

THE POLITICAL IMAGINATION OF MARA SUPERIOR



Above: *Bushwacked* (Front and back), 2008. Porcelain, wood, gold and silver leaf, brass, and antique ivory. 18 x 27 x 12 in.
Below: *Bushwacked* (Detail). In the collection of Dr. Paul and Melinda Sullivan.

An Interview with the Artist by Joanna Hubbs

IN THE PAST NINE YEARS MARA SUPERIOR, KNOWN FOR her whimsically beautiful porcelain pieces, particularly centred around fanciful teapots, has changed the tenor of what she calls her story-telling works to focus on political events that have rocked this country. I began this interview by asking the artist fundamental questions regarding her development and vision as an artist:

JH: *What are the historical and/or contemporary roots of your work?*

MS: I have a classical art school education majoring in painting. Art history has always been a source of my nourishment. I am an art sponge. I cannot choose one influence since different sources inform each piece that I make. A few of my passions include: Egyptology, Persian miniatures, Greek and Roman art, Giotto, Duccio, Simone Martini,

Cranach, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Bonnard, Matisse, Saul Steinberg, David Hockney – as well as the history of Asian and European ceramics, textiles – and music. When I discovered porcelain it opened up a third dimension, offering infinite forms, textures and shapes on which to paint as well as to tell stories.

JH: *What are the most challenging aspects of making your art and how has it evolved over time?*

MS: Porcelain has its own particular technical problems: high shrinkage, cracking, a long work cycle, the unpredictability of an outdoor gas kiln and the uncertainty of the object successfully surviving the firing, especially when working close to a deadline. In spite of all of this

I have stayed with reduction high-fired porcelain because it fulfils my idea of exquisite beauty in a





Above: *Tulipomania (Front and back)*. 2009. Porcelain, wood, bone and gold leaf. 31 x 22 x 11 in.
 Below: *Tulipomania (Detail)*.

material integral to my content.

I put my idea down on paper and, from years of experience, I try to figure out the best way to execute it. It is all risk and innovation – no one has told me how to make things – which can often result in a certain amount of loss.

I have an intuitive approach to the process of creating appropriate forms and shapes to combine with the surface iconography that tells my stories. Although I use my own visual grammar and have a cast of characters reappearing in my imagery, the infinite possibilities in the variety of shapes have kept my design sensibility from becoming static.

In the beginning of my career I was very excited by the utilitarian aspects of porcelain as well as its aesthetic possibilities. I made things that I joyfully handled and used in my everyday life. Over time as my skill and ideas improved and developed, I became less interested in function and more intrigued by the possibilities of relief sculpture and the teapot with its technical challenges and iconic form full of historic references.



Eventually the teapots grew in complexity. They became oversized, multi-spouted extravagances built with stacked forms and covered with intricate images, text and relief. They had no relation to function but retained a conceptual link to the history of porcelain.

My teapots now retain only a vestigial connection to their ancestors and are simply a format for an idea. Most recently I have been utilizing wooden forms covered with tiles as a building unit in my constructions, opening new possibilities of shape and scale – an ongoing adventure. Form and surface are integrated into one concept. Making art is about choices, decisions, preferences and changing your mind. The nature of my content has been reverential, ceremonial, commemorative and celebratory. The iconic teapot form has embodied all of these to me but

now I have begun to move away from some of its limitations and am finding new, more relevant forms to enhance and carry my stories.

JH: *How has your attitude toward your work changed*



Piggy Bankers/The Great Recession of 2008. 2009. Porcelain, wood, gold leaf, antique ivory and brass. 24 x 23 x 9 in.

in the past decade or so?

MS: I have always worked from an idealized reality and a perspective of beauty and consciously did not choose to use my work as a platform for disturbing content. However beginning with the ascendancy of George W. Bush and as an avid NPR listener and *New York Times* reader I became concerned by what I saw as a dismantling of American democracy. It was this concern that gave birth to my first political piece, *Bushwacked*.

Bushwacked is a time capsule of the eight years of 'W's' administration and the first in a series of themes involving government, the economy and ecological issues. This vessel rests on a pedestal covered with shards and two miniature broken plates entitled *US Economy* and *Iraq*. On one side are little plates marking the climate of fear, exaggerated patriotism, greed for oil and the almighty dollar bill. On the other side we see a cracked map of the United States – the Union is being 'undone'.

The next piece, *Tulipomania* refers to what Allen Greenspan dubbed "irrational exuberance" during the housing boom leading to the burst of the bubble and the calamity of the *Great Recession* of 2008, not unlike the tulip craze that took place in 17th



Above: *Piggy Bankers/The Great Recession of 2008* (View 2).

Below: *Piggy Bankers/The Great Recession of 2008* (Detail).

century Holland. *Tulipomania* depicts a true story from the height of the mania, when a house was exchanged for three tulip bulbs, leading to the great tulip crash of 1637. When the bubble popped, traders begged the government to prop up the failed financial system in ways all too familiar to us in 2009.

As I watched the daily disasters unfold, I was led from *Tulipomania* to *Piggy Bankers*. As each crisis unfolded – mortgages, banks, credit, financial institutions collapsing, and so forth – the piece virtually created itself. After the near collapse of the US economy due to the recklessness and greed of the banks and Wall Street, I was compelled to sharpen my political satire by creating a piece that was more stark, raw and less decorative in expressing my (and the public's) rage, fear and anxiety. My version of the Biblical *Golden Idol* atop the sculpture



Above left, centre and right: *Smart Planet*. 2009. Porcelain, gold leaf and tin. 20 x 10 x 10 in.
Below: *Smart Planet (Detail)*.

takes the form of a pig, unable to see beyond his golden portfolio. The piece is a document of events leading up to the crash and pretty much speaks for itself.

The most recent work, *Smart Planet* is my way of protesting the manner with which climate change is being either ignored or swept under the rug by selfish shortsighted corporations interested only in immediate gain. Is our world to perish because of economic greed?

This series of political pieces is, of course, in the long art historical tradition of political satire, from Daumier and Hogarth to James Gilroy, Thomas Nast and, in our own time, Saul Steinberg who has had the most profound influence on my own thinking as I began my political series.

Content that is disturbing need not come in an ugly package. In fact, I think it is even more powerful and has a sharper bite when the viewer discovers the meaning underlying the seductive presence of a beautiful object.

I have two more works in progress: *American Villains* (Madoff, Cheney, Limbaugh, Beck, and others) and in an opposite mode, *The Obama White House*. I truly hope that this series will have a happier ending so that I can return to themes of delight and celebration. My work tends to reflect my state of being.

JH: Mara Superior's political work may refer to

contemporary events but, like that of her illustrious predecessors, it also depicts the shortcomings of human nature, which lead to catastrophic results. Her insistence upon the beauty of the objects she 'sculpts' in porcelain also feeds on a universal human need to find order in the chaos of history and life. And that search for order, in one shape or another, whether through a desire to create beauty or to provoke, or both – is it not the very source of any artistic creation?



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The work of Mara Superior is in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California; Museum of Arts and Design, New York; Newark Museum, New Jersey; New Britain Museum of American Art; Racine Art Museum, Wisconsin, US; Smithsonian Museum of American Art; Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian, Washington, DC; and The White House Collection of American Craft. Her solo exhibitions include: De Cordova Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts, US; Fuller Museum, Brockton, Massachusetts; and New Britain museum of American Art, Connecticut, US. She has been awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and Massachusetts Cultural Council Fellowships.

Mara Superior is represented by the Ferrin Gallery, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, US.

All photos by John Polak.