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# CHRISTIE BROWN

by Tessa Peters

## *Narrative Strategies*

Christie Brown came to prominence in the mid-1980s, in the vanguard of a new generation of figurative ceramic artists in the UK, whose work challenged the era's primary focus on the vessel form. After taking a General Arts degree she worked as a TV researcher before re-thinking her career path in the early 80s via further studies on the Studio Pottery Course at Harrow College of Art. Initially known as a maker of graceful bas-relief figures, by the mid-90s her work had become fully three-dimensional and her representations of the human form had taken on a more disquieting, haunting presence. Over the course of her career Brown has explored a variety of themes, all underpinned by a range of enduring concerns, notably the relationships between historical artefacts, mythological narratives and contemporary experience.

She employs a variety of materials and processes; however, for the past two decades the technique of press moulding has been central to her practice. She is acutely aware of clay as



**The Uncanny Playroom**, 2010, stoneware terracotta and mixed media, 150 x 65 x 23 cm  
*Photo by Sussie Ahlburgh*

a metaphor for origin and its close association with the creation myths of ancient cultures, noting that, alongside its associations with cloning or replication, the mould “also represents a space waiting to be filled, a manifestation of absence and presence, a representation of the threshold, the liminal”.

Her solo exhibition, “Fragments of Narrative” (2000), in an exhibition space at the former Wapping Hydraulic Power Station, East London, marked a significant point in her artistic development. Until then she had made work to be viewed on the conventional plinths of a white cube gallery – but

such an approach would have been incongruous at Wapping, with its late Victorian industrial architecture and vast unrenovated interior spaces. It demanded a site-specific response. Finding resonances between the former use of the site for the generation of power and myths of origin, in which the inanimate is brought to life, she began to make freestanding figures based on mythological narratives. Two examples are Pygmalion, whose wish that the beautiful female statue he created might come to life was granted by the goddess Aphrodite, and Prometheus who, according to some stories, made the first man from clay. There were also representations of a Golem, a figure found in Kabbalistic literature. One legend relates how an effigy, made of clay, was brought to life by a rabbi by means of a ‘shem’ – sacred words inscribed on a tablet or scrap of paper that were placed in its mouth. Once animated the Golem would serve its master, but could later be immobilised by removing the shem.

**Collective Traces**, 2006, stoneware, terracotta and mixed media, dimensions variable, figure 60 x 17 x 20 cm  
*Photo by Sussie Ahlburgh*





Rara Avis: Seated Man with Black Ears, 2015, stoneware, 72 x 34 x 48 cm Photo by Sylvain Deleu

**Brown is not concerned with naturalistic representations of the human body. Her imagination is captured by mimetic man-made figures, including dolls, automata, statuettes and mannequins. Imbued with cultural meanings, such artefacts have long been used by humankind as a means to reflect on or mediate ideas about the world.**

Brown is not concerned with naturalistic representations of the human body. Her imagination is captured by mimetic man-made figures, including dolls, automata, statuettes and mannequins. Imbued with cultural meanings, such artefacts have long been used by humankind as a means to reflect on or mediate ideas about the world. Her work "Ex-Votos" (2003–2004) presents cultural remnants, archaeological shards spilling out from still intact clay heads and seeming to symbolise lost knowledge and history. Yet each of the heads bears a museological accession number, indicating a desire to conserve, to study and – in Jungian terms of the collective unconscious – to eventually re-inherit their significance.

Brown returned to the Harrow ceramics course as a lecturer in 1993 and, in the early 2000s, in recognition of her research activity, she was awarded the title of Professor of Ceramics in the visual art department, now part of the University of Westminster. A new focus to her creative output came with residencies, one at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, London, another at Hunter College, New York, a short distance from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and its galleries of Egyptian art. Her exhibition, *Collective Traces* (2006), at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, featured an installation inspired by the everyday, utilitarian nature of the objects in the Petrie collection together with a survey by the organisation British Age Concern, which asked 3000 people what ob-



Rara Avis: left, Lop-eared Woman; right, Statue, 2015 stoneware; left, 70 x 25 x 17 cm and right, 100 x 24 x 25 cm. Photo by Sylvain Deleu



**Rara Avis:** Clever Sheep. 2015, stoneware, 49 x 29 x 21 cm

*Photo by Sylvain Deleu*

jects they would like to be buried with. She cast multiples of the objects mentioned by respondents to the survey, including mobile phones, teddy bears and various lucky charms, placing them beside clay figures, seated on chairs, hands on knees, in the traditional pose presented by ancient Egyptian statues. "The Uncanny Playroom" (2010) was derived from the same source, although it evolved more gradually through her addition of found objects and clothing. Less obviously inspired by Egyptian art, she describes it as: 'The childhood memory of a playroom school where dolls and teddy bears were lined up at their desks,' noting that 'these inanimate objects may have a life of their own ... an animated narrative may occur when we have left the room.'

Such ideas of the uncanny were theorised by Freud to be associated with superstitious beliefs and the residues of animistic mental activity

that we carry with us from early childhood. These came to the fore again in her exhibition "DreamWork" (2012) at the Freud Museum, London. One of the installations that she made for the exhibition, titled *Sleepover*, was inspired by a selection of antiquities – Etruscan, Egyptian, Greek and Roman figurines – that she found "partly hidden in a case in Freud's study" and which she linked to "his use of the archaeology metaphor to present his psychoanalytic theory to the world". Entering the darkened space – once Freud's bedroom – the visitor encountered a gathering of 23 white, child-sized figures, which collectively arrested him or her with their confrontational gaze.

"DreamWork" was part of a larger Ceramics in the Expanded Field research project, funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council, through which Brown and colleagues Clare Twomey and Julian Stair sought to examine how artists might engage with museum collections in new ways. She was involved in another museum-related project the following year at the Sir John Soane's Museum, London. This commission, titled "A Thwarted Dynasty" (2013), referred to the rift in relations between Soane, renowned Neo-Classical British architect, and his sons, due to the reluctance of the latter to follow their father into the architectural profession. Her commemorative portrait busts of family members, including "Fanny the dog", posited some grounds for reconciliation.

Over the years Brown has built up a large archive of press moulds and, in combination with free-building and hand modelling, she has employed the resource in the making of her most recent exhibition, "Rara Avis", a term meaning "an uncommon, or exceptional person or thing", for ArtHouse1, London (2016). The show comprised 27 standing or seated statues and portrait busts, many of which were collaged human/animal hybrids. Here, in an apparent state of metamorphosis, her mythological gods and goddesses, and her uncanny dolls and mannequins, took on features from ancient Chinese and Egyptian animal figures to create a sense of "otherness" and alternative ways of thinking and being in the world; they are a reminder, in her words, "that human beings are not necessarily the centre of the universe".

Building on this full range of ideas, Christie Brown continues to harness the peculiar power of myth, cultural archetypes and antiquities to tell us thought-provoking stories about ourselves.

**Tessa Peters**

*is an independent curator, and a senior lecturer and researcher at the University of Westminster, London.*

### ARTIST'S STATEMENT

My figurative practice is informed by our relationship with the past through narrative and history, and the significance and relevance of archaic artefacts in museum collections to contemporary artists. Archaeology presents a fragmented narrative of past lives and holds parallels with the practice of psychoanalysis where layers are carefully stripped away to reveal hidden information. My work references these traces as well as the mythology, narrative and symbolism associated with clay. In the uncanny realm of the figure, an idealised or perhaps disturbing representation of ourselves, the potential exists for the imagination to create an animated narrative which can include zoomorphic references and hybrid characters. Drawing on inspiration from mimetic figures such as dolls, puppets and figurines, which contain these animated references, I create figures and portraits that suggest otherworldly beings which at the same time seem familiar. The ideas are often presented through site or theme-specificity and the making method of press moulding allows an exploration of the potential for repetition through installation and collage. In recent work I have drawn on my extensive archive of plaster moulds and combined free built elements with press moulded sections, creating a range of collaged portraits, which reflect the complexity of otherness and identity, as well as the human-animal relationship.

### TECHNICAL NOTES

Most work is press moulded in a variety of clay bodies, including brick clay and porcelain, and painted in vitreous engobes and low fire glazes.

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Christie Brown is a figurative ceramic artist. She graduated from Harrow School of Art in 1982 and set up her studio in north London. She taught at BA and MA level at the University of Westminster from 1993-2012, where she was also a doctoral supervisor and researcher until 2016. Following on from exhibition "Fragments of Narrative" in 2000 she was made a Professor of Ceramics for her international contribution to the field. She was Principal Investigator on the Arts and Humanities Research Council project Ceramics in the Expanded Field (2011-14). Her most recent solo exhibition "Rara Avis" was held in April 2016 at Arthouse1 in London. She has exhibited in several group exhibitions including Exposed: "Heads, Busts and Nudes" with Ferrin Contemporary (USA 2016). Other major exhibitions include her solo "DreamWork" at the Freud Museum, London (2012), "Marking the Line" at the Sir John Soane's Museum (2013) and the shortlisted Award exhibition at the British Ceramics Biennial in 2013. Her work is featured in several private and public collections in Europe and the USA, including the Victoria and Albert Museum London, the Sèvres Museum, France, and the Mint Museum, USA.

**The Golem**, 2000, brick clay, 186 x 48 x 37 cm — Photo by Kate Forrest

