



Susan Low-Beer

About Face

A Review by Heidi McKenzie



Top: *About Face* (Installation View).

Above, left to right: #2, #6, #7 and #8.

Facing page top, left to right: #11, #12, #16 and #17.

Facing page below, left to right: #18, #19, #20 and Susan Low-Beer.

Border details, clockwise from top: #19, #6, #7 and #17.

CANADIAN ARTIST SUSAN LOW-BEER'S SOLO EXHIBITION at the David Kaye Gallery in Toronto last winter, *About Face*, invites its audience into active participation. Low-Beer presented 26 ceramic heads, each sitting on its own plaster or found-material base, exhibited somewhat eerily at 'about face' level to the viewer's vantage. The effect was spell-binding. It is virtually impossible not to automatically project your own story on to the inanimate lives of these pieces. In conversation with the series of sculptures was *Ra*, a series of five *giglées* (high-resolution digital scans printed with archival quality inks) collaged onto specialty pleated Japanese paper. The images for this

series found their antecedent in the photographic negative of the original two-part mould from which *About Face* originated. Given the figurative nature of the work, it is all the more intriguing that Low-Beer does not name the works. They are numbered in a calculatingly impersonal manner. She relies on her viewers' imaginations and is fascinated by the diversity of the individual's response to her work, "I am interested in the resonance that happens between the viewer and my art. Anything that allows you to move into a more profound space is important."

The installation is a showcase of experimentation: bringing into being a feeling or expression through manipulation of surface texture and pushing the boundaries of process. Literally cast from the same mould, each of the heads is highly differentiated. Some seem soft and kind, others brutal and gruesome, others





haunting and plaintive. The works' mounts fashioned of spools of fibre and twine were intended to suggest body. To me, the elongated bases read as evocative of a placeless indigenous culture, somehow nomadic. I was struck by the youthful essence of the face that had been processed, as if it were meant to speak from a child's voice, yet Low-Beer ascribed no such age designation. Neither did she consider the object's gender in her process-driven invention. American curator,

a fuller sense of being beyond the limitation of self".

Ever interested in the alchemy of cross-fertilisation and the inter-disciplinary, Low-Beer invited a group of local Toronto poets to respond in words to her non-verbal medium. These poems are published on the gallery's website. Low-Beer was amazed by the range of responses and chose to publish excerpts from Maureen Hynes' poem, "Questions" for and from the heads on her own homepage, a selection of which are



Mary Jane Jacobs advocates for "mind of the don't know" with respect to both the artist's creation and the audience's reception of art where one immerses one's mind in the process of inquiry and experience, giving up any orientation toward outcome or result. This is the mode of practice in which Low-Beer excels. As a practitioner she cultivates her willingness to stay with her question and to allow answers to arise out of an intuitive understanding, not by willing them forth through analytical thinking. Low-Beer puzzles that "there is always something mysterious and indefinable that makes me keep going; it is always based on something emotional." She stops making when the work tells her it is time to be still. Out of this methodology comes a potent power, one that creates, as Jacobs argues, a space where experience can take us to a renewed place in our lives, "a transformation and

transcribed below:

But first I want to know what your eyes saw when you emerged from your plaster moulds, what name was embroidered on each of your hard white pillows.

Do you speak among yourselves at night in one ceramic language?

What do your heads contain and why do you frighten me?

The poets' interpretations ranged from the sublime to the macabre, from angels and God to war and decapitation. I find these written traces to be documentation of Susan Low-Beer's success of intention – to create a platform where imagination takes flight.

Heidi McKenzie is a ceramics artist, art critic, art consultant and emerging curator, who is currently completing her MFA at OCADU in Toronto, Canada.

