

Prepared by Kay Miller, October 2012

**"Gubbin's Return," Richard Shaw, 1981, porcelain with decal overglaze, #81.32**



**Gallery Label:** Richard Shaw's painting and sculpture background (he earned his B.F.A. at the San Francisco Art Institute) served him well when he became one of Robert Arneson's students at the University of California, Davis, in the mid-1960s. Instead of creating ceramic sculpture that was larger than life as Arneson did, Shaw moved toward replication through his amazing *tromp l'oeil* (literally, "fool the eye") pieces. These grew from tabletop objects to walking figures such as *Gubbins Returns*, and demonstrate the artist's eye for detail as well as the mastery of the porcelain medium in his meticulous replication of the figure's components, including a wine bottle, a cardboard box, and a spool of string. This move from static, three-dimensional still lifes toward movement and anthropomorphism imbued a new aspect to his sculpture, perhaps inspired by the work of his father, an animator for the Walt Disney Company.

### Questions:

1. Describe this figure. What is it holding? What did the artist use to make its legs, body and head? Is this figure static, or in motion? Is it male or female? WDYSTMYST?
2. Each part of this sculpture looks like something artist Richard Shaw found in a junk shop or lying around his house. But he made each component of "Gubbin's Return" entirely from porcelain in a technique called *tromp l'oeil* – or fool the eye. Why do you think Shaw choose to make a clay model of a wine bottle, ball of string and cork instead of just assembling real objects?
3. Shaw's whimsical figures are known for their distinctive body language. What gestures is this figure making? What emotions do you think it is expressing?
4. Many of Shaw's figures evoke the feeling that something happened in the moment just before the sculptural moment. What do you think might have happened to Gubbin? What is he returning from? Where is he going? What story is Shaw telling? What do you expect Gubbin's next move to be?
5. Shaw loves copying ordinary objects and causing viewers to see the beauty in them. "All that stuff has poetry in it," Shaw says. What bits of poetry do you see in Gubbin's elements? As a group, let's pull our poetic bits together and compose a quick poem about Gubbin.
6. Imagine the man who created this figure? What clues can we find about what the artist is like?

### The object: "Gubbin's Return":

- One of Shaw's earlier whimsical figures from a series that he has been doing since 1977. None of them is the same as any other.
- Shaw's idea was to take typical elements of the still life [sometimes called **nature mort** or dead nature] and stand it up. Then, he anthropomorphized the figure, turning it into an animated person, "breathing life" into it.
- Highly detailed. Label on wine bottle and box were made with water-slide decals made in a process that uses silk-screen printing.
- Looks like assemblage of junk or found objects. But Shaw each component is made from porcelain. Some parts were cast from molds. Others may have been hand built or thrown.

- Employs *tromp l'oeil* and decal overglazes, in a silk-screen process that Shaw developed.
- Looks like it is in motion. Employs “body language” and a bit of an attitude!
- Constructed from the base up. Wires or rods run through ceramic pieces, holding them together.
- Has a cartoonish feel, possibly inspired by his father, who was an animator for the Walt Disney studio. Also inspired by American folk art.
- Evokes a living moment, event or situation. Gives the feeling that something may have happened in the moment immediately preceding.

### **Richard Shaw:**

- **In the world of contemporary ceramics, Richard Shaw is the master of *tromp l'oeil* sculpture whose elements that look like objects in the real world but are perfectly cast from porcelain.**
  - *Tromp l'oeil* usually refers to a style of painting begun in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance, but that Shaw adapted it to ceramics.
  - He developed an astonishing array of techniques, including overglaze transfer decals.
  - He combines the commonplace & whimsical, the humorous & mundane, the poetic & surreal. Humor and irreverence play a huge role all Shaw’s work.
- **One of the most respected and collected artists in contemporary ceramics.**
  - His works are owned by major collectors and more than 25 museums nationally, including the Smithsonian, Whitney Museum of American Art, L.A. County Museum, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and museums in Europe, Korea & Japan.
- **Best known series:**
  - Miniature rooms
  - Whimsical figures
  - Book jars & tea pots that look like art boxes, sketchbooks, stacked books, skulls (***Vanitas***)
  - Wedding cake disasters
  - House of cards
  - Titanic plunges
  - Cantonware takeoffs
  - Desert, coffee & cigarettes
- Born 1941 in Hollywood to artist mother and cartoonist father who worked as animator at Disney Studios doing Mickey Mouse strips and later at another studio won Oscar for Mr. Magoo.

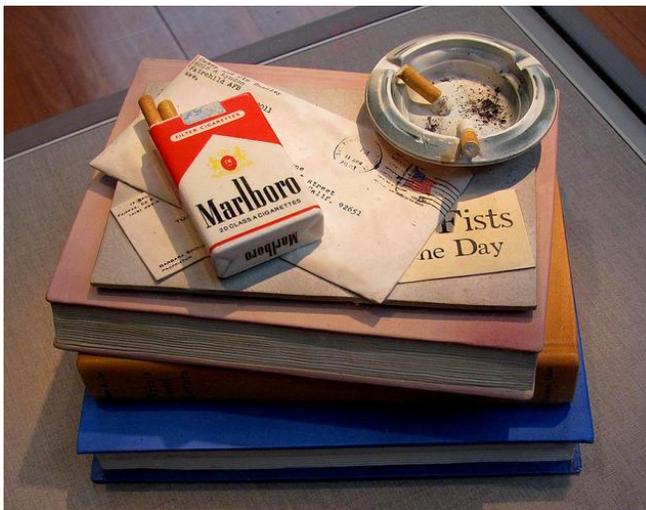
- As a boy, Shaw couldn't read or write. Failed several grades in school. Wanted to be film-maker or a "real artist" wearing a beret and smoking Camels. Heroes/role models included cartoonists & serious artists.
- Drew all the time, especially people.
- Started as a painter at Orange Coast College, but fell in love with ceramics after seeing a "funky" sculpture in the ceramics studio.
  - 1965 – BFA - San Francisco Art. Institute. Studied with ceramics pioneer James Melchert.
  - 1968 – MFA University of California/Davis. Studied with famed sculptor Robert Arneson. Also with Manuel Neri and William T. Wiley.
  - Part of iconoclastic **Bay Area Ceramic Funk** movement in late 1960s. Pivotal time in which ceramics became less about throwing pots, more about unconventional, experimental sculpture. Group included Viola Frey, Peter Voukos, Davivd Gilhooly, Marilyn Levine, Ron Nagle and Melchert.
  - Shared studio with famed ceramist Robert Hudson. Together they experimented with new & unorthodox techniques. Toyed with jars & teapots that stretch idea of functionality.
  - Taught at Art Institute 20 years; since 1987 at U. C./Berkeley.
- Wife, Martha Shaw, is a painter and collaborator. Five children, all of them artists.
  - Has lived in Fairfax, Calif., since 1976 in ramshackle house & studio overflowing with collections, ceramic molds, half-finished projects. Chickens in and out of the house. Doors and windows flapping.
  - "You have no idea how he produces this beautiful art because it's such a mess," a colleague said in one video.
- Contest with himself to "make the whole world into clay."
  - Incredibly hard worker. Self-disciplined. Virtuoso technical skill. Wild imagination.
  - Takes gleeful, fiendish delight in the "gotcha" of fooling viewers, especially other ceramists.
    - ❖ "When you fool other guys who are making ceramics, you **got it!**" – Richard Shaw.
  - Studio has hundreds of molds stacked to the ceiling in a "library" of shapes.
  - Loves taking common objects and making viewer see the beauty in them.
    - ❖ "All that stuff has poetry in it!" – Richard Shaw
  - Each element of a Shaw piece is either thrown or cast from individual molds. When he first started his "books" series, he made the pile of books as one. That didn't work. Now, each book is separately crafted.
  - Developed a process for silk-screening transfers
    - ❖ Allows Shaw to add realistic, finely detailed pictures of book titles, stamps, product labels, playing cards and dollar bills onto porcelain.

- ❖ Process of using water-slide decals: First, silk-screen a chosen image – such as Gubbin’s wine bottle label – onto decal paper. Decal is then applied to a piece of porcelain that has been fired & glazed. This is done by dampening the decal with water, then sliding it off the paper manual and onto the porcelain, where it is pressed into place. A final firing of the porcelain object seals the decal into place.
- Although Shaw returns to the same tropes and materials, he strives to make each piece distinctively different. Working from a format, he says, is like putting the first dab of paint onto a blank canvas: It removes the stark terror that comes from starting a new piece.
  - ❖ “The whole idea of art is developing a vocabulary that is you but not boring.” - Shaw
  - ❖ “Art is a weird exercise in never making anything twice.” - Shaw
  - ❖ “Art is about breaking every rule in the world.” - Shaw
- In his miniature rooms, Shaw alluded to scenes where people had just left the room. In the same way, he was fascinated with Cantonware, the blue-and-white ware that was widely copied. To Shaw’s eye, the pottery has a cartoon feel. He once read that by the time a piece was loaded on a ship, it had been touched by 30 hands. He loved the notion of so many people leaving their artistry, imprint, even fingerprints on a blue-and-white plate.
- Has a great sense of humor that shows throughout his work.
  - When things are not what they appear to be, Shaw thinks, it makes the viewer look more closely and have a new experience with a familiar object. *tromp l’oeil* is a trick, an illusion, a bit of magic that slows you down and makes you think.
  - He focuses on the ordinary object, the prosaic, the mundane. He makes copies so authentic that it’s most “plagiarism,” like stealing something, he says.
- In 1977, Shaw started crafting whimsical figures like Gubbin’s Return that look like assemblages of found objects, but are actually made entirely from clay.
  - He “took the Still Life and stood it up,” then anthropomorphized it into a person in an animated pose.
  - Shaw thinks of this as breathing life into a kind of painting often referred to as *nature mort* [dead nature]. “I’m trying to do the opposite, make it alive, not dead” he says.
  - His figures have body language. “The standing ones that were really moving along have a kind of attitude about them. They become alive. There’s more action, gesture, but you know they’re made out of junk. Or you don’t; they’re actually clay.”
    - ❖ “It would be neat if you could make one that was so personal; it would be embarrassing to look at.” - Richard Shaw

- Evoking a living moment, event or situation is important part of Shaw's work.
- Shaw loves a gag. He juxtaposes components in contexts that make no sense and make you laugh – a sculpture of the Titanic sinking into a couch, or a Cantonware blue-and-white cup in a house of cards. This makes the viewer ask “Why?”



**"Old Neighbor," 2007    "Standing Figure w/ Goulash," 2003    "The Painter," 2003**



**"Book Jar with Ashtray," 1980 / 2008**



*"Bride and Shipwreck,"* 2004



*"Look Around,"* 2005



*"Sketchbook Jar with Palette and Deer Skull"*  
2005



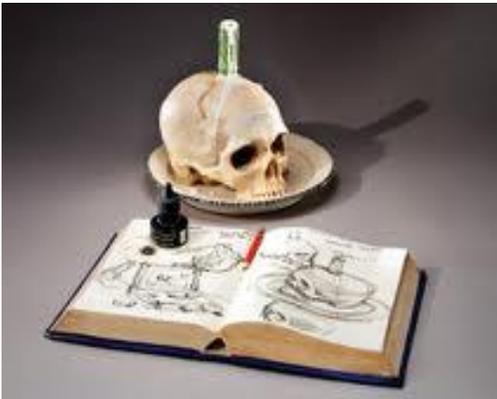
*"G.W.B. and Other Clowns Jar,"*  
2005



***"Streets of Apathy," 2008***



**The owner of this teapot said her guests often moved it to the sink to be washed**



***"Still Life with Skull," 2009***





***"Canton Collection", 2009***



***"Ceramic Paint Tube Teapot"***



***"Basket with Empty Pockets," 2009***

**Sources:**

Richard Shaw, 2012 Regis Master Lecture, May 26, 2012. Minneapolis Institute of Arts <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sz6XAFy3HAE>

Shaw's home page: <http://www.richardshawart.com/shawdoc.html> Includes videos about him, his life, art and processes.

*"Interview: Richard Shaw: Magic Tricks,"* Richard Whittacker, Works & Conversations, Aug. 25, 2006. <http://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=186>

Goodwin FineArts, Denver gallery that carries Shaw's work: <http://www.goodwinfineart.com/pages/RichardShaw2.html>