Nikki Renee Anderson
Expressive Forms

Article by Victor M Cassidy
Atop the table is a ceramic sculpture with three rings of rounded forms, surmounted by a pineapple shape with flared upside-down dress forms sticking out at the top like ears. A megaphone-like sculpture emits sound and a dress/megaphone-shaped piece lies on the carpet. These objects are coloured Pepto Bismol pink, which the artist terms “pink with an attitude that’s intended to make you feel queasy”.

Dressing Room Dramas presents a private space that maps the beginnings of identity, Anderson says, because “the objects in those spaces become metaphors for identity”. The megaphone-like sculpture emits the sound of soft, childish voices whispering nursery rhymes. According to the artist, the voices in this piece are based on psychological experiences. “My voice becomes representative of the voices we all hear inside of ourselves,” she says, “which can be strengthening, self-doubting and eerie.”

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Many artists need quiet time after school, sometimes years of it, to develop a personal style, perfect technical skills and learn how to market their work. Not so with Nikki Renee Anderson, who completed her MFA in 2002 and since has produced three-plus bodies of mature work. Anderson is a ceramics sculptor whose subject is the female experience. Her sculptures are typically small and she generally mounts them on the wall, often in multi-piece installations. Her round, plump forms suggest cakes, candies, pillows and plant or body parts. Rather than seeking to invent new forms, Anderson explores the expressive possibilities of her visual language. Always there is humour in her sculpture and a sense that she delights in life’s pleasures.

Working with white clay, Anderson uses the coil and pinch process to make a form and finishes the surface with tools, deliberately leaving some imperfections. She bisque fires each piece, paints it with acrylic paint and then pours coloured acrylic resin over it in different ways, depending upon her expressive needs. She has painted her sculptures in a variety of colours, but mostly white.

Private Spaces

Trained as a sculptor in college, Anderson experimented with wood and metal before she discovered ceramic, which seemed more versatile to her. The artist’s early work came out of her childhood experiences. As a little girl, she had watched – and sometimes helped – her baker father shape pastries. Later, she made sculptures whose pleasing rounded forms recall sweet rolls, cupcakes, candies and the like.

Anderson’s early work also suggested girlish fantasy, social relationships among little girls and the birth of personal identity. In 2003, in a project space at Chicago’s spring art fair, she exhibited Dressing Room Dramas: Pink and Ruffled, an ambitious room-sized installation with white fabric walls and a dark blue shag rug on the floor. Brightly coloured blue, yellow and pink domes of ceramic adorn the back wall. Inside are folding screens, flat forms that resemble old-fashioned mirrors and painted wooden children’s furniture that the artist built.

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One of the five Jewel Boxes, called Lollypop Box contains a shape that the artist connects to candy, cosmetics and the female body. It looks like three balls of ice cream in a line with a cone at either end. She has poured turquoise acrylic resin over it, so the shape seems almost to float in the liquid that has hardened beneath it. A second box contains a shape like the soft frozen confections that are dispensed spirally into cones. Mauve acrylic covers this sculpture to make it look utterly delicious. Nubbin Drawer, a third box, contains three forms like sweet rolls covered in hot pink acrylic. No one can resist the nubbins, which just seem to ooze calories.

**Whispering Bodies**

The subjects of Whispering Bodies, Anderson’s 2010 solo show at the Elmhurst Art Museum near Chicago were childish fantasy, play and self-indulgence. She made round, plump and often asymmetrical forms in white ceramic that suggested cherries, derrières, circular pillows with cloth-covered buttons at their centres and pastry bags. She poured red acrylic over the forms so it dripped down the sides and she installed the work on walls or shelves. She wired some pieces for sound so visitors heard indistinct soft whispers.

The artist produced four related series of sculptures for Whispering Bodies, which she showed on four walls of one gallery, Bulging Cherries, in the boldest series, she explores “the idea of simple geometric shapes and squeezing dessert/body forms”, the artist says. The artist takes the word bulbous to amusing extremes, distancing the
Victor Cassidy is a writer on the arts from Chicago, Illinois US.