

Steve Gorman

Below The Surface



The Rooster: The Agony of St. Peter.
Ceramic with airbrushed acrylic. 21 x 13 x 7 in.
Photo by Steve Gorman, courtesy Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art.

*I will praise you; for I am
fearfully and wonderfully made:
marvellous are your works; and
that my soul knows right well.*
~ Psalm 39, Verse 14,
King James edition



Steve Gorman Installation at Sherry Leedy Gallery.

Foreground: Hurricane Lee (View 1). Right: Either Craw(l) or Dance: The Bottom Dweller.

Photo by Jennifer Bowerman, courtesy Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art.

THE ARTIST STEVE GORMAN COMMENTED TO ME THAT HE believes that the human body is “fearfully and wonderfully made”. He was referring to the Bible, to a passage from Psalm 39, Verse 14, which is frequently interpreted to mean that human beings are distinguished from the rest of nature by the fact that they are capable of wonder and reverence. I was not surprised that Gorman chose this quotation to represent himself, because he brings complexity and awe to the creation of his works. For him, making sculpture is a worshipful act of embracing the scope of human experience, both dark and luminous. I think of this as I absorb *Below The Surface*, an exhibition of his new work, on display at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri between 6 January and 25 February, 2012.

Comprising 12 new ceramic works and three groupings of what I think of as smaller sculptural ‘sketches’, my initial impression upon entering *Below The Surface* is of an explosion of colour. Gorman was trained as a watercolourist but when he was in college, a professor forced him to choose between ceramics and painting. Gorman’s solution was to peaceably create his own composite; sculpting ceramic forms and then painting them in magnificent hues using airbrushed acrylic paint. This hybrid approach to creating, placing one idiom in proximity to an unexpected other to create something original

and infused with psychic resonance, is a hallmark of this exhibition. Nothing, in fact, is singular. Instead, disparate elements, some painted and some modelled, come together in dreamlike sequences upon each stationary form. The effect is kinetic, as if each piece is presented mid-motion. Gorman’s is a magical and animated world and the viewer is allowed merely a peek at compound life forms turning within their particular fields of energy. Eros is manifested everywhere, in gestural shapes, in vibrant colour, in pulsing eroticism and a celebration of the corporeal as spiritual. Thus, in *Either Craw(l) or Dance: The Bottom Dweller* (ceramic and airbrushed acrylic, 29 x 18 x 15 inches) the

A Review by Tanya Hartman

viewer is confronted by an enormous and seemingly joyful crustacean balancing on a bifurcated nose and two orange claws. A blue-green tail is arched upward for balance. This is a creature who has chosen to dance but has done so by exposing its vulnerable stomach to scrutiny. The belly of this shellfish is more subtly painted than the bright thorax, and is modelled in soft yellows and greenish mauves. The creature’s topside, the part it shows to the world, is clearly more radiant and seductive than its muddy gut. And thus, through the work, the viewer encounters the human conundrum: to attempt to transcend one’s limitations and risk humiliation (exposure of the abdomen) or to be content merely to crawl, forever hiding imperfection from inspection. Through



formal terms with metaphoric import, Gorman answers the riddle. This creature rests upon a trinity that can support its lower essence and help it to orient itself heavenward. It balances on a tripod of support (two claws and a nose). Its lower body is fiery in coloration, its upper body blue and refreshing as a sky after a storm, the tips of its tail touched with golden yellow. The base of the sculpture is painted in oxblood and orange, colours associated with carnality; with meat, fire and sexuality whereas the tail is ethereal, pointing towards the boundless freedom of the sky and the luminous promise of eternity. Gorman chose a shellfish specifically as a metaphor for the human spirit, which is often hard on the outside but sweet and yielding within. In making the work, he is asking us not to crawl but to choose a more dangerous and exhilarating form of momentum.

Looking at the eyes of the sculpture, which are painted with delicate and precise glints of light, I am reminded of a story that Gorman once told me. Early in his career, he decided to make a drawing of his son. He was immersed in the act of drawing the pupil of his son's eye, when he noticed his own reflection in it. This was a moment of wonder for the artist, in which he realised the inter-relatedness of all beings. This sense of communion between disparate existences runs throughout the exhibition.

Against the back wall of the gallery are four strong works, ranging in height from nine inches to 25 inches and all twisting upwards in turning gesture. So prevalent, in fact, is this hopeful, upward thrust, that only two works in the exhibition, *Hurricane Lee* and *The Taken*, lack this visual trope. The works



Left: *The Taken*. Ceramic and air brushed acrylic. 14 x 9 x 7 in.
Right: *Hurricane Lee (View 2)*. 2011. Ceramic and air brushed acrylic.
24 x 32 x 24 in.

Photos by Steve Gorman, courtesy Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art.

along the back wall alternate in content between the overtly spiritual and the earthly. To the far right sits *Hound Dog* (ceramic, airbrushed acrylic, 25 x 7 x 11 inches) a literal 'bird dog' whose long, painted ears lie along its back (pointing downwards) while its beak points skyward. This hybrid's eyes are painted slits, closed in an ecstasy of song or spiritual hunger or a combination of both states of being. Black and white telephone poles scroll across the base of the sculpture, placing it in a bleak landscape. The upper underside of the *Bird-Dog's* beak is painted in black and white stripes, which reflect blunt duality of the world below, whereas the lower underside of the mandible is painted in sky blue, reflecting heaven. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the bird is strongly associated with spirit, because it can fly between heaven and earth and the dog is connected to loyalty, to the soil and to the pleasure of living in the moment. Could *Hound Dog* be Gorman's depiction of his own dual nature?

To the left of *Hound Dog* is *Fire Whirl* (ceramic, airbrushed acrylic, 13 x 8 x 5 inches), a slender vase with split lip. Its exterior is painted in fiery oranges and yellows while its interior is tinted dull purple and warm brown. In its form, it appears to be a straightforward figurative vessel but, again, as in *Hound Dog* and *Either Crawl or Dance: The Bottom Dweller*, there is fusion and confusion between body and essence. In the Jewish tradition, the word 'Ruach' means both spirit and wind as in, "And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Ruach of God moved upon the face of the

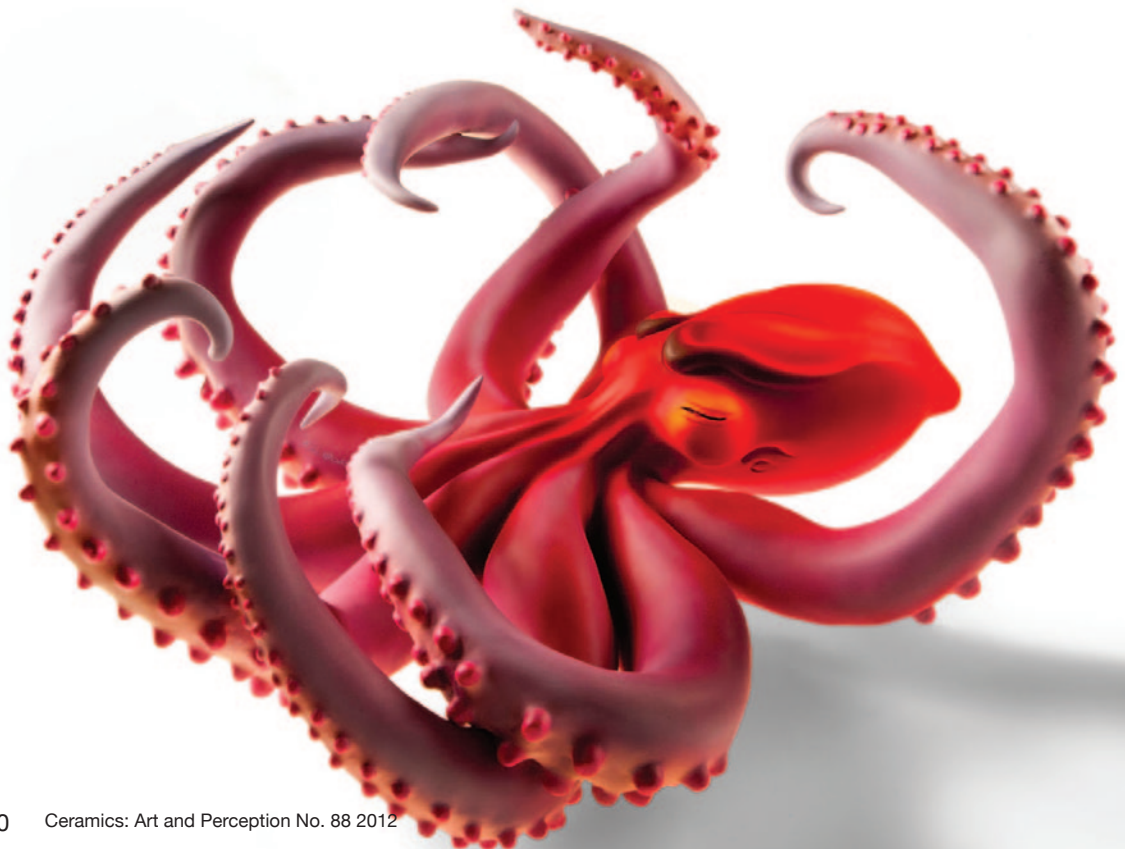


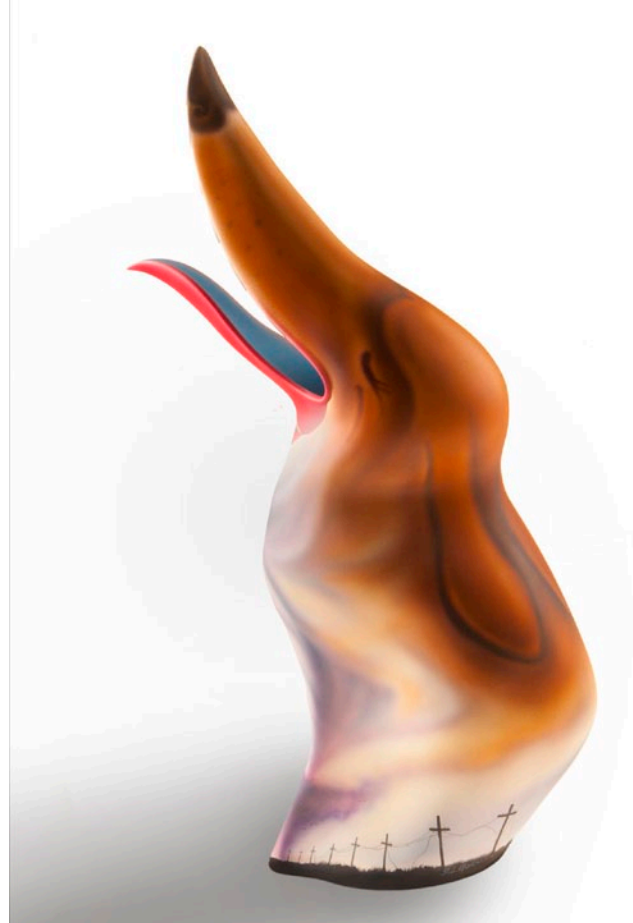
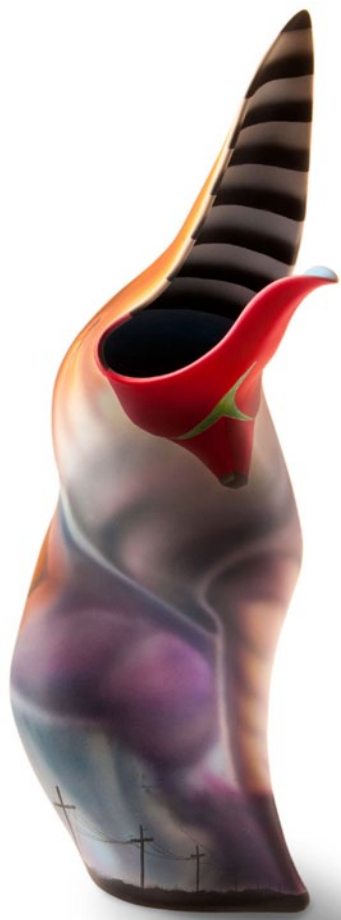
Above: *Installation at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art: Killer Octopus View*. Photo by Jennifer Bowerman, courtesy Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art.

Below: *The Bottom Dweller: Killer Octopus*. 2011. Ceramic and air brushed acrylic. 10 x 21 x 21 in. Photo by Steve Gorman, courtesy Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art.

Facing page, left and right: *Hound Dog (2 views)*. 2011. Ceramic and air brushed acrylic. 25 x 7 x 11 in. Photo by Steve Gorman, courtesy Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art.

Facing page, below: *Image of the artist at work in his studio*. Photo by E G Schempf.





waters." This quotation, from Genesis 1:2, portrays spirit as a transformative, generative energy. Gorman's *Fire Whirl* presents figure and Ruach as one but, even as the figure gyrates within its sacred field, its inner self pulsates with the colours of death and decay.

Pumped Up (ceramic, airbrushed acrylic, 9 x 4 x 6 inches) installed to the left of *Fire Whirl* is the most overtly carnal work in the exhibition. This small sculpture references the human figure, with a labial opening at the top. The female form seems 'pumped up', plump with sexual desire and dressed up in undulant purples that seem more Disney Princess than contusion or bruise. The piece seems to be about pride in feminine splendour and craving. The last piece in the quartet of works against the back gallery wall is *The Rooster: The Agony of St. Peter*. The sculpture presents bird as fire, its dark body swirling in paint, its muscular claws darkly gripping the rimmed plate that centres it, its orange beak and comb flaming upwards in pain and spiritual dissatisfaction. Peter denied Jesus, betrayed him and the piece suggests that to reject one's spiritual nature results in misery and conflict.

Hurricane Lee (24 x 32 x 24 inches) is a *tour de force* that dominates and holds the centre of the gallery. The piece is named for a hurricane that occurred in November 2011. Again, Gorman addresses the dual nature of human beings. He paints the sculpture to resemble both a sonagram of an embryo and

a Doppler radar report. The result is startling and original. The sculpture's shape is fetus-like, curled into itself, finned and resting on flippers. One side of the piece is bright and celestial, the other stormy and dismal. This, more than any other piece in the exhibition, appears to express Gorman's thesis: that each being has the force of a tornado and the potential of heaven, that we must live with this duality and ultimately prevail. In viewing this extremely personal and generous exhibition, I am reminded of the last two lines from *Fern Hill*, a poem by Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, "Time held me green and dying/ Though I sang in my chains like the sea."

Tanya Hartman was educated at The Rhode Island School of Design and at Yale University. She now teaches painting and drawing at the University of Kansas, US. She has received numerous awards including two Hall Center Creative Work Fellowships and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to pursue post-graduate research in Sweden, as well as others. Other honours include a grant from the Puffin Foundation and various teaching awards at Yale University and at the University of Kansas including the TIAA-Creff Award for Excellence in Teaching and an award for outstanding teaching at the graduate level from the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas.

