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Francesca DiMattio's Grotesque, Delicious Sculptures Will Rob You of Certainty

by Cassie Packard

Impossibly cool and decidedly feminist, Francesca DiMattio is the only person I've met who makes ceramics with a forklift. (While wearing a perfect milkmaid braid, no less.) Her massive, twisted sculptures seem to vomit up feminine elements—the word "pulchritudinous" comes to mind—to subvert everything we think we know about a medium that is typically domestic, delicate, and decorative. Undervalued due to its gendered associations with "women's work," craft has traditionally been relegated to the bottom of the artistic totem pole, its makers anonymous. In the face of that fact, it's particularly nice to see DiMattio proudly taking credit for her work.

In 2010, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston commissioned DiMattio to make an "art wall," and in the summer of 2014 she had her first museum solo show, a major landmark for any artist, at the University of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum. Shortly thereafter, designer Tory Burch included a DiMattio ceramic in a curated Paddle8 auction. Now the New York-based artist is hard at work in the studio finishing up pieces for an upcoming show entitled Confection—a reference to some of the new ceramic works, which look thick with icing. The show opens next month at Pippy Houldsworth Gallery in London in conjunction with the launch of a new book of her work. From her position at the forefront of the ceramics trend in the art world, DiMattio talked to VICE about making clay do what she wants, rebranding femininity, and finding beauty in instability.

VICE: First off, I have to say, I think your "Fetish Sculpture" is the most fantastic thing. It kind of resembles a post-apocalyptic mutant alpaca.

Francesca DiMattio: A what?

A mutant alpaca.

I can definitely see that.

It seems tied up with the Marxist description of the commodity fetish as this sort of grotesque animated object. There's definitely a melting of desire and class that happens in the way the materials are handled and put together: Highly refined elements are handled really roughly, and in the process the whole object seems to melt or mutate into a new hybrid. The work I'm looking at right now is such a grafted object: A saccharine surface of cake icing is wrapped around a guttural form that looks like molten lava thrown on the floor. In fusing opposites like that, you break down any hierarchy.

It's all very postmodern, the way in which the disparate elements come together. Your source material is from all over the timeline—French Rococo porcelain, Iznik pottery, dime-store kitsch...

Yeah, I pull from anywhere and look to combine different cultures and different references to high and low culture in each piece. As a starting point, I have piles and piles of images that I rip up from books, making the research more visual than linguistic. Everything becomes material. While I'm familiar with the histories underlying the images, I normally work with hundreds of images on the floor—I literally just sit down and react to them, seeing what I want to use.

As well as different references seen in the glazing, I use a lot of contrasting techniques and surface variation in the form itself. Smooth, refined porcelain sits next to rough clay that's literally thrown onto the piece. Pinch pot passages that record the immediate speed of fingers squeezing sit next to slowly rendered Wedgwood relief. Both form and surface are made out of contrasting impulses.

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DiMattio in her studio

How big are the parts you're working with? The final pieces are huge.

Yeah, they're pretty big. Most are in two or three pieces in the end because as a single piece they would be too heavy to ship or lift. I have an incredible miniature forklift that I use to move pieces around and it can lift about 2,000 pounds. And I installed a hoist in my new studio for hanging sculptures, which can raise and lower pieces up to 2,000 pounds. Tools are key.

The miniature forklift is pretty funny, because you're creating in such a traditionally feminine domestic medium with all of these dainty elements but you're twisting them, smashing them, making them monumental, and using a forklift on top of it all. So is that intentional, the disfiguring or breaking down of this feminine space?

Definitely. My initial motivation to work with clay was because of its association with the feminine. Objects made out of ceramics are typically small and pretty, an accent in a room. I wanted to use strategies to make them the primary action in a room.

The way that I use clay isn't the way it wants to be used. Clay doesn't want you to combine different types of clay and various treatments in an asymmetrical, oversized form. I have found the process more war-like than it is seductive. I like opposing materials or opposing references. I think the deeper motivation for all of it is to rebrand how we meet the feminine or how we think of it. By using something like cake icing and smearing it on this huge rough form you meet to it so differently than you would a small decorative piece on a table. You meet it frontally and the meeting is almost confrontational.

Contemporary ceramics are very trendy in the art world at the moment. Between their strong presence at Frieze New York a few months ago, the major Ken Price retrospective at the Met and LACMA, and the Ruby Sterling ceramics at the 2014 Whitney Biennial, people are saying that 2015 is the "year of ceramics." What do you think of the medium's current popularity, and has it affected your practice at all?

It was funny timing because I came to ceramics because of my family. My mom had done ceramics her whole life, and my father-in-law is a well-known ceramic artist. When I started working in the medium, it felt really personal and private; I didn't see it around in the art world. And then suddenly it was part of a much larger conversation.

At one point I wanted to make something for a group show that was going to be fabricated in Mexico. The place said that my proposal was too complicated or just not possible. My father-in-law told me, "Come out to Arizona and you can make it." And from that invitation the whole thing started; over the course of six weeks, he taught me everything I needed to know to make what I wanted to make.

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Black Confection. All images courtesy of the artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London; Photographer Karen Pearson



Confection 3

You came to sculpture from painting. Is there a connection between the domestic interiors you paint and your ceramics?

I think they're completely connected, in both their structure and in what they're conceptually after. I have always been interested in using different modes of craft in unexpected ways. The structure of the paintings, for example, follows the undulation inherent to sewing and knitting as well as the stark juxtapositions found in quilts. I think of pattern a lot too. I paint a lot of floral patterns, but instead of staying contained on a curtain or bedspread, they move through the composition almost virally, as if the elements of a room were thrown up and painted out of order.

I'm always looking to defamiliarize the familiar; to take feminine modes of making and give them a more aggressive delivery. The unlikely pairings that result call into question notions of beauty—everything is broken and interrupted and ultimately unstable. I suppose that's what I'm after: that state of flux in which you can't pin anything down, or have an absolute feeling about anything.

Check out Francesca DiMattio's upcoming exhibition in London, opening October 12.