

Coille McLaughlin Hooven: Porcelain 1974–2008

Coille Hooven, An Introduction

By Jenni Sorkin

One of the first ceramists to bring feminist content to clay, Coille Hooven's sculpture is plaintive and borne of domestic-centered narratives that treat the home and femininity as a source of reverence and wit. Her objects teeter on the suggestion of functionality: an unusable apron with an embedded face, or vessels topped with cunning animal figurines that perform human tasks. An imagined world made in porcelain, Hooven's imagery is an affront to the familiar kitsch ceramics found within the grandmotherly china cabinet display. Her figures are neither rosy cheeked nor conventional. Rather, they are isolated and yearning: mother and child pairs that perch at the edge of a security pillow, or a spoonbill festooned in a crown, its head protruding from a pie, not unlike the English nursery rhyme " ...four and twenty blackbirds, baked in a pie." Other sculptures are more vessel-like altogether, their snouts or claws morphing into a spout or a handle.

Rooted in the psychology of entrapment and endurance, Hooven's human figures are often hampered by their own ornamentation, such as *Everyman's Burden* (1998) in which a headless female torso kneels under the weight of a cup. This is in marked contrast to many of the anthropomorphic creatures, which seem at the helm of vehicular shoes or boat-like boots, playfully offering the possibility of enchanted escape. A strangely sensual pleasure of not knowing exactly what we are looking at, Hooven's oeuvre is an amalgam of conflicting emotions, from damaged women to animal talismans, all created in the exacting form of porcelain. Her color choices are purposefully spare, blue and white, not unlike black and white photography, working off a reduced color palette in a range of blues, rather than grays. Cobalt glaze is used because of its potency and enormous possibilities, spanning from very light blue to inky blacks.

The home has long been a repository for perceptions of gendered knowledge: the often-unconscious role play, feminist consciousness, and ideas of embodiment enacted by artists ranging from Louise Bourgeois to Judy Chicago. Indeed, Hooven's objects oscillate between its two most fraught spaces: the kitchen and the bedroom. Hooven's imagery is classically feminist: the nude female body in various poses, in distress, contemplative, howling, and the domestic kitchen table with its accouterments: dishes, aprons, pies. As the feminist critic Arlene Raven wrote, "'Home' is a unique place-more than a place, an internal comfort that some women have felt as 'coming home,' through feminism, to ourselves." (1) The idea of home, particularly the search for shelter, can be seen as a larger metaphor for community building.

Similar to the sculptor Ree Morton's (1936-1977) celotex installations and objects, Hooven also employs a vocabulary unabashedly decorative and maternal, referencing children, food preparation, and the female body, sometimes all in the same artwork. Throughout the 1970s

feminist artists used domesticity as a broad thematic upon which to project the abundant, often mordant desires and grievances of their lives. This is reflected in the wide range of the art production of that era from artists' books, to video.

Like many women of her generation, Hooven came to feminist consciousness through her own lived experiences as a young wife and mother. She had studied with David Shaner at the University of Illinois, graduating with a BFA in 1962. From there, she was hired at the burgeoning ceramics program at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore. In 1970, Hooven left her job and her husband to strike out on her own, with her two small children in tow settling permanently in Berkeley. At the time Hooven arrived, the Bay Area was rich with possibility. Hooven recounts, "With their new ideas and irreverent attitudes, the combined influence of Peter Voulkos' and Robert Arneson's Funk Style, drew many adventurous clay artists to attend U.C. Berkeley and U.C. Davis. We were thrust forward into this new freedom. It was irresistible." Whimsical and disturbing, her work was very different from theirs, yet she was included in this clay community. Voulkos let her fire her wares afterhours at UC Berkeley's ceramics facilities, and Arneson selected her work for a purchase award in 1973.

However, Hooven's ceramic sculpture is rooted in a personal historical trajectory that begins long before the feminist 1970s, connected to a maverick great-aunt, also a professional ceramist, Louise McLaughlin (1847-1939), who died within months of Hooven's own birth. As Hooven writes simply, "I have felt guided by her spirit." One of the earliest studio potters working in the United States, in the late nineteenth century, she authored the first manual on china painting, and invented a new technique for underglazing, decorating ceramics on an unglazed surface. McLaughlin also worked in porcelain laboring for years on end to produce proper glaze chemistries that would be on par with those of the French or the British Arts and Crafts potteries. McLaughlin began her career as an amateur china painter and emerged a ceramics professional, inducted as an honorary member of the American Ceramic Society at the end of her life, showcasing her professional accomplishments.

Craft's marginalization was a central part of the discourse of 1970s feminism, ripe for examining in Chicago's Dinner Party (1975-1979), which utilized needlepoint and china painting, as well as the extreme decorative explorations of Pattern and Decoration painters such as Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff. While ceramics continues on as a discipline often relegated to the sidelines of artistic production, it was hardly secondary in Berkeley, where Hooven has continued to make her home for the last forty years. Working independently, outside of the dominant academic framework, Hooven has herself made a maverick career. A dense maelstrom of emotion, her work is bold and empowering, embedded not only with the detritus of female domestic life, but also with a sense of joy.

Notes

1. Arlene Raven, *At Home*. Exh cat.(Long Beach, CA: City of Long Beach and Long Beach Museum of Art, 1983), viii