

Ceramics monthly



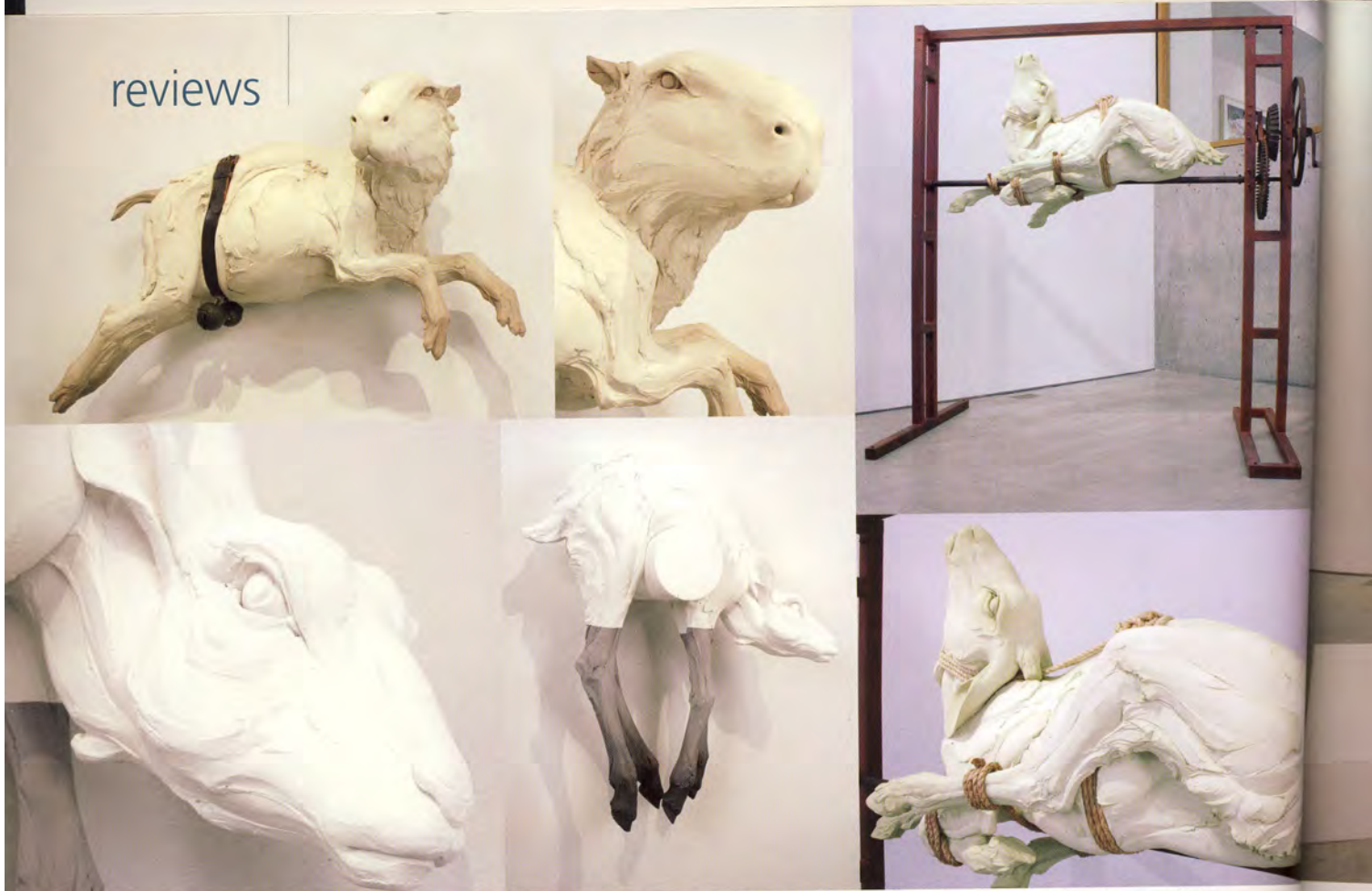
James Klein and David Reid make work
based on an affection for the handmade

focus | **pottery and industry**

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reviews



Clockwise from top left: *Triomphe* (detail), 38 in. (97 cm) in width, stoneware-based, mixed media sculpture. *Triomphe* (detail). *Humiliation by Design*, 7 ft. 6 in. (2.34 m) in length, stoneware-based, mixed media sculpture. *Humiliation by Design* (detail). *Render*, 21 in. (53 cm) in height, stoneware-based, mixed media sculpture. *Render* (detail).

On Tender Hooks

by Liz Howe

"On Tender Hooks," the recent exhibition of sculpture by Beth Cavener Stichter, on view at Claire Oliver Gallery (www.claireoliver.com) in New York, New York, continues the artist's oeuvre of psychosexually provocative ceramic sculpture. The artist triumphs in conquering technical feats galore while toying with significant doses of Zoosadism and rooting around in Victorian Era mores.

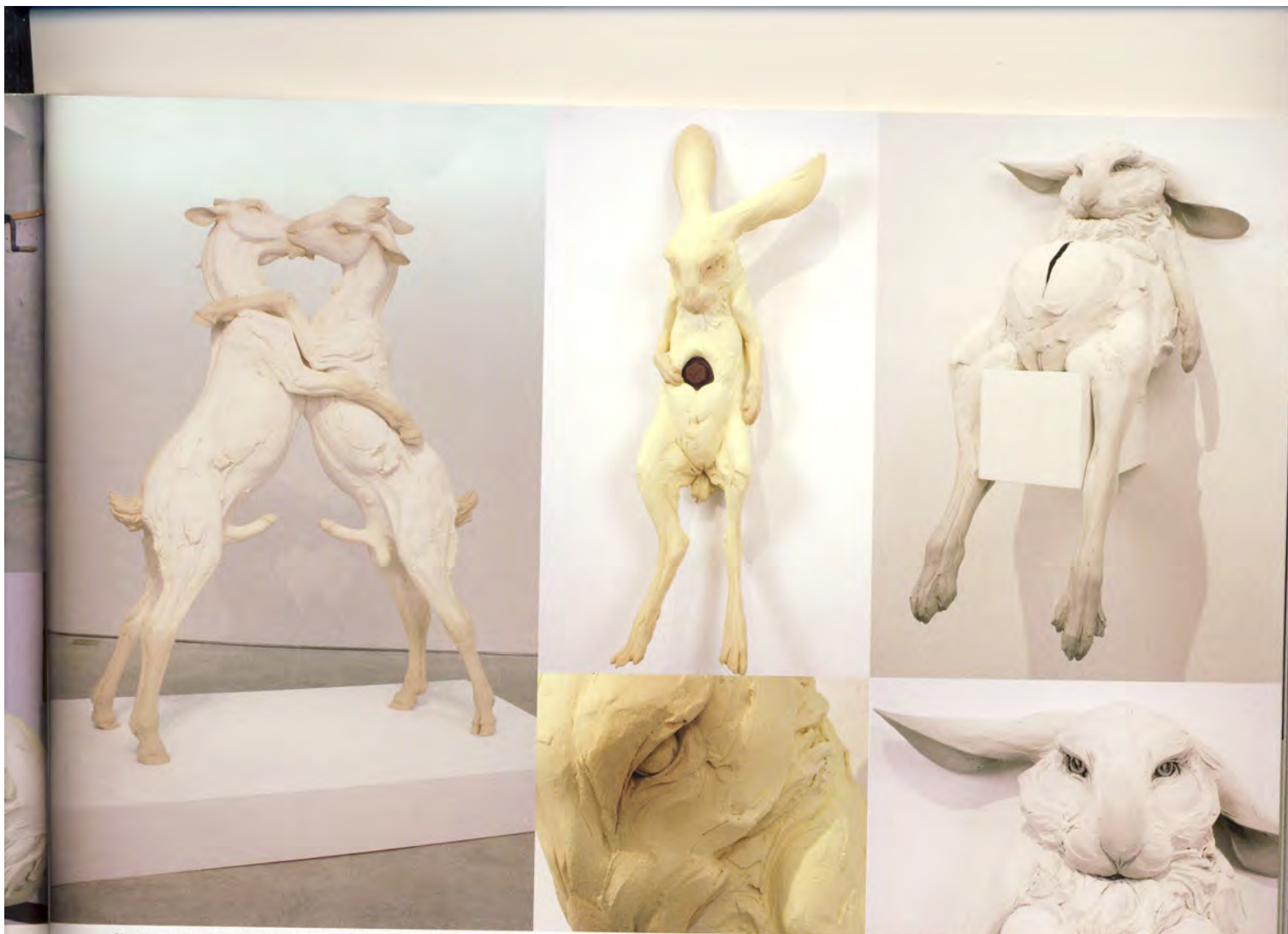
The frontispiece, *Humiliation by Design*, greets viewers upon entry into the gallery foyer, introducing us to Cavener Stichter's material mastery and conceptual premise. This full-sized ceramic goat, rope-tied to a steel framed gear shaft, illustrates the push and pull of physical bondage and subjugation. With the animal's legs tied together, body bound to the steel rod, and head strained back, we encounter a macabre, masochistic tale of torture written in sociopathic script. It is a gruesome sight really; the pose and posture scream violence, submission, and defeat while the sculptural handling remains confident, savvy, and decisive.

The psychological disorientation continues in the main gallery, joined by more depictions of life-sized animals—hare, goat, capybara—classically rendered with large sweeping gestural strokes, posed in decidedly provocative stances. *A Rush of Blood to the Head*, one of the larger works, consists of two male goats standing upright, embracing and kissing with fully erect (and human) male genitalia. Positioning the piece just behind the gallery office wall blocks its view from the entryway, heightening the dramatic effect and adding "shock

value." The title adds eye-rolling humor and a transparent layer of cliché to the massive sculpture and though this piece does not rely on blatant pornographic postures it serves up a sizable association. The chalk white color gradates to taupe; deepening to its fullest saturation in the areas most associated with interpersonal contact such as eyes, ears, nose, tail, hooves, and in this case, penis.

Across from "kissing goats" (nicknamed by the artist on her website) and glancing disinterestedly in their direction is *Triomphe*. This full profile capybara is attached to the wall and suspended mid-leap, sporting a strapped-on leather belt with two large bells dangling in a game of cross-gender play. The overly plump creature, with bedroom eyes and a tail slightly lifted to display (again, human) female genitalia, appears to both leap and wither, rousing our admiration while stroking our sympathies.

Each of these personified mammals, as well as several others in the show, reveal themselves—human genitalia and all—in various stages of victimization and exhibitionism to our voyeuristic gaze. Like case-studies in *Psychopathia Sexualis* the influential Victorian Era work by Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing, these creatures confess the unspoken underside of sexuality. Much like Krafft-Ebing's groundbreaking, controversial work, Cavener Stichter investigates and illustrates in her anthropomorphic ceramic sculpture various manifestations of human sexuality. And, like Krafft-Ebing, credited with advancing the effort to establish scientific authority over matter's of sexuality, Cavener Stichter



Clockwise from top left: *A Rush of Blood to the Head*, 5 ft. 9 in. (1.8 m) in height, stoneware-based, mixed media sculpture. *Bolt*, 32 in. (81 cm) in height, stoneware-based, mixed media sculpture. *Husk*, 34 in. (86 cm) in height, stoneware-based, mixed media sculpture. *Husk* (detail). *Bolt* (detail).

aims for “dispassionate objectification of her subjects.” As the exhibition statement explains, “The child of a microbiologist, Beth spent her teenage summers isolated in her father’s lab, painstakingly dissecting fruit flies. Taught to examine facts dispassionately and impartially, the artist imposes no moral judgment or personal seduction on her work; she couches her conclusions in universal terms. The artist hopes that by inducing the viewer to acknowledge his own uncomfortable darker side, she can inspire a greater understanding of those disparities that divide contemporary societies.”

Though Cavener Stichter strives for “dispassionate objectification of her subjects,” seeing them from “an impartial perspective void of personal seduction,” we are confronted in most of her work with salacious intention. There is nothing objective or impartial about them. The circumstances of her subjects, immersed in their peculiar, sexually charged predicaments both tease and agitate. The handling of the material alone exudes dominance and passion, delivering broad, unabashedly intentional strokes of classical grandeur.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault wrote that Krafft-Ebing’s research “concerned itself primarily with aberrations, perversions, exceptional oddities, pathological abatements, and morbid aggravations” and that “in complicity with what it denounced, haughty and coquettish, it established an entire pornography of the morbid.” Cavener Stichter’s work is vexed with similar snags. The more in-your-face blatancy the

work employs, and the more technically astounding it becomes, the more it serves to illustrate rather than exude vulnerability.

Conversely, *Render* and *Bolt*, two of the smallest, most powerful pieces in the exhibition, speak in sensitively hushed whispers. In these, scale, technique, and gesture (each is built to interact directly with a wall prop) merge seamlessly to confess quiet vulnerability. As the hare in *Bolt* gingerly touches the soft, gaping wound, where an actual, rusty bolt penetrates and impales her, we gain access to an unguarded region of the psyche not fueled by pride or pretense. The artist’s technical virtuosity is tempered to good effect by the humanity in this small piece activating a mysterious and universal intimacy. As the gallery states; “What is revealed in the artist’s work is not an indicator of openness but of vulnerability. She is cognoscente of the danger that the realism of her creatures and her deliberate choice of Martha Stewart color palette can encourage: the worst kind of sentimentality.” *Render*, *Bolt*, and even the more lascivious *Husk* fluidly meld sentimentality, cliché, technique, and concept, delivering their punch as viewers move in . . . rather than shouting it from across the room. By doing so, the work relies on our complicity, fashioning us all into victim and perpetrator; face to face with our wounds and our indifference.

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