



Em Kettner, *The Afterbirth*, 2019, cotton and wool on glazed porcelain, 6 x 6 x 4 in.
Photo: Ryan Edmund Thiel.

Em Kettner: Play the Fool

October 24 – December 5, 2020

Em Kettner's solo exhibition "Play the Fool," features 27 small-scale porcelain sculptures bound together by vibrantly graphic woven costumes decorating their exaggerated and frequently elongated limbs. "I'm interested in how 'the fool' can topple established power dynamics by leaning fully into their perceived shortcomings and physical anomalies," Kettner explains of these works. The figures' fanciful costumes, she notes, "enhance what is erotic, strange, and celebratory about them, while distracting from their assumed submissive status." Arranged throughout the Gallery like intimate theater scenes seen from an eagle-eyed vantage point and depicting, for example, a sickbed, a votive offering, and a moment of private pleasure, Kettner's sculptures bring notions of the Carnavalesque and its reversals of expected hierarchies in conversation with contemporary discourses on disability culture, Otherness, marginality and radical beauty while playfully insisting that "nothing is too sacred to be comical, to be shared."

Artist Q&A

Assistant Director/Curator Elizabeth Lalley interviews Em Kettner



EL: Can you tell me a little more about the title of this show? I'm thinking of the way the Shakespearean fool acted as a source of outsider wisdom, but your work takes this even further. How do you see the role of "the fool" here and how is it enacted in your pieces?

EK: Oh, I love all manner of fools—they're innovative and necessary mediators, cultural critics, and mystics. In myth, as you mentioned, the archetypal fool often holds sway over events in the story or delivers otherworldly advice. Characters with these abilities can address heavy and complex topics from a place of humor, engaging the audience through comedic performance and storytelling. Such unassuming methods have this incredible power to challenge the status quo: by leaning into perceived shortcomings or otherwise strategically lowering yourself, you can mete out criticism all while embodying reminders of folly, fallibility, and mortality.

In my work I'm thinking not only of the fictional fool, but also the roles historically allocated to disabled people: court jesters, circus sideshow attractions, and even gods of mischief and laughter were at once celebrated and isolated for their anomalous behaviors. To "play the fool," then, refers to a defensive strategy, a potentially advantageous position, and—for much of history—an inevitability for those with disabilities.

Many of my porcelain figures are bound to each other or their beds in states of supplication or sickness. I embellish what is strange or broken so that the sculptures flaunt their sinewy limbs with panache, diverting attention toward their brightly woven costumes. There's power in embracing your own smallness and fragility, and insisting others delight in these conditions as well. In the spirit of "the fool," my characters perform their private pleasures, prayers, and pain for an ever-anticipated audience.



Installation view of Em Kettner: *Play the Fool*, Photo: Ryan Edmund Thiel.

Let's talk a bit about the minute scale of your work. Many of the pieces feel almost talismanic, like charms that could be carried in someone's pocket. How did working in this scale begin for you and how has it carried through your practice?

Miniature objects are both accessible and deceptively simple. Something small might appear insignificant until you're mere inches away, or holding it in your own hands.

I've always been most curious about ritual and votive objects: those collected and carried by pilgrims, saints, and children; those used in healing or transformation ceremonies; and those with covert or lost purposes. Sometimes at this miniature scale, the facts of the object's making are on full display even if its utility is lost to time. This is a quality found in talismans, venerated relics, and even domestic tools separated from their original context.

In the case of my work, the scale invites the viewer to approach intimately and lean in or crouch down. Closer inspection reveals what's painted and what's stitched, and how the threads hold every limb in place. All of this can come into focus, but the reason for these very specific moves might remain unclear. I want to imbue the objects with spiritual significance or animism, and paying meticulous attention to something so small is a way to suggest deep import.

The woven aspect in the works feels very tender to me, as it requires you to touch the small forms so closely and delicately. It's as though you're wrapping the works in a protective way, while also accentuating their features, making their extended or multiplied limbs even more visible. Can you talk a bit about the thread component in these works?

That's exactly how I think of the process. The woven elements enhance what's strange, stitch characters to each other, and in some cases literally hold the ceramic forms in place.

Traditions of costuming similarly allow the wearer to transform, expand upon, or veil their physique. But I'm also finding parallels in medical responses to injury or anomaly: binding the body in casts; confining the body to bed; or merging the body with a caregiver, assistive device, or support animal.

As someone with a physical disability, I experience my own body as inextricable from these such support systems. If I rely on another person to help me stand up, then in that instance I have four extra limbs working in tandem with mine. The characters I create exist within these moments of expansion, mutualism, and dependence. And certainly these sensations also describe erotic interactions and attempts to commune with something holy.

One of the more poignant theories relating to our own evolution is that ancient civilization is first evidenced by the remains of a healed femur bone. A prehistoric leg had been set, bound, and kept still. This fossil suggests multiple people thought beyond their individual survival instincts in order to empathetically and successfully care for another. It's a theory that uniquely situates disability as integral to the formation of human civilization.

I see my weaving process as being part of this legacy; that is, my porcelains, like brittle white bones, require I stay with them long enough to weave elaborate, protective casings.

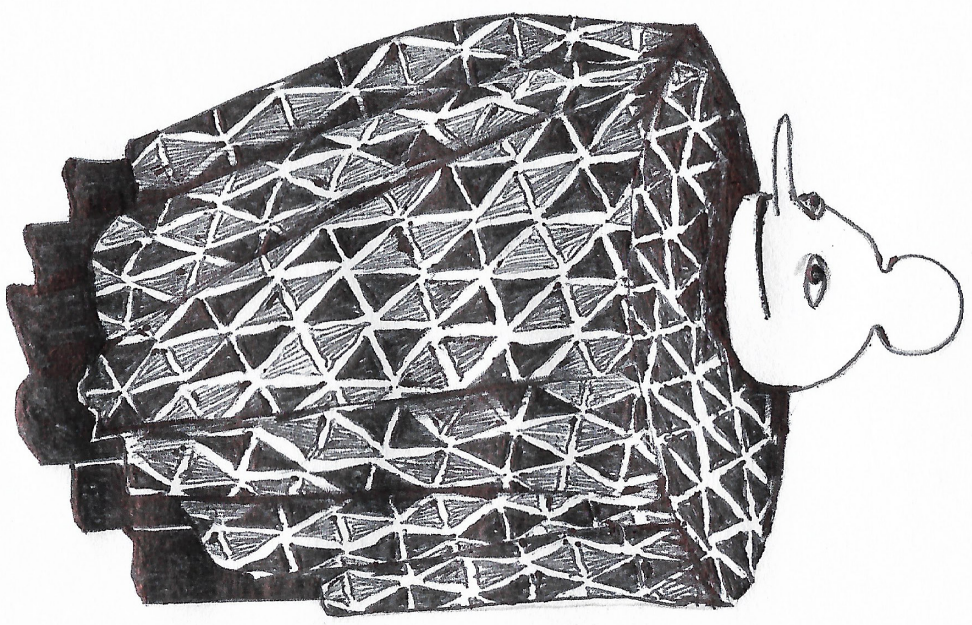
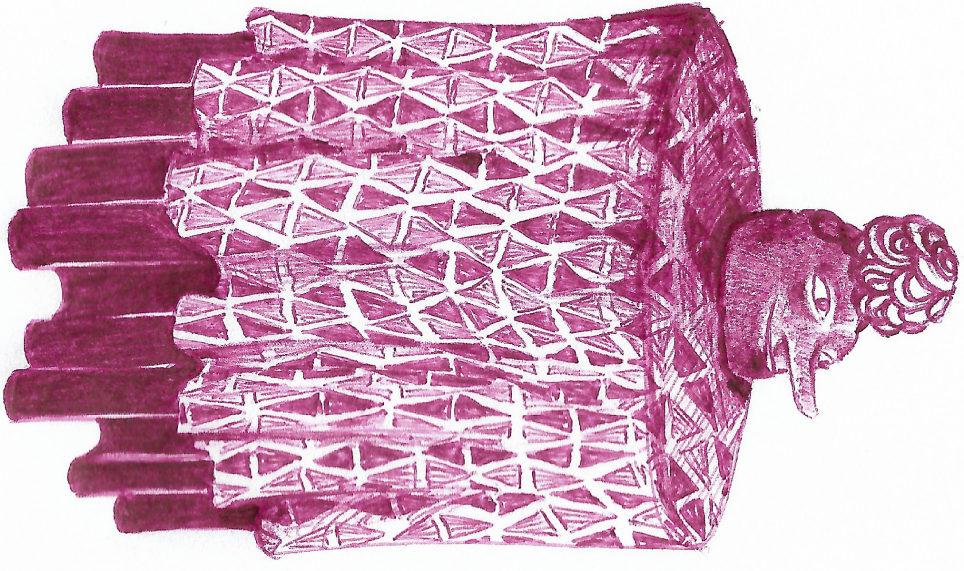




Em Kettner, *The Twins*, 2019, cotton and wool on glazed porcelain, 5 x 3 x 1 in. Photo: Ryan Edmund Thiel.



Em Kettner, *The Suppliant (1)*, 2019, cotton and wool woven around glazed porcelain, 9 x 5 x 8 in. Photo: Ryan Edmund Thiel.





Em Kettner, *The Suppliant (3)*, 2020, cotton woven around glazed porcelain, 8 x 4 x 3 in. Photo: Ryan Edmund Thiel.

The works exist almost as tiny theater scenes being performed for “an eagle-eyed critic” as you’ve said, particularly when we think about their titles. What is the role of narrative and storytelling—particularly myths, fables, and retellings of these traditions—in your work?

I think it’s crucial to re-examine the ways certain bodies have been written into history and myth. And it’s equally important to imagine new or alternative perspectives, as “the fool” so often proposes.

I mentioned a fascination with votive and other venerated objects. That focus emerged from my research into the effects of folk and institutionalized theology on the disabled body. Certain origin myths and religious texts express confusion or disgust regarding physical alterity: there are biblical passages banning the lame from the altar: changeling legends and sacrificial practices across Northern Europe that target disabled children; and Sumerian creation stories characterizing disability as the result of drunken gods at play. These archaic beliefs are repeated and manifest in our fictional villains, metaphors, and diagnostic procedures—each perpetuating a narrow conceit of how ideal bodies behave.

I’m interested in revising these foundational stories by injecting humor and compassion. I’m imagining a culture where physical variance is welcome at the altar, and recasting members of my community as lovers, guardians, and comedians. “The Pilgrim” and “The Suppliant” refer to an extreme state of humility and desire. These figures pose with offerings or lower themselves until they’re prone, balanced precariously on their tongues. At the same time, they take great pride

in their roles, flash body parts in playfully erotic gestures, and glance at one another with mischievous expressions.

I’m curious about how you think about the relationship between the “characters” that you’ve made. Does “The Suppliant” exist in the same world as “The Pilgrim” for instance? Do you think about them in relation to each other or in the context of separate “stories”?

Yes, I think they definitely all belong to the same story, though that story is still unfolding ahead of me...

With respect to individual narratives, I’ve been thinking about how to illustrate the passage of time in a single still object. I love those giant Assyrian Lamassu sculptures, striding from the side, stationary from the front, and “impossible” when you consider all views at once. Likewise, my sculpture “The Suppliant (2)” is both a being with five limbs in the round, and a being in motion from each side. Some of my pieces might represent different stages in one character’s journey. Medieval paintings repeat characters in a single image to advance the narrative; my work “St. Francis and the Flies” depicts three flies attending a sermon, *or* one fly crawling around the saint.

I think about whether I can imply a story by isolating a piece, or by installing in pairs or clusters once I have a large enough series to play around with. After much rearranging and consideration of the figures together, I’ll usually decide necessary links are missing and so I get back to work.



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