

PHILADELPHIA

Ann Agee

LOCKS GALLERY

REVIEWS

Ann Agee has intricately painted the inside of a toilet, made ceramic dildos (one even doubles as a napkin ring), and slaughtered a chicken on video. In comparison to those works, her recent show, “Rules of the Pattern,” felt tame, but it exposed the heart of her provocative thirty-year practice. On opposite walls of the gallery, huge paintings on scrolls of mulberry paper unfurled to the floor, bracketing the solemn exhibition space with the illusion of a colorful, unpopulated kitchen and living room, part Maira Kalman, part van Gogh. On adjacent walls, blue-and-white porcelain serving dishes arrayed on steel armatures also conjured empty domestic space. Where did everybody go? The images painted on the plates in *Gross Domestic Product*, 2010, suggest private labor (a sewing machine, a washing machine) and leisure (a TV, a patio). In each of the other porcelain wall works (both 2009), a single scene is insistently repeated, a site where private and public life explicitly collide: the classic chaise-and-chair setup of the psychoanalytic encounter in *Grapes*, *Chaise*, *IKEA Chair*; and, in *Pink Set*, a rumpled empty double bed (a motif that inevitably points back to Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s poetic and potent 1991 billboard, a symbol of intimacy and absence, both political and personal).

Since the early ’90s, Agee has been riffing on delftware, the Dutch pottery known for its inky blue brushstrokes. The craft format of pottery well suits Agee’s inquiry into the repression of the inner self and the packaging of the social self: Her plates may be the genteel trappings of a well-appointed table, but she embellishes them with signifiers of the unspoken fears and taboos that manners have evolved to conceal. Agee’s works also lay bare the futile attempt to preserve the integrity of one’s own civilized sense of self through housework. Far from the celebratory vulval plates of Judy Chicago’s iconic *Dinner Party*, 1974–79, Agee’s shiny platters serve up slivers of a domestic realm that was carefully designed to offset the chaos of the body.

In her white glazed-porcelain vases and figurines (grouped here on tables), Agee shifts her focus from the pristine modern home to the body that besmirches it. This is decor without the decorum, expressed in the language of kitsch—a more hyperactive form of household distraction than flowery delftware. Agee’s vases are off-kilter and dully ruffled; some are studded with barnacles, snaking stems, or serrated flowers. As vessels and as vases, they bespeak the feminine, but their bristling surfaces and alien flora evoke Meret Oppenheim’s fur-lined teacup (*Object*, 1936), that unforgettable synthesis of seduction and threat, politesse and eroticism. Indeed, Agee’s methods of layering opposites and analyzing the mutual refraction of the unconscious and the everyday feel deeply Surrealist. Her delicate figurines celebrate the animality of the body—exactly what kitsch denies. In *Naked Maker Me*, 2009, a tailed human/animal hybrid frolics among supersize flowers. An emphasis on birth invites a comparison of kiln and womb: One cheerful figure is giving birth while climbing a tree, while another smiling woman reaches deep inside a mare, helping her to foal.

Where does the female body fit into what Tristan Tzara called the “hygienic” modern house? When the sanctum of the domestic is sabotaged by the earthy body itself, the reverse is no less true. In Agee’s deft hands, porcelain becomes a fetish, toggling between what we dine from and what we shit into. Between these poles, the body itself vanishes from the work—no small feat in an undeniably feminist project. We are left puzzling over the self’s dreams and nightmares, and traces of its forlorn public shell.

—Nell McCluster



View of “Ann Agee.”
From left: *Orange Room 1*, 2008;
Orange Room 2, 2010.