



Children featured provocatively in exhibitions

BY ROBERT REID, RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO — Two evocative exhibitions at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery deal provocatively with children.

Susan Low-Beer's *State of Grace* and *Force of the Moon's Shell* create an unsettling sense of ambiguity, ambivalence and paradox.

The installation features 15 clay sculptures of young children mounted on twisted steel shafts.

The children seem to be suspended in mid-air, about a metre off the floor. They could be diving into a swimming pool or jumping on a trampoline — or something more disturbing.

The sculptures, both glazed and unglazed, span a variety of pastel hues from beige and cream to blue and green. All have evenly spaced, horizontal lines incised around their bodies.

The sculptures produce a dynamic tension between stasis and movement, as the children seem suspended in time as well as space — a material, three-dimensional snapshot, caught and frozen forever.

Eternal childhood.

The poses suggest freedom and spontaneity. At the same time, the figures seem tense, with straightened arms at their sides, slightly behind their bodies, and legs bent at the knees.

Facial expressions vary, but all eyes are closed, whether in a state of euphoria, serenity, sleep — or death.

The children are intentionally indistinct in terms of gender and ethnicity.

Universal childhood.

The exhibition commentary talks about the sculptures capturing "the buoyancy, movement and lightness of innocent, joyful exuberance."

This is one interpretation.

But *State of Grace* seems darker.

Walking around the installation, looking into the faces of the children and struggling to understand their poses, a gallery-goer's thoughts might turn to the collective deaths of children across geography and time: plagues, pandemics, natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes or the methodical, mechanized murders committed by humanity against its children.

Innocence shattered by experience.

Force of the Moon's Shell is a series of five mixed-media works mounted on the wall. Small armless, male figures, with splayed legs, hang out from gestural paintings which incorporate circle imagery.

Michele Karch-Ackerman's *Foundling* honours the lives of unwed mothers and the babies they were forced to give up.

The installation is inspired by personal family history. Her grandmother was an unwed mother confined to one of numerous homes located in communities across Canada in the first half of the last century.

Foundling opens the door on a secret room in Canadian social history when hypocritical morality turned human sexuality into shame and humiliation, separation and loss, guilt and regret and a sorrow too deep for tears.

Karch-Ackerman elevates such techniques and materials as sewing, knitting and quilting, traditionally relegated to the ghetto of domestic craft and women's handicraft, to the level of fine art.

The installation, which features five interrelated components, is a mix of works created by the artist and groupings of found objects.

Kitchenette is made up of a vintage typewriter table on which are placed napkins, trays and homemade cookies in clear, plastic bags. On two



Record staff

On display at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery is an installation by Susan Low-Beer titled, *State of Grace*. Media is ceramics.

stainless steel shelves are three tea pots, with cosies, and a series of metal, tea canisters, among other items. Three aprons hang from hooks.

The Foundling Garments consists of 100 infant sleepers stitched by the artist from vintage household curtains, circa 1930s to '70s. The sleepers are suspended from the ceiling in two long rows, which produces a sense of regimentation and institutionalization.

The Tea Cup Table is a long, narrow table reminiscent of tables found in institutional dining halls. On the table are 100 vintage tea cups overturned on saucers.

Tea Table consists of eight card tables, draped in vintage table cloths, on which are placed cream and sugar bowls, in addition small place cards outlining rules and regulations.

Recipe Box Shelf is a stainless steel shelf that holds a vintage recipe box and cards, in addition to a bowl of pencils. A vintage pencil sharpener and brass mail-slot have been mounted on the wall. Gallery-goers are invited to share their personal adoption stories.

What makes *Foundling* so evocative is the way mundane, everyday household objects subtly draw attention to the deep suffering and emotional scars that were caused by the social regime of ostracizing unwed mothers and then forcing them to give up their infants to maintain the illusion of social propriety.

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Exhibitions

Foundling: Michele Karch-Ackerman

State of Grace: Susan Low-Ber

Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery

On view through June 6

Information and Gallery hours available at 519-746-1882 or online at www.canadianclayandglass.ca

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