

Intimate Conversations

I remember too well when many women wore social masks which outwardly communicated their would-be perfect lives; the "masks" did not remove easily and delayed or deferred any opportunity for budding, honest communication. More frequently today, we meet someone who becomes an intimate friend quickly: the right connections are made and a dialogue of promise and substance begins. Often, these intense conversations are with artists and others of diverse creativity who bare their own vulnerabilities more freely and listen harder to one another. I value greatly this enlightened, mutual trust and personal risk taking.

I am likewise drawn to visual work which makes this same leap of faith: moving directly to touch cords of personal recognition, without artifice. Work of this nature speaks a language of accessibility referencing shared private experiences, those both difficult and joyful, evoking empathy. It offers a visible dialogue grounded in the familiar, an invitation for others to take risks and share ideas and emotions, out loud. The smallest confidence, shared, has the potential to become a monumental public affirmation. Thus begins *Intimate Conversations*.

The intrinsic nature of clay with its ever-present connection to the earth affords seemingly limitless possibilities, accommodations and plasticity; it shares a physical adaptability suggestive of the range of human vagaries and complexities. Clay encompasses immediate material contradictions simultaneously: being both soft and hard, appearing both fragile and strong, appropriate for exquisite miniaturization and surprisingly monumental scale, intrinsically rooted to the past, yet possible to always become something new, wearing a perfect, accomplished skin or reflecting the emotional and physical fingerprints of each maker. Its variables allow the diversity that human imagination and communication may require.

The nine artists in this exhibit use clay, traditionally and otherwise, as a conduit, a channel to bestow their intimate concerns tactilely upon us, as well as to

share their seemingly endless discoveries in the process. The issues raised are relationship based, complex and personal, sociological and historic. Familiar scale seems to enhance the ease of receiving these visual statements. The work and the messages are accessible and brim fully with the pleasure of communication: delight in recounting what will be natural, gratifying connections and pains shared when the ideas address universal human dilemmas. The pieces talk of self and others, the natural and people-made worlds and the continuum of art in history. The artists are women; the work addresses some issues of women, women and men, and all manner of creative contemplation.

Melissa Stern creates a world of small, guileless figures whose posture and gestures connect primally with our inner selves. They tenderly summon ever present memories of painful awkwardness and naive expectation. There is both an empathy for and a dark humor about their/our vulnerabilities. The deceptively simple forms, of ceramic and mixed media with layered surfaces lavish with primary color and rough texture, provoke us to the core. We can laugh and cry together over Stern's concerns for all our "missing" parts; in a seemingly modest fashion, big issues, self doubts and emotional nakedness are aired through an all-inclusive black/gray humor. She addresses relationships, adulthood and parenting. The paired figures seem alternately defenseless and aggressive, grabbing at our guts, reminding the child in all of us of our own thin skins, exposed.