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Ann Agee

by Julian Kreimer

View of Ann Agee's exhibition
"Domestic Translations," 2015, at
P.P.O.W.



Hanging on gauzy black ribbons like pendants in the back room of Ann Agee's recent show, 21 little porcelain phalluses with testicles were a tip-off to her sensibility. Each could fit comfortably in one's hand. The penises' diminutive sizes offer a charmingly innocent view of the organ. The stamp reading "Agee MFG Co." on the back of each one departs from the 6th-century BCE Greek originals that inspired the pieces. As in the classical versions, which were filled with fragrant oils and worn as necklaces, small holes allow access to hollow interiors. *Testosterone Booster (Perfume bottle necklaces)*, 2012-15, points to Agee's careful observation and celebration of clay's varied and intimate history with the body.

Nearby in the same room was the installation *Lake Michigan Bathroom (III)*, 2014, in which five different life-size plumbing fixtures (urinal, toilet, bidet, sink and water fountain) project out from a wall frieze of blue-glaze ceramic tiles. It is the third version of the piece, the first of which debuted at the New Museum's "Bad Girls" exhibition in 1994. Clay's utilitarian history has always been accepted within fine-art ceramics, though primarily with a view to making objects from which to consume—almost never to expel into. The Chinoiserie scenes on the tile frieze include sewage-treatment plants; a drawing, framed in garlands of tampons and menstrual pads, of a woman washing her vulva; and two Tiepolo Pulcinellas relieving themselves. Two tiles near the bidet feature quotes from German writer Patrick Suskind's 1985 novel *Perfume* (title, author

and year decoratively indicated in a center panel) about how the mixing of floral and putrescent odors can create a fragrance that will “exhale the robust, vivacious scent of life.”

Elsewhere, mural-like paintings on Thai mulberry paper presented interior views of British Neo-Classical architect John Soane’s house, Agee’s parents’ 1950s modernist house in Japan (which resembled the suburban house where she was later raised), and an abstract pattern of large red, orange and blue shapes. These paintings served as backdrops for eight stoneware sculptures placed throughout the gallery, each a tower of intersecting flat planes cut through by cylinders and cups. There’s an unmistakable sense that ceramic mugs and vases (and, in one case, a drawer) are chaotically breaking into the spatial dynamics of Suprematist-style sculpture—the kitchen invading the Platonic space of the studio.

Though showing a disparate range of work has become common among young sculptors, Agee’s willingness to spiral out in so many directions, while making each piece compelling in itself, resulted in the exhibition’s main successes. Among the additional objects on view were a silkscreened dress on a steel hanger, 18 multilingual “Agee MFG Co. Guidebooks,” 15 mock-commemorative plates, porcelain hands suspended in copper-lidded jelly jars, several welded metal chairs and four porcelain frames. These last works overflow with decorative flowers, seeds and foliage from different seasons, made of spun-and-thrown clay, cut, shaped and fixed into place. They seem to be competing with the elaborate woodwork of Enlightenment-era English virtuoso Grinling Gibbon. In *Vanity* (2014), a glaze of the palest blue gives the oak leaves and acorns a wistful, elegiac cast. We sense a cycle of growth, exuberance and decomposition. Two holes indicate where candles would have been placed, illuminating the looking-glass that would have been inside, better showing us ourselves.