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Jamie Bates, Installation view, *The Science of Sentiment*, Plenum Space Gallery, July 6-27, 2012.



Jamie Bates' Exploration of the Social Alienation of Illness



Plenum Space Art Gallery
504 E. 18th Street
816-929-5930
Kansas City, MO
Jamie Bates
The Science of Sentiment
July 6-27, 2012

By BLAIR SCHULMAN

The Science of Sentiment makes a solid attempt at illustrating the social alienation of illness using hallucinogenic imagery and some actual handling of work. Ceramicist Jamie Bates' firings promote this concept by offering something once malleable, now irretrievably delicate. In this small exhibition at Plenum Space, we see something that writer Truman Capote calls, "The recreation of the perishable self."

The history for this work was born of her extended family's dealing with cancer and high mortality rates. Bates revisits these feelings of loss and reinterprets them in clay. Two shelves of palm-size fired heads and a nearly life-size model of the human form enables her audience to visualize the solitude and emptiness that Bates herself experiences.



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With the handling of family illness and ceramics alike, one is expected to treat both as vulnerable. From that defenselessness, it becomes difficult to establish a further intimacy for fear of eliciting further damage. Humans are sometimes cruel creatures and the impulse to let both her ceramics and relationships drop away is tempting, Bates places a lot of trust in her audience and herself to be kind.

Plenum Space is a second floor gallery in the East Crossroads with its staircase cutting right through the middle of the space. At the very top of the stairs you immediately encounter a nearly-scale human form set in repose on the floor that has been hand modeled using a coil building technique with porcelain. Bates illustrates her position of isolation, and the actuality of how the body might be responding to disease by superimposing radiant images in phantasmagoric color patterning. Slowly morphing in varying sequences, the singular shape becomes transformational by displaying the intensive internal spreading of illness. The idea that Bates employs here asks us to be more sympathetic of the seismic changes of illness and death that radiate beyond the stricken and is very successful.

Individual responses to the larger form are found on two shelves of ten small heads no bigger than your palm. Created through a mold, the clay head is eventually under-fired, causing a coarse, coral-like texture. This roughened surface and its watered down colors feels somewhat aquatic, as if it has been underwater for too long and is ready to fall apart. Which is also interesting to ponder; families and friends start out together, but their separation and disintegration is inevitable, especially if forced to weather rough conditions. Incessant opposition can take its toll, not unlike being underwater where immobility can cause dissolution and rupture than if one were tethered by stable health and stronger emotional pulls.

Beside each of these heads is a magnifying glass. Which are nice, but unnecessary. We are given no surprises or payoffs to any deeper investigations. I was expecting a magnified version of illness or some other imagery that depicts the alienation this work intends to impart, but instead all one gets is a closer look at Bates' kiln technique and that does not necessarily need to be magnified. It would be more exciting for Bates to illustrate an illness's more cerebral aspects or some compositional fragility of human spirit that makes the closer inspections worthwhile.

The combination of these heads, the larger form and the way they are displayed readily acknowledges the need to pause and reflect upon the tidal changes that can occur with the health of others. Their ripple effects have the power to drown us as well. Bates is taking a deeply psychological conundrum between the sick and the healthy to illustrate the chasms that exist whether we acknowledge them or not.



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