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Eric Fertman tips his hat to the surreal in Kemper at the Crossroads exhibit



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"I'm an object worshipper," Eric Fertman confessed in a recent interview, standing amid his handcrafted artwork at Kemper at the Crossroads. "On a visceral level, people relate to objects ... we feel them."

In Fertman's first solo museum exhibit, "Here's Your Hat, What's Your Hurry?" the Brooklyn-based artist combines a range of carved wood sculptures with large watercolors and artist notebooks. Possessed of an idiosyncratic sense of humor, Fertman's two- and three-dimensional works look like renegades from a Looney Tunes prop shop. What Michelangelo was to Rodin, it seems Popeye is to Fertman.

Big cartoon feet, pendulous blue breasts, wooden telephones and horsetails are part of Fertman's obsessive, surrealist imagery.

"It's a pleasure to make art, and I totally have fun," Fertman acknowledged, "but there's definitely work involved. ... I want (my art) to work on a fun level, but I also want it to have a dark side."

To that end, in his drawings Fertman repeatedly morphs heads from the old Pac-Man video game into skulls with huge, empty eye sockets; he painstakingly carves eyeglasses with missing lenses or rims; and he constructs a shattered room with a rotary-style telephone that doesn't work. Motifs of surveillance and scenarios of pandemonium alternate like fugues in works that also possess the comic energy and navel-gazing sensibility of a teenager.

"I don't tell people how to think about my work, although I leave little clues," Fertman said. "It's all very personal to me ... it's what I'm not thinking about" consciously.

A Boston native, Fertman moved to New York City to attend Cooper Union, where he received the Elliot Lash Award for Excellence in Sculpture in 1997 while still a student. Fertman's ebony-colored sculptures at the Kemper reflect only a small fragment of his prodigious output, which includes a range of subjects, from loose interpretations of lunch boxes to wooden versions of Chinese scholar's rocks.

All Fertman's works possess a theatrical presence. Spindly pieces such as "Lady" (2011) resemble abstract figures with huge arthritic joints. Others, such as "Lantern" (2011), are more like Rube Goldberg machines that have become petrified.

Besides the obvious link to cartoons, Fertman has notably digested the art of Philip Guston, the abstract expressionist painter whose late works depicting bulbous smoking heads, lightbulbs and giant feet flummoxed the art world in the 1970s. But Guston's work bordered on the grotesque, while Fertman's sculptures are elegantly worked; they show an acknowledged allegiance to refined Asian art forms such as Chinese spirit stones with their carved wooden bases.

What makes Fertman's art contemporary is his devotion to the handmade and a shameless love of materials. He belongs to a DIY generation that relies on elements of touch, craft and a fondness for retro, a big change from the conceptually based art of the 1980s and '90s, when artists such as Barbara Krueger and Richard Prince embraced irony and the world of the digital to proffer politically charged messages.

The era of the "culture wars" and identity politics banned notions of pleasure, beauty and connoisseurship, so it is not surprising that younger artists have flipped the art world around and are choosing to explore that once-maligned arena of the personal mixed with craftsmanship.

The risk is replacing the strident didacticism of the past with the cozy narcissism of the Facebook era.

Fertman must use his fertile responses to past art forms to make the outmoded styles he loves dangerous again. If he wants to tell us familiar stories in new and personal ways, he must resist the impulse to fall into the seductive trap of nostalgia.