



## Tony Natsoulas

(born 1959), like his art is funny, offbeat, awkwardly charming, and endearingly campy. "I just do what the little voices tell me to," reads the bumper sticker applied to his pick-up, a statement that, upon meeting him, you know is not far from the truth. A bard, a sonneteer, and a prankster in clay, Natsoulas wants us to like what he likes, to appreciate the humor in the banal, and to look nostalgically at some of history's self-indulgent pleasures.

Small in stature—his wife Donna holds his ankles lest he fall in while stacking his top-loading kiln—it is the pounds

per square inch of energy and charisma that makes Natsoulas himself a force of nature. His ebullient nature is matched only by his work in clay that surmounts varied technical challenges to create monumental sculpture that shocks, entertains, and amuses. While his art may be both humorous and irreverent, fitting qualities for a descendent of the Funk movement, it originates out of a profound respect for the subject. His most recent pieces are tongue-in-cheek icons, loosely based upon eighteenth-century prototype. Loving the extravagance and decoration of the era's costume and

make-up, he lovingly details powdered wigs, ruffles, and penciled beauty marks. Not stopping there, he pushes this abundance to absurd levels through flowers, birds, pets, and other accoutrements. While the figures are not universally recognizable, they do represent individuals of personal importance to the artist. "I can't make people I don't like," Natsoulas explains, and his Barocco creations use friends and colleagues, and even his spouse as models. In the end, however, the original subject is barely recognizable under the

multiple layers of decoration.

Natsoulas has not always focused on this era of extravagance. His early works are of full-length figures that sell shoes, play guitars, drive automobiles and wait tables, the everyday activities with which he readily related as an artist just starting out. Natsoulas began these sculptures while an undergraduate student at the University of California, Davis. His initial creative challenge was to make the figures stand of their own accord without additional support—not an easy accomplishment in clay,

especially when the figure is running, standing on one foot, or balancing a tray of dishes. Even though the figures are fixed, Natsoulas always uses unbalanced poses, theatrical gestures, and exaggerated facial expressions to animate them and defy the nature of the medium. The kinetic quality of his work separates him from an artist like Viola Frey who strives for the opposite—enduring monumentality.

In his portrait busts, Natsoulas is faced with an even greater challenge in bringing life to his figures.

With huge flat heads and tiny torsos, his busts exist in two seeming dimensions, subverting the third. Each piece becomes amazingly narrow when viewed from the side, a technique he first saw in a sculpture by Robert Arneson and liked. The intended views are the front and back, which he sculpts as if he were a painter of portraits or a caricaturist. He lavishes attention on the features that grab his attention and minimizes those that do not. Eyes, lips, fingers, hair and other accessories are meticulously crafted and

employed in tandem with eloquent hand gestures and facial expressions.

The dynamism this adds to his pieces is seen in the eighteenth-century woman who wears an enormous wig teeming with hummingbirds; in *Sir Stevens of the Royal Puppeteers* who animates Punch and Judy; and in the figure of *Di Pasqua di Comedia del Arte*, who sports a masquerade-masked monkey on his hat. Other figures may be covered in bows, cats, fish or hold the tools of their professions or notoriety.

These clever, daring, and fanciful flights of detail show that, at heart, Natsoulas is a master storyteller.

Natsoulas received his bachelor of arts degree in 1982 at the University of California, Davis and his master of fine arts in 1985 from the same institution. He studied briefly at Sacramento State University, Maryland Institute—College of Art, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine. His teachers have included many celebrated names in California painting and sculpture—

Robert Brady, Roy de Forest, Wayne Thiebaud, and Manuel Neri. He has also been an informal student of artists David Gilhooly and Clayton Bailey, who have both greatly influenced him. His most significant mentor was the sculptor/ceramist Robert Arneson, who Natsoulas credits with changing his life by giving him the incentive to pursue art as a career. Natsoulas, who began studies with Arneson while still a student at Davis High School in Davis, California, would later become Arneson's student

and teaching assistant at the university.

For the most part, Natsoulas has trained with artists who have been associated with Pop Art or "Funk." Their inspired lunacy combined with Natsoulas's own sharp wit and love of humor made clear the direction his own art would take. While Natsoulas's art does contain elements of the Pop and Funk styles that inspired him during his studies, it goes beyond both and is distinctly his own. If a label is necessary, his art may be best defined as *Camp*. Although



## Checklist

**Cover.** *Di Pasqua di Comedia del Arte, 2002.*  
Ceramic and found objects, 56 x 32 x 20 in.

**1.** *Cajun Cardinal Kilechrist, 2002.*  
Ceramic and enamel, 40 x 48 x 19 in.

**2.** *Her Royal Majesty de Mardi Gras, 2002.*  
Ceramic and found objects, 46 x 24 x 18 in.

**3.** *Sir Stevens of the Royal Puppeteers, 2002.*  
Ceramic, 48 x 36 x 23 in.

**4.** *The Accademi di Suzanne with Kitty, 2002.*  
Ceramic and found objects, 65 x 33 x 27 in.

**5.** *Lady Constance di Silva Serves Cake or Death, 2002.*  
Ceramic and found objects, 56 x 32 x 27 in.

**6.** *His Royal Majesty King Von Verone of Beerstadt, 2002.*  
Ceramic, 48 x 28 x 21 in.

**7.** *Lady Nectar with Hummers, 2001.*  
Ceramic and found objects, 43 x 39 x 16 in.

**8.** *Lady Donna Bow Bonna with Baby Mer, 2002.*  
Ceramic and found objects, 53 x 44 x 20 in.

*Not Pictured*  
**Lord Stephen Bradford Holding Court, 2002.**  
Ceramic, 49 x 61 x 20 in.

*Marriage of the Angels à la Mode, 2002.*  
Ceramic, 50 x 42 x 15 in.

*Duke Frederick of Midas with Carry on Pug, 2002.*  
Ceramic and found objects, 45 x 37 x 15 in.



*Camp*, or more specifically *High Camp*, may be an inheritor of Funk, it is in its own way a more sophisticated humor—less scatological and less blatant. *Camp*, as that which is outrageous in its artificiality, affected, and referencing the out-of-date in an amusing manner aptly applies to Natsoulas and numerous other artists working in California, particularly in the

Sacramento region. For Natsoulas, *Camp* also takes a different vein from Pop. Throughout his career his work has drawn upon the products of consumer culture—television shows, commercials, toys, cartoons, comic books, and movies. Even in the “eighteenth-century” pieces he continues to draw from these sources, turning particularly to

Hollywood’s costume dramas for inspiration. Natsoulas’s work does not seek to overtly critique our image-clogged society, nor criticize the implied consumer. In fact, such a critique as conducted by an artist like Warhol in the 1960s is, for Natsoulas, already the “good ol’ days,” a simpler time that has long since been lost. Whereas Warhol serially repeated celebrity images of Monroe or Liz Taylor to drive home the consumptive nature of our



interest in their celebrity, Natsoulas presents his icons as charismatic, distinctive individuals that become, in his hands, literally larger than life. More than Pop or Funk, Natsoulas’s work is most closely related to that of his hero, Red Grooms. Grooms combines an imaginative, comic spirit freely with the

elements of consumer or popular culture, a vision with which Natsoulas closely relates. It is significant that Natsoulas seldom portrays contemporary personalities. Even in the artist’s other series, one of which recently featured celebrities like Pablo Picasso, The Beatles, and Auntie Mame, he prefers to run parody or flattery on those who are either deceased, fallen from vogue, or have achieved a near mythical status. His figures are in a sense anti-contemporary, and frequently blatantly nostalgic. Natsoulas seems to be saying, “they don’t make ‘em like that anymore,” and the underlying

sense of loss is palpable. On a fundamental level, Natsoulas is engaged in the construction of a contemporary, secular equivalent of the ritualistic and religious figures that artists have been creating for centuries. The large flat heads and small legless bodies of Natsoulas’s sculptures bring to mind numerous examples of artistic traditions, from ancient to modern cultures. Locally, an influence may be found in the three-dimensional carved religious figures known as *bultos*, still to be seen throughout California’s Spanish mission churches. As with these devotional figures,



which are typically brightly painted, Natsoulas’s portraits are also glazed in quasi-naturalistic colors that are heightened and often too brash to be real. The very “unreality” of both the *bultos* and Natsoulas’s sculpture disarms the viewer, distances the piece from nature, and makes the figures seem eerie and

inaccessible. Natsoulas shares the Spanish compunction to “dress” his figures, covering them with sparkling beads and outfitting them with elaborate hats and shoes in a fashion reminiscent of the elaborate tunics and jewelry that embellish *bultos* of the Virgin and saints. He even adds spectacles or electrical lighting to achieve the desired effect of each piece’s personality.

As a sculptural portraitist, Natsoulas has a rich past to draw upon, whether it be the warty painful verism of Roman sculpture or the loud look-at-me self-portraits of his mentor, Robert Arneson. The fact that Natsoulas has recently memorialized the larger-than-life celebrities of the last century—the “royalty” of art, movies, and music—the leap to his current work, which depicts eighteenth-century courtly elites, makes sense. Taking great enjoyment from the humor, decoration and over-the-top costuming of the Baroque and Rococo eras, Natsoulas lavishes attention on the clichés of the period—



hair, white skin, extravagant fabrics, and masks. In so doing, Natsoulas looks not only to Hollywood, but directly to art history. He is particularly enamored with French period artists and portraitists such as Hyacinthe Rigaud, Jean-Antoine Watteau, and François Boucher, and distills humor and biting commentary from the famed English satirist William Hogarth. Another eighteenth-century prototype specific to Natsoulas’s medium are figurines produced at the Meissen porcelain factory. Using these figurines almost as maquettes

to inform his own work, he borrows costumes, hairstyles, and expressions from them, as well as color and approach to ornament. By blowing them up to colossal scale, Natsoulas eradicates the preciousness of the original and instead makes them bold and confrontational, which although humorous, challenges the viewer face-to-face. While these busts may amuse in their sheer outra-



geousness, there remains an underlying respect for such a refined and elegant time. Because the sculptures are so unabashedly silly, the artist instructs us that perhaps we needn’t take art and history—and by extension ourselves—quite so seriously.

Scott A. Shields  
Curator of Art

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