

eyewitness

BY PAMELA POLSTON

TAKING NOTE OF VISUAL VERMONT



"APPROPRIATION"

Figures in Time

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IMAGE
Matthew
Thorsen

George W. Bush in a bunny suit? It's not the first thing you'd expect from a ceramic artist. Especially a plush, yellow-and-pink Easter bunny: Burlington sculptor Dirk Staschke's Republican rabbit is 34 inches tall — not including the ears — and is filled with the kind of stuffing that makes teddy bears huggable. Not that you'd want to give this guy an affectionate squeeze; the head *is* ceramic, and breakable. And the face is a little off-putting — Staschke has chosen that deer-in-headlights look our president wore during his recent debates with opponent John Kerry.

The Bush bunny is one of a trio of "dolls" that Staschke, 33, has made for a grouping collectively titled "Land of Make Believe," and they are part of his upcoming solo show at the Clay Art Center in Port Chester, New York. The other two figures are Bush as Santa, minus the beard and the belly that shakes like a bowlful of jelly, and Bush in a toddler-sized flight suit — the details include a yellow ascot, insignia patches and tiny black boots. For Staschke, the

More unexpected reflections on recent history are the exquisitely rendered clay corpses of Uday and Qusay — the sons of Saddam Hussein — that Staschke is creating in his Old North End Studio. "People forget that their bodies were paraded on TV," he notes. The supine figures, about 31 inches long, look wounded but peaceful in death, and the stylized beards recall the early figurative art of Mesopotamia.

Sadly, violence and warfare have been with us since before the "cradle of civilization" was rocked. But most of Staschke's work is less overtly political, drawing on broader, timeless concepts about the human condition.

He considers myth, archetypes and art history as "jumping-off points" to make "contemporary statements using older ideas and twisting them in new ways," Staschke says, citing the postmodern credo. He also rejects as hypocritical the stigma attached to ceramic sculpture. If a "fine artist" uses clay his work is considered art, Staschke points out, but when an artist

ly correct" — with architectural details such as cornices and pedestals. They are neutral in color and often "aged" with a crackle glaze, a fitting finish for his classic aesthetic. Staschke intends for his pieces to ask such questions as "how we as individuals fit into the larger context of society." That notion is raised by his "Anonym Series," which weds human heads with ornamental elements. Exhibited last spring at the Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia, the figures challenge conventional ideas about beauty, acceptance and identity.

In Staschke's "Baroque Series," malnourished children sit or stand atop pedestals decorated in the lavish style of 17th-century Europe, with fruits and vegetables that could feed the children if only they were not both "locked in their own sculptural confines," as Staschke puts it in his artist's statement. "The result is an object imbued with both the trivialities of consumerism and the human suffering associated with poverty."

Staschke has shown his work only once in Vermont so far, at the 2003 South End Art Hop. He moved here from Queens, New York, just a year and a half ago when his wife, Amy, took a job at Burton — a position compatible with one of his loves: snowboarding. Vermont's natural resources support Staschke's other favorite pastime, too; he's an avid flyfisherman. His fly-tying table has a warm berth next to the kiln in the couple's apartment.

Born in Huntsville, Alabama, Staschke got his undergraduate degree in fine art at a small liberal-arts college in that state, then headed north, to Alfred University in New York, for his Master's. He taught at schools around New York City for eight years, and since moving to Burlington has been an instructor at the Firehouse Center and the Shelburne Craft School. The downside of his new home is that "the jobs are few and far between here," laments Staschke. That's why he'll be commuting back to Alfred for a teaching gig next semester. He's also leading a "Portrait Busts" class at the Clay Art Center next month.

This summer, Winooski-based sculptor Leslie Fry solicited Staschke's help with a public-art commission involving ceramic reliefs. The Firehouse Gallery's first artist-in-residence, Fry was busy with multiple projects and needed someone who could work proficiently with clay. She had seen Staschke's Art Hop exhibit and was impressed. "I like that he works within a traditional manner — he models clay, he knows anatomy really well — but that he's tackling big subjects," Fry says. "He's dealing with politics, art history and theoretical aspects *and* is grounded in the human form — his modeling is gorgeous."



DIRK STASCHKE

Staschke is also currently represented at the Garth Clark Gallery in New York City in a show called "Bare Clay: The Nude in 20th Century Ceramics." One of his two pieces there, "Appropriation," is a nude male figure in crucifixion pose, with a Buddha head. Perfectly proportioned, starkly sorrowful and conceptually provocative, the sculpture illustrates both meanings of its title word: "combining two things to make something new, and to take without asking," Staschke explains. "I view that piece as sort of an open-ended question, a global collision of cultural influence and ideas."

Such provocation was unnerving for an audience in Beijing recently, where Staschke had the opportunity to lecture at an art center. A slide of "Appropriation" inspired a collective gasp. One Chinese student asked Staschke whether he didn't worry his work would anger people. "If they're angry, they don't understand the work," the artist replied. For Staschke, this sculpture, just 34 inches high, carries the freight of a big concept — how culture and religion affect each other. "I have a feeling Buddha or Christ would be appalled at what passes for religion now," he adds.

In 2001, Staschke's work to date earned him a feature in the journal *Ceramics: Art and Perception*. In it, critic Scott Meyer praises his works for their elegance, thoughtfulness and sometimes inscrutable commentary. "With titles like *Equilibrium*, *Anonym* and *Façade*, they remain as enigmatic as any of the great ruins whose complete meanings have been lost to history," Meyer rhapsodizes. "Indeed, they pose more questions than they answer. Herein lies their meaning and their power."

Clay may be the earthiest of mediums, but in Staschke's hands it gives shape to the loftiest of ideas. ⑦



"BAROQUE 2"

Dirk is dealing with politics, art history and theoretical aspects *and* is grounded in the human form — his modeling is gorgeous.

LESLIE FRY

"War Hero" is just as fictitious as the other characters, and anyone who might miss the insinuation has only to read his damning artist's statement.

The Bush dolls sprang from Staschke's obsession with current events, and also represent a foray into popular culture.

with the "potter" tag makes figurative work from clay, some still dismiss it as "craft."

A close look at Staschke's extraordinary *oeuvre* should dispel this outdated prejudice. His handbuilt and molded stoneware sculptures generally combine human figures — nude and "anatomical-



"LAND OF MAKE BELIEVE"