

Fatherhood

Justin Rothshank

BY LIZ HOWE

“Fatherhood,” an exhibition of work by Justin Rothshank in the intimate Baltimore Clayworks Solo Gallery (www.baltimoreclayworks.org) in Baltimore, Maryland, presented over 50 pots, including mugs, pitchers, plates, and vases. The tight display was cleanly organized into groups of work mostly made from red clay dipped in white slip and multi-fired with laser printed and manufactured decals. Also shown were seven wood/soda-fired mugs, each brandishing a laser printed iron-brown decal and demonstrating Rothshank’s significant research into creating image transfer processes for atmospheric firing methods.

The work clearly concentrated upon all things childhood related, mining mostly 1970s era imagery exploring innocence, rites of passage, and allegorical generalizations about parenting. The sweetness of Rothshank’s concept and heavy use of a white slip palette punctuated with colorfully clichéd decals created an approachable, lively visual display; his exclusively wheel-thrown work exuded lightness, humor, and naïveté both in form and image.

In contrast to older work the vertical pots shown here—cups, mugs, vases, and pitchers—were casually thrown with wonky bulges, capricious throwing rings, and fairly arbitrary proportions. This playful naïveté served to amuse and entice in its strongest manifestations. A grouping of white tumblers decorated with children’s drawings juxtaposed with Norman Rockwell imagery and several richly patterned vases struck a unique balance between off-kilter form, compositional perceptiveness, and childish candor. The most confident of these quirky objects hovered precariously between wry irony and sugary affability but the handling of the material seemed awkward. Many of the standing forms, though loosely handled, suffered from a stilted restraint and some important design concerns seemed curtailed by haste. Specifics such as spouts, handles, and subtle proportional relationships were problematic areas not deliberate enough to breed curiosity or unmediated enough to effectively coalesce.



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In this body of work the amalgamation of imagery through line, shape, color, contrast, and experimentation with ceramic decals was clearly the artist's forte. Juxtaposition of two-dimensional imagery through shifting scale, pattern repetition, color emphasis, and image layering was the most successful element of the work and several pieces including *Vase with Boys in Yellow* and *Pitcher with Blue Flowers and Rockwell* showcased Rothshank's compositional flair.

The crescendo in this decoupage decal disposition was illustrated in *Boy with Rooster*, a simple plate approximately 12 inches in diameter with a roughly 2-inch rim. It served as a powerful example of visual and conceptual depth only hinted at in many of the artist's other pieces. The darkened plate rim framed a large version of Rothshank's swinging child silhouette (seen in several other pots in the show) and was overlaid with decals of dense dark green flora punctuated by oversized red, yellow, and violet flowers. The large, seamlessly decoupage decal section wrapped around the right edge of the plate rim, growing inward to the left and tightly bounding the child's silhouette. The rooster—a symbol often associated with arrogance, pride, victory of light over darkness, and watchful vigilance against evil—emerged from the dense flora perched atop a mossy bluff and protruded into the center of the plate. The fowl's breast and beak practically pressed into the young child's chain-swing-suspended form near the edge of a proverbial Dark Forest.

Much of the work in the show was decorated with imagery of Lassie, Superman, Norman Rockwell paintings, and 1960s parenting advice texts. The decals range from hand-drawn iron-brown children's scribbles to laser-copy transfers of texts and colorful 1970s era allegorical imagery. Much of the imagery drew a strong association with the 1930s postcard art created by Sister Maria Innocentia Hummel, pastoral and sentimental scenes of childhood, which ultimately inspired the Hummel figurine. The contemporary retro flair of Rothshank's selections radiated an edginess, which safeguarded from a headfirst fall into 'cutesy' though some of the work leaned way too close. Cameo appearances of Mr. Rogers, the Lorax, Superman, and other favorites served to successfully entice the viewer through familiarity, personal association, and nostalgia. The associations were pleasant and fun, but Rothshank's real strength lay in a subtler more intuitive approach to imagery manipulation. The work layered with lush overlapping, contrasting glaze colors, and successfully void of culturally iconic imagery created deeper profundity and more expansive avenues for interpretation.

the author *Liz Howe is an artist and educator living in Saratoga Springs, New York, where she teaches at Skidmore College and is exhibitions director at the Saratoga Clay Arts Center.*

1 *Boy with Rooster*, layered decals, fired four times, 2011. 2 Decal mugs with layered decals, gold luster, fired four times, 2011. 3 *Pitcher with Blue Flowers and Rockwell*, layered decals, gold luster, fired four times, 2011. 4 *Boy Swinging*, layered decals, fired four times, 2011. *Photos: Kevin C. Brown.*



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