these multifaceted yet understated attitudes and shaded emotional states because they are embodied in the work through such direct, primal means. We appreciate the fine-tuning wrought upon these clumps of mud even as we let ourselves be taken in by it.

It’s not that the work implies a narrative, particularly, but rather that the viewer brings to the experience a lifetime of reading and responding to facial cues and what they reveal about states of consciousness — a highly subjective process. In a recent interview with Leslie Wayne, Siegel says of her figures, “I want them to be as much about the viewer as they are about me.” Indeed, their ambiguity is a kind of mirror.

Contributing to the works’ impact is the consistent form of these busts; armless, each tapers to a narrow, integral base located just below the rib cage. (These works are less structurally precarious than they appear, attached to their pedestals by means of an internal anchoring system.) The absence of arms and hands — for that matter, of expression through posture or stance — elicits a sense of muteness and vulnerability.

Regarding influences, the artist acknowledges the terracotta Haniwa figures of ancient Japan, Renaissance reliquary sculpture, and African masks. As a sculptural genre, the portrait bust is an ancient invention; post-Renaissance, those that don’t depict a specific individual often shoot

for caricature (Honoré Daumier) or typology (Franz Xaver Messerschmidt). Among Siegel's distinctive achievements, then, is her works' mesmerizing subtlety. They recall the great screen actors who can project profound and precise shifts of feeling with slight adjustments to the muscles of their face.

Siegel's ability to suggest this infinitesimal mutability surely has something to do with the medium of clay, which of course is acutely responsive to touch. I wonder if these tenuous expressions would translate at all to a bronze cast from a clay original. Probably not, since the ceramic glazes' transparency contributes so much.

The show's haunting presentation also exerts the pressure of self-consciousness on the viewer. But for a lone work in the gallery's reception area (the exquisite "Two-part Bust with Two-Toned Face," 2018, which, though also armless, doesn't taper to a base but is truncated below the pectorals), all are positioned so that they face the gallery entrance; they form a small crowd, an audience awaiting the arrival of the gallery-goer.

rough edges: Elise Siegel continues at Studio10 (56 Bogart Street, Bushwick Brooklyn) through February 3.

The Penetrating Gazes of Portrait Busts

While Elise Siegel's sculptures take the form of traditional portrait busts, they are anything but.

Nina Felshin

Elise Siegel's new installation *rough edges* at Studio10 in Bushwick gives new meaning to "reversing the gaze." The installation consists of 12 ceramic sculptures - loosely speaking, portrait busts - each around 24 inches high and mounted on unpainted plywood plinths. As you enter the gallery you can see each one separately as well as its relationship to the others. While they take the form of traditional portrait busts, they are anything but.

Be prepared for the penetrating gaze of this group of partial figures. You might just feel quietly confronted or stop dead in your tracks. "This is about you, not us," they seem to communicate, as they beckon you closer. They don't represent anyone in particular and gender and race seem intentionally indeterminate, though you, the viewer, might assign a more specific identity, bringing to them your own experience and/or expectations.

Titles provide no clues. They are simple descriptors: "Black and Pale Blue Portrait Bust with Hollow Eyes" (2018) or "Portrait Bust with Copper and Iron Stripes" (2017), for example. For some, Siegel's hollow busts might evoke vessels or perhaps metaphorical containers of emotion. Each reveals an uncanny expression, reinforced by variations in modeling, as well as glazing techniques like the complex, layered application of colored slips and oxides that produce raw, patina-like surfaces. These formal characteristics translate into emotional vulnerability and promote personal projection.

Projection, in fact, is key to Siegel's work. Unlike the more traditional portrait bust, which represents the external characteristics of an individual, these busts seem to be about interiority - yours and mine. If you read darkness into them, be assured you are not alone. They encourage us to acknowledge the emotional rough edges we all feel at times, if not all the time.

The busts also encourage us to project external experiences or externally generated fears or anxieties on them. For some, they might conjure a jury or the aftermath of the 2016 election, a nuclear attack, or a climate-related disaster. You name it. This is the poetry of Elise Siegel's work and, although content may vary, it is the source of poetry in art in general - tacit permission to bring one's experience to bear and to participate in the creation of meaning.

rough edges: Elise Siegel continues at Studio10 (56 Bogart St, Bushwick Brooklyn) through February 3.

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Immediate, physical, emotional: Studio visit with Elise Siegel

Contributed by Leslie Wayne / For as long as I've known Elise Siegel, she has been making three-dimensional work about the psyche. Although her sculptures have always addressed the body in some form or another, her subject has always been the mind. In the 90s, she made skirts and dresses from wire mesh and acrylic modelling paste, accentuating the patched together, bandaged and cracked surfaces of the material, questioning the value we place on fashion to provide both identity and protection. In 1999, she returned to clay, a material she had studied extensively in school and created 30 heads which she placed on the floor like ghostly dismembered personages rising from the depths. She went on from there and made body parts out of clay, such as tightly clasped hands, and arms dangling from ropes on a wall. The body continued to remain fragmented, and throughout the early to mid-2000s she focused on ambitious installations of life-size clay figures. Her 2001 installation, "Into the room of dream/dread, I abrupt awake clapping" consisted of eight children seated on wooden chairs in a loose circle, all looking in the same direction with their hands silently clapping. Their little outturned and nearly identical faces were quizzical as if to ask the viewer to interpret the game in which they were engaged. In 2004 her installations, "Twenty-one Torsos, Twenty-four Feet" comprised of children's hollowed out bodies divided into upper and lower halves, the uppers perched on rolling stands with arms waving about in apparent mayhem, and the lower bodies seated on two rows of chairs facing each other so that their stockinged and flexed feet gingerly touched each other. It was a powerful evocation of psychological innocence and aggression. Since then she has returned to the head, more accurately the portrait bust. For these, Siegel draws inspiration from a broad range of cultures and periods, from the Jomon Dogu figures of Neolithic Japan to Renaissance reliquary busts and African masks. I had the pleasure of visiting her studio as she was preparing for her upcoming solo show at Studio 10 in Bushwick, which is on view through February 3.

Leslie Wayne: Elise, I love coming into your studio. It feels so fully inhabited by these characters. Although I think I should qualify my use of the word character because each bust, while it has a fairly distinct expression, color, and posture, there is a kind of anonymity to them as a collective. I mean they don't really look like portraits of anyone in particular but rather seem to represent the idea of "character." Is that accurate?

Elise Siegel: I think you've hit on a couple of things. The anonymous crowd and the idea of "character" make a lot of sense to me. Any crowd of people seems anonymous unless you already know the individuals, such as a crowd of people waiting on a subway platform. But once you fix your attention on one person, you start to create a mental narrative around them, based on their facial expression, body language, their clothing etc. among other things. You still don't know them, but you respond to various cues that are available to you. The things you pick up on and the story you construct say as much about you as they do about the person you're observing.

On a certain level, the experience you're describing in my studio might not be all that different. When you first walk in you confront a crowd. Once you begin to engage with individual sculptures, you start to construct narratives. But even though you might be drawn in, you're also aware they are not real living people, and the narratives retain a fictional quality. So the sculptures can be seen (or felt) as "characters" in the stories you tell yourself about them.

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In this work, I am definitely not trying to depict an individual, or even a very specific emotion, or experience. What I really want is to allow the sculptures to be suggestive, but indeterminate; to draw a viewer in and be responsive to whatever that viewer brings to the encounter.

I think we have the capacity to connect with and respond to sculpture in an immediate, physical and emotional way partly because we inhabit the same space. We are in the same world and not separate from it.

That's true, and figurative sculpture in particular demands a very different response from the viewer than painting does because of its corporeality. Though to your earlier point about their being suggestive but indeterminate, I will say that I find the expressions you give them to be decidedly, if not distressed, then somewhat dazed. They're not exactly neutral. Something's going on inside of them that projects a very strong feeling, even though they are not representing anyone or anything in particular.

ES: I love that word – *dazed*. I have often used it to describe how I feel after wrestling with a piece in my studio, so it makes perfect sense that some of the busts reflect that. They almost never become who they are without a struggle and often they're on the brink of destruction before I finally let them be. Many of them have been through quite an ordeal.

When I begin working on a sculpture I'll have some formal ideas I'm interested in exploring, but in terms of what an individual piece is going to say or express – that is something I only discover through the process of making it. I might get some early sightings, but I don't fully recognize it until it's looking back at me and basically, staring me in the face. By this point the sculpture has been through many iterations, and I've been through a few changes myself. In other words, we've had a long conversation. Hopefully, the finished sculpture retains traces of the entire experience.

LW: I think they do! And the idea of portraiture as a reflection of the artist is of course a very Modernist idea. I notice they are also almost always female. Are these all really just self-portraits that compel themselves upon you, in spite of your best intentions to – and to be fair, successes at – incorporating other cultures, modes and ideas? I mean, at the end of the day, I think that sometimes we just can't help ourselves.

ES: I can see where you're coming from. As a sculptural idiom portrait busts have a very long history and come with a set of expectations. A portrait bust raises the obvious question: who is it? If it is not an honored personage, or someone known to the artist, or even a person they've thought about, who could it be but the artist herself?

Most of the busts do seem more female than male and they are definitely a reflection of certain aspects of my own psyche.

Even some of the elements from other cultures that I've incorporated are things I've had a strong attachment to ever since I started making art, and in some cases even since childhood. I have visceral memories of early visits to the African and medieval armor galleries at the Met, entranced as well as scared stiff by the power of some of their imagery. My introduction to the Jomon period came from my

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favorite teacher in art school, and I admit to having created a series of Haniwah inflected totems soon after graduating! I guess I would say these things are part of me too.

So the busts incorporate various aspects of my lived experience, as a female person, as a child, as an artist, etc. They have a lot of me in them. But I would not call them self-portraits. It points in the wrong direction. I want them to be as much about the viewer as they are about me.

I think of them as sculptural objects that take the very familiar form of portrait busts, but then subvert some of the expectations that are triggered by that initial sense of familiarity. Hopefully, there can be a moment of encounter, when things shift and feel a little less certain, or out of balance, allowing something more unexpected to occur.

LW: Fair enough. I recall a similar discussion I had with Philip Glass once who was speaking at MoMA about Chuck Close's work. I asked him if the intense scrutiny of Close's faces were an investigation of his own mortality and he adamantly replied no! My father was a shrink so my natural inclination is to always go to the psychological. But I appreciate that that is not everyone's primary focus!

So let me ask you about something else. I have always sensed that you have a very profound relationship to the material and a real hands-on love of the craft. Happily, clay is having a long overdue moment of recognition as a valid material with which to make meaningful art. How ridiculous. Well anyway, thank goodness for that and how great for you. Today we're seeing work of everyone from Viola Frey, Andrew Lord, and Betty Woodman to mid-career artists like Kathy Butterly, Rebecca Warren, and Jessica Jackson Hutchins to younger artists like Matt Wedel, Jessica Stoller, Francesca DiMattio, and Brie Ruais. That's quite a community. Do you see yourself as a fellow ceramic artist or as a sculptor who happens to be working in clay?

ES: Yes, I wholeheartedly agree. It's great that clay is no longer sidelined in the art world. We're lucky to be working at a time when there is more inclusivity and many of the old distinctions are losing their meanings.

To answer your question: I'm a sculptor working in clay. Though I majored in ceramics in art school, a few years after graduating I started to explore other materials. By the time I moved to New York in 1982, I was no longer working in clay. Over the next fifteen years I made and exhibited several significant bodies of work in other materials. It wasn't until after my daughter was born in the mid 1990s that I returned to clay. I think my interest was rekindled for two reasons. First, I wanted to take the plunge into truly figurative work and clay seemed ideal for this. And I was also feeling the need for a material that could compete with the pleasures and demands of a newborn baby—something as seductive and sensuous as she was.

LW: I love that. Art rivaling life.

ES: Yes! They were and are still very intertwined. For me the meaning of what I do is very much embedded in process, in all the ways I connect to my material. I think of what I do as a kind of intimate interaction with the clay. It's an engagement in the unpredictable present moment, rather than an attempt

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at control. As much as possible, I want everything I perceive and feel and do in this process to be revealed in the resulting object.

Clay feels alive. It has an incredible immediacy—an ability to respond to the smallest gesture, to accidents and events both within and beyond my conscious intent. It also has the capacity to register and record touch, to capture the experience of making. I also love that it's been a primary material for creative human expression since pre-historic times.

LW: I know it's a bit of a cliché to blame mechanization and the digital age for the increasing loss of craftsmanship, but there's some truth to that argument. I would say that the preponderance of theoretical studies in schools is also responsible for sidelining making and the basic understanding of materials and craft. But some aspect of these trends are cyclical and I know from my husband Don [Porcaro] who taught for many years at Parsons that a new generation of students who grew up with computers and cell phones are craving – and demanding the experience of making things with their own hands. So I think there's a great future ahead for what you are pursuing.

I agree and I think there are multiple factors leading people back to craft, including feminism and multiculturalism. But in this digital age, people are just feeling the need for hands on experience. I've been teaching at Greenwich House Pottery for many years and when I first began it was a slightly sleepy "well kept secret" in the Village. Today it's bursting at the seams more classes and artist residencies. I think it bodes well for all of us!

About the author: New York artist Leslie Wayne is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea. Wayne is an occasional writer and curator, and has received numerous grants and awards for her painting objects, including a 2017 John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship.

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Tags: ceramics, Leslie Wayne, portrait

Elise Siegel [link](#)

Published on February 18, 2015

After seeing Elise Siegel's work in the two person show (with Mie Yim) at Storefront Ten Eyck, I was inspired to clean up and post a few paragraphs I wrote about her work a couple of years ago. Go see the exhibition. It's great.

Elise Siegel is a sculptor whose work has always dealt in highly-expressive, hand worn forms, a language that makes her work distinctive. Though her sculptures deal in the human form, she works within this figural language not because she desires pure representation. Instead, she seeks to learn more about the relationships we form with inanimate objects: how we animate and relate to them, how we see ourselves within them. Drawing on ancient sculptural forms from both Eastern and Western cultures, her work is situated within an aesthetic tradition that embraces spiritual and emotive inquiry.

Until the last few years, Siegel's work has primarily been large-scale, staged installations of monochromatic ceramic figures in enigmatic situations. Her current investigations involve experiments with glazes, colors and pedestals; more specifically, how these variable layers change the outlying forms of her sculpture. Recently her work has shifted to singular portrait busts. While squarely within the European tradition, Siegel's figures are not meant as commemorations of great power or beauty, but are fictional portraits of the lost and lonely. Each portrait has an individual cast, but all share a poignant longing gaze as if beseeching the audience with their yearning. They look as if they are trying to share the secret of their buried hunger with us, and thus establish an intimate connection. This connectedness between sculpture and audience is an old romantic ideal which Siegel elegantly brings back to life.

The tender and awkward touch, the straightforward and somewhat clumsy application of simple glazes of green, blue and black, and the inward-looking aspect of the not-too-big heads may give the appearance of modesty, but this work is very ambitious. By eschewing the trend of bombastic spectacle so often seen in gallery exhibits today, Siegel gives shape to vulnerable subjectivity through a lone handmade object.

In a recent conversation I noted a trenchant sentence in Siegel's description of her process. She speaks of how in making each head by hand, what she seeks is "that moment when they appear to recognize" her. The search for this deeply sculptural moment is the crux of the matter – making sculpture live.

Daniel Weiner



Art

The Half-Boys

Sculptor Elise Siegel's ceramic creep-out

by Robert Shuster

May 1st, 2007 2:07 PM

To view Elise Siegel's ceramic sculpture **Elise Siegel: "I am what is around me"** at the Nancy Margolis Gallery is to become an intruder, and possibly an agent of corruption. There you'll find several small groups of Siegel's

Nancy Margolis Gallery
523 West 25th Street
Through June 9

unsmiling, nearly identical boys – upper halves only, mounted on black stands – enacting a cultish ritual or game. Interrupted, some turn to look at their visitor, while one figure, nearest the door, comes forward to present his blackened hands. Innocence fouled by an exposure to the outside, or simply a childish display of mud? The show's title, *I am what is around me* (the first line of a Wallace Stevens poem), gives a hint.

Siegel, an accomplished sculptor whose work has appeared in numerous galleries and museums, combines carefully arranged theatrics with a folk art sensibility (indefinite features, rough texture) to create a scene that, like other tableaux of hers, both charms and unnerves. Realism, only a starting point here, has been disturbed and skewed into foreboding dreamscape.

The creepiness comes, in part, from Siegel's process of golemlike creation. She molds her hollow figures whole out of clay coils, cuts them up to fit body parts into the kiln, then reassembles them— a sequence that came to her by happenstance (the kiln wasn't large enough), but one that gives each figure a sutured-together look with visible seams (scars) along the shoulders, ribs, and wrists. What's more, Siegel has left the heads partially severed; they rest at awkward angles, as if the boys are still learning how to use them.

Not quite human, then, the figures perch on their black stands like large puppets. Manipulated by Siegel's sure sense of stagecraft, they ask us, in turn, to respond— but it's not clear how. The provocative and somewhat chilling enigma of those beseeching hands leaves us feeling a little helpless.

Art in America



View of Elise Siegel's *24 Feet* (foreground) and *21 Torsos* (background), both ceramic and mixed mediums, 2004; at Garth Clark.

Elise Siegel at Garth Clark

Lined up demurely in two tidy facing rows, the dozen little girls of Elise Siegel's *24 Feet* seem to squirm in their straight-backed wooden chairs. Given only from the waist down, their hollow bodies are formed from hand-shaped, fired and painted clay. But their emotional presence is made vivid by their feet. Flexed and pointed, toes curled and spread, they communicate with uninhibited eloquence, mitigated not one bit by the sagging, rumpled little anklet socks with which every foot is shod.

24 Feet has an innocence so potent that the question of sentimentality is mooted. As she did in her 2001 installation—a circle of seated clay children staring expectantly toward the gallery's door—Siegel virtually disabled cynicism by plunging viewers straight into a total immersion in childhood. This kind of psychological quarantine was imposed even more forcefully by *21 Torsos*, the other installation on view here (both were completed in 2004). In diametric opposition to the linear rectitude of *24 Feet*, here 21 little monsters were engaged in fists-flying mayhem. Shown sans legs, raised off the floor on wheeled metal stands, they formed an unstable cloud of silent strife. As with the girls in *24 Feet*, each figure is individualized, though they share basic features: cropped hair makes them boyish; they look roughly seven or eight years old. Tight-fitting sleeveless T-shirts make their bodies seem all the more tender. Their pudgy little hands

are variously balled for punches, or raised in preparation for an opened-handed smack, fingers spread wide. Some reach forward, and many come close to contact without ever consummating the aggression; again, as with *24 Feet*, no two figures ever quite touch. Facial expressions range from quizzical to actively belligerent—most mouths are grimly shut, or slightly opened in thin-lipped scowls. But their raised eyebrows, small, deep-set little eyes and pale, doughy skin lend these children an air of vagueness, even helplessness: they seem somehow unsure about how they've wound up in this angry, irresolvable muddle.

That uncertainty is enhanced by the figures' postures. Tipped slightly forward, their backs arched and rear ends a little raised, heads just slightly inclined toward each other in groups of two or three, they could be putti in a ceiling painted by Tiepolo; only the wings are missing. Or, they could be juvenile versions of the teeming naked fighters in the famous engraving by Pollaiuolo, all arms raised, every martial posture illuminated. It's harder to find con-temporary comparisons for Siegel's work. Judy Fox's suavely seductive painted-clay children come to mind, as do Kiki Smith's cast-bronze figures drawn from fairy tales. But in Siegel's pieces, there's no allegory. No secondary language of psychological symbolism is at work. Rather than serving as ventriloquists' puppets for adult expression, Siegel's children seem to speak only for themselves. Leaving us thereby at a loss for words is not the least of their provocations.

—Nancy Princenthal

Art in America



Elise Siegel: *Into the room of dream/dread, I abrupt awake clapping*, 2001, mixed mediums; at Jane Hartsook.

Elise Siegel at Jane Hartsook

Elise Siegel's grouping of eight nearly identical child-sized ceramic figures was installed in a heavily curtained and dimly lit upstairs gallery at the Greenwich House Pottery. Nonspecific in gender, all the figures sat on hardwood school chairs, their feet dangling. Seven of the eight were arrayed in a circle around the final member, and every one of them looked you right in the eye as you entered the room. With their hands held in front of their chests, silently clapping, — mouths slightly ajar and heads tilted at a variety of inquisitive angles, this little kindergarten group positively radiate expectancy and dread. Whatever the game, the figure in the center was "it—with hands in lap, not clapping. Whether you, the viewer, came to judge, to supervise or to perform was not clear, but you were immediately the center of attention. This strange reversal of focus, together with the eerie silence of their arrested clapping, delivered an almost physical blow to the viewer entering the room for the first time. The piece is titled *Into the room of dream/dread, I abrupt awake clapping*. The details of Siegel's manipulation of this little drama are fascinating. The figures are modeled as big hand-built pots, like early pre-Columbian figurines. The volumes are fat and doughy, acquiring a slightly higher level of

articulation at the extremities. The feet are particularly detailed, with their curled toes and arched insteps anxiously paddling the empty air. The faces all have simple punched-in eyes, remarkably penetrating despite their crudity of facture. The heads were fired separately from the bodies and sit precariously on small clay wedges that allow the sculptor to rotate and tilt each head until its gaze is perfectly fixed on the entrance. A second division at each figure's waist contributes to this flexibility. Such minor misalignments of head and body help to increase the feeling of fragility without breaking the dramatic illusion— no mean trick. Everything is colored a dull, even gray, like unfired clay. As is often the case with sculptures of children, there is a sliding sense of scale, so that one isn't exactly clear what age the figures are meant to be or even how big they are. Such ambiguities contribute to that simultaneously vague and acute wash of sensation characteristic of dreams, particularly those startling, waking dreams in which we are both participant and observer, inside our identity, yet outside of it, until we awake overwhelmed by the momentary unreality of the familiar quotidian world. [The work is on view at the Zilkha Gallery, Wesleyan University, through Dec. 9.

—Robert Taplin

**Exhibition Brochure: *Into the Room of Dream/Dread, I abrupt awake clapping*, Jane Hartsook
Gallery, February 2001**

While she was at work, for almost a year, on this installation, Elise Siegel kept a few texts in mind. One, Thomas Mann's *Disorder and Early Sorrow*, concerns a party at which a girl of five, younger sister to the hosts, is asked to dance by an especially dapper young man. A mad, momentary infatuation ensues, and the little girl is inconsolably bereft at being sent to bed. A tale of small but damaging conflicts almost too numerous to name—of general disorder—Mann's story is above all a parable of misplaced ardor, of grief at a loss that is the more painful for being wholly unconditional, supported by neither propriety or wisdom, or even rational cause.

It is emotion at just this pitch, and a void this resounding, that Siegel captures in *Into the Room of Dream / Dread I Abrupt Awake Clapping*. A circle of children, made of fired clay but painted an unbaked-looking gray, are seated around a solitary child who holds the position of honor—or opprobrium. As in a dream, all seem reflections of the central (dreaming) subject, their features as similar as individual modeling can make them. They are delicate but a little ungainly, slightly too big for their age, their bottoms wide as wobbly bowls, their wrists, ankles, waists and necks articulated, like undressed porcelain dolls, by the edges of separately fired elements (some of the neck joints are in fact shimmed with little clay wedges). Seated bolt upright in their identical wooden chairs, the children are anxious with expectation. All are clapping, their small hands mostly upright—the central child holds hers (or his? their sex is indeterminate) between her knees—and rigid with effort. Even their feet, dangling long inches above the floor, are tense, toes flexed or tightly curled. And every innocent, baby-soft face—mouths slightly open, eyes deep, intent, and utterly unreadable—is turned toward the door through which the viewer enters. The effect of confronting their concerted attention is breathtakingly strong. Assuming involuntarily the privilege (or anathema) of the child in the circle's center, the viewer also, again inevitably, mirrors the expectancy of the surrounding children. Obtusely, even absurdly, big and animate, the viewer (guest? intruder? performer?) is, in the terms established by this unappeasable audience, at the same time perfectly helpless.

The cascade of displacements around which the installation is organized produces an effect that could be called, in a word, uncanny. Indeed, one of two other texts that Siegel had prominently in mind was Freud's 1919 essay, *The 'Uncanny.'* In the German (unheimlich), the term refers to a sense of alienation from the comfortable and home-like (Heim = home), an effect readily invoked by children's dolls, as is brought out in Rosalind Krauss's application of Freud's essay to the work of Hans Bellmer. "The doll is able to encode the dynamic at the heart of the uncanny," she writes, because "the structure of the uncanny turns... on a strangeness that grips what was once most familiar,... as it also takes the form of repetition, of the inevitability of return."

In citing literary uses of the uncanny, Freud writes at length on E. T. A. Hoffman's tale *The Sandman*, written a century before. This story, the third of Siegel's textual reference points, concerns a young man who succumbs, fatally, to the thralldom of a shape-shifting figure of evil, at first identified as a traditional bogey-man, a "sandman" who plucks out children's eyes when they won't go to sleep. A catastrophic romance with a female automaton, fashioned in part by one of the sandman's progeny, figures largely in the story; the seductiveness of this sightless (as well as deaf and dumb) mechanical doll, and the blindness of the hero's infatuation with her, have important parallels in Siegel's installation, from its portrayal of troubled vision to its concern with imprecise distinctions between animate and lifeless objects. Relevant above all is the uncanny effect—devastating, but also sometimes wondrous—that the irruption of childhood experiences can cause in adult life, as they so vividly do in *Into the Room of Dream / Dread I Abrupt Awake Clapping*.

NANCY PRINCENTHAL

**Rosalind Krauss, "Uncanny" in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss,
Formless: A User's Guide, Zone Books, New York, 1997, p.194.**

Exhibition Brochure – Second Skin, Halsey Gallery, College of Charleston South Carolina, November 1993

Ideas about the social construction of identity are central to the work of many contemporary cultural theorists. The self is no longer seen as something simply innate and biologically determined but also as a reflection of society, a repository of cultural values. During the past decade feminist film theorists have used these ideas to examine the image of woman. They argue that it is constructed—“fabricated,” “pieced together,” and in every sense of the word “made-up” according to the rules and standards of society.

Clothing is a densely coded visual system of signification that transmits psychological, sexual, and cultural messages. Therefore, many theorists have focused on the role clothing plays in the construction of female identity. They have attempted “to make its constructedness evident—to turn it inside out so the stitching shows.”¹ Elise Siegel’s stitched and constructed garment-like sculptures provide a concrete aesthetic parallel to this inquiry.

Since 1991 Siegel has been making sculptural objects that resemble female gendered garments and serve as surrogates for the female body. Included in her wardrobe are skirts, dresses, pinafores, corsets, bras, and tutus. Siegel animates her garments in ways that poetically and metaphorically evoke the absent wearer. Movement is suggested by the flare of a skirt or the directional pull of wire. The wire allows her to draw in space but just as importantly reads as hair. It tugs, bristles, quivers. It resonates with the ambiguous eroticism associated with this body covering. It enlivens the garments visually and, because hair is known to continue growing after death, it serves as a striking reminder of the absent figure. It signals the presence of absence.

Cracked, suggestively pigmented surfaces evoke skin. The suture-like stitches that join together the component pieces of a work are fully exposed. The constructedness of physical appearance is literalized. In the artist’s words, “the line between clothing, and actual body and skin becomes blurred as we put on, take off, implant, augment, pare down, and decorate in a never-ending attempt to re-invent ourselves.”

Siegel navigates this fine line between body and clothes in several corsets and bras. These foundation undergarments that are worn next to the body, mold and shape its image, become part of the body—a second skin. In a group of poignantly sutured bras, the straps read as bandages. It comes as no surprise that they were executed during the Dow Corning breast implant crisis of 1992. The corsets are alive with the anxious motion of the twisted and unraveling bandage-like strips from which they are constructed. Corset or viscera? Inside or out? Insides are out.

In another group of works that resemble aprons, Siegel further explores the convergence of inside and out. She employs wire that simultaneously reads as two body coverings—hair and skirt, hence the name “hair skirts.” The tangled webs of wire evoke pubic hair and thus allude to the “apron’s [original] function as a covering...as protection against the ‘polluting’ power of genitalia.”²

Formally, the work in this exhibition derives from the artist’s previous, fully abstract sculpture, both in its anthropomorphizing references, its use of materials (pigmented modeling paste over wire mesh fabric) and its method of construction (cutting and sewing from patterns). She now employs these materials and techniques as a vehicle for ideas about contemporary culture. They also serve as the underpinnings for a broad range of expression and give the work a heightened emotional and psychological intensity. Through the language and imagery of clothing, Siegel achieves a graceful fusion of form and content.

Nina Felshin

¹ Jane Gaines, ‘Introduction: Fabricating the Female Body, in *Fabrications. Costume and the Female Body*, ed Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1.

² Maureen Connor, Icons at Large,’ *Artforum*, vol. 30 (VIII, no.3 (November 1989), 26-28.

Elise Siegel



Blue Portrait Bust with Dripping
Cobalt Shirt
ceramic, 2018
h.24"x w.11"x d. 8"



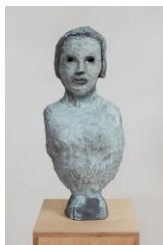
Portrait Bust with Copper and
Iron Stripes
ceramic, 2017
h.28.5"x w.14"x d.9"



Portrait Bust with Rutile Slip and
Hollow Blackened Eyes
ceramic, 2016
h.24.5 x w.12"x d.9"



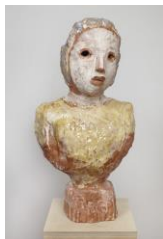
Pale Blue Portrait Bust with
Dark Drips
ceramic, 2018
h.25"x w.13"x d.8"



Black and Pale Blue Portrait Bust
with Hollow Eyes
ceramic, 2018
h.25"x w.10"xd.7.5"



Pale and Dark Gray Portrait
Bust with Dark Eyelashes,
ceramic, 2018
h.23"x w.11"x d. 8"



Portrait Bust with Amber Shirt and
Lavender Hair
ceramic, 2016
h.27"x w.14"x d.10"



Baby Blue Portrait Bust with
Square Eyes
ceramic, 2018
h.23"x w.12"x d.7"



Portrait Bust with Dark Gray
Bodice,
ceramic, 2018
h.24.5"x w.12"x d.7"



Pink Portrait Bust with Almond
Eyes
ceramic, 2014
h.22"x w.12"x d.9"



Portrait Bust with Radiant Orange
Underglaze,
Ceramic, 2015
h.26"x w.10"x d. 8"



Portrait Bust with Cobalt and
White Underglaze
ceramic, 2015
h. 25"x w.13"x d.8.5"