

# Margie Kelk

## Nowhereness



*Characters, painted wood on plexiglass with ceramic heads, 64"x 21"*



*Characters (detail), painted wood on plexiglass with ceramic heads, 64"x 21"*



*iPads (Screening) acrylic with ceramic head inserts, 15"x 12"*



*iPads (Screening) acrylic with ceramic head inserts, 15"x 12"*

By Gil McElroy

When we think about clay in a utilitarian context, hardly ever do we seem to stray beyond the narrow confines of the vessel and its relationship to food and cooking and nurturing. Clay has so very many other contexts and roles in human culture and origins that warrant aesthetic inclusion and serious enquiry, but these are far too often ignored or simply dismissed. Like its place in shaping human shelter; be it as lowly and mundane as a basic brick or an adobe construction, or as elegantly aesthetic as pure architectural ornamentation. Or its integral role in the electronics industry, ranging from simple insulators to the semi-conductors found by the tens of thousands in virtually every electronic product, to the tiny ceramic antennae used in GPS devices. And we could push even further afield and into the realm of biology and the field of genetics, where clay has a posited role in helping birth the chemical reactions required to produce the genetic material RNA, the very elemental stuff of life. Given all of this (and it is a less than extensive list), why are we so stuck on pots when the industrial and even genetic afford myriad other aesthetic directions?

In her recent body of work recently shown at Red Head Gallery, Toronto-based artist Margie Kelk engages both the industrial and architectural aspects of ceramics, using them to contextually address issues pertaining to the living of life itself, and the evolving forms of virtual relationships within which we are increasingly involved on an everyday level.

*Nowhereness* comprises a gallery installation of sculptural clay artefacts framed by the dislocatedness that is an intrinsic aspect of contemporary cyber-culture. Canadian thinker Marshall McLuhan gave us the notion of the "global village," but perhaps he didn't envisage it as a phenomenon that would further isolate us, connecting us to one another only via the technological interface of the computer and social networking sites that we think might foster real connectivity between each other but which, in fact, don't.

*Village on a Motherboard* (all work is 2012) is a table-top size enlargement of a tiny bit of a computer circuit board (home to those aforementioned semi-conductors) on which Kelk has situated a number (eight, actually) of small ceramic houses. They're stylized representations of rather ordinary structures – buildings with flat or peaked roofs, windows, doorways – found



*Village, ceramic houses on 48" square painted plexiglass on wood*



*Nowhereness installation, The Red Head Gallery, dimensions variable*



*Characters, ceramic, dimensions variable. Photos: Isaac Applebaum*

in ordinary, everyday kinds of neighbourhoods. And they're not unoccupied. Immediately opposite the entrance to the gallery, Kelk had situated a shelf-size installation of dozens of minute ceramic heads. It's the human world from the neck up, and that's critically important to engaging with all of Kelk's work, for the cousins of these same tiny human heads, all *sans bodies*, populate the neighbourhood laid out in miniature atop a circuit board. Some peer out of house windows (basement ones too). One even stretches a painfully elongated neck upward to look out of a high window. And some are bizarrely stacked atop one another on rooftops, rising like smoke from household chimneys.

This is bleak stuff. This is isolation painfully rendered. This is humanity unable to connect with the world outside except through the mediating influence of electronic virtuality, which increasingly substitutes for meaningful one-on-one human relationships. These heads are bodiless entities, figurative sculptures in clay of a torso-less, hand-less, leg-less people living isolated lives, linked only by the ground – literal and metaphorical – of electronic circuitry that has virtualized itself in what we once gloriously called "The World Wide Web" but which has become so ubiquitous and commonplace as to be reduced to "the internet". This is loneliness, and it is no accident that Kelk's heads are all, without exception, renderings of elderly people; those most at risk of social isolation. Facebook and its ilk is no saviour for them.

Mounted on a nearby gallery wall is *Characters*; another installation of clay heads, each of which is individually set in a small square frame – a box – and all of which are aligned in three stacked rows. There are twenty-six of the boxes and heads, and the overarching concept is, of course, the computer keyboard. In our new global village, texting and messaging substitute for

personal relationship and dialogue. Kelk is right on the money: we have become our keyboards.

Six other box works comprise the wall-mounted *Screening*. Each is rectangular and black, and each internally frames the approximation of a small square computer screen – based on an *iPad* – which frames a smaller ceramic sculptural box containing a duo of ceramic heads. In none of the six pieces do these heads – do these people – in any way respond or react to the presence of one another. They're oriented outwardly, toward the person(s) on the other side of the screen; toward us. When we are not busily messaging one another, this is how we increasingly take in the world and each other: via an image on a computer screen (an extension, of course, of television, albeit with more interactivity). Maybe it seems more meaningful, more close and intimate – at first, anyhow. But this is as heavily mediated and distant a relationship as any text message or Facebook posting. *Screening* critiques how we are willingly ensnared within the virtual, within the limited economy of the image, thinking that somehow this will broaden our social horizons when, indeed, it merely shrinks them down to a shadow of what real human interaction provides. We crave intimacy, yet simultaneously fear it and push it away, opting for the safety of the simulacra in place of the real thing.

But wait. All of Kelk's figures confined within the worlds of *Nowhereness* are, in fact, individual and unique, one-of-a-kind figurative clay pieces; the product of intense and laborious physical manipulation – the product of an aesthetic itself little affected (at least overtly) by the global village's isolationist imperative. Though it pertinently addresses its societal and cultural impact, Kelk's work is itself not that of simulacra. This is the real thing and of it, we should sing.