

INNER CITY

AN INSTALLATION BY CERAMIC SCULPTOR
ARNIE ZIMMERMAN AND ARCHITECT
TIAGO MONTEPEGADO

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design
224 Benefit Street
Providence, Rhode Island

Through January 3, 2010

AT THE HEART OF RISD'S CANAL-SIDE CAMPUS, AN OLD TROLLEY TUNNEL LINKS THE GROUND LEVEL OF COLLEGE HILL TO ITS LOFTY HEIGHTS. BARNACLE-LIKE CERAMIC GROWTHS FESTOON THE TILE SHELTER OF THIS PUBLIC TRANSIT NEXUS, WHICH HUDDLES IN STARK CONTRAST TO THE CLEAN LINES OF ITS YOUNG NEIGHBOR, THE CHACE CENTER.

Inaugurated in Fall 2008, the Center houses an expansion of the RISD Museum, linked by a glass sky bridge to the Decorative Arts galleries of Pendleton House, built in 1906.

Arriving by escalator at the museum's third level main gallery with this stratified urbanity on my mind, I am confronted with a grid marked in white tape on the polished concrete floor. Rising from the grid are three squat pedestals, each bearing a place identity: Lisbon (Portugal), Leeuwarden (the Netherlands) and Providence. "Inner City," a modular installation that has grown to include over 180 ceramic buildings and figurines by sculptor Arnie Zimmerman, has visited all three of these cities. In each exhibition venue, the installation has occupied a distinct footprint, thanks to Zimmerman's collaborator, architect Tiago Montepegado. The installation at the RISD Museum represents the work's largest iteration to date.

The white tape continues into the 4,000 square foot inner sanctum, demarcating a tidy, right-angled street grid punctuated by 26 pedestals of varied height. Large, stoneware edifices, more suggestive of factories than dwellings, rise from these blocks, their fractured walls bearing the telltale signs of kiln accident or earthquake. It's an ironic urban plan to find here in New England, where urban arteries skin old cow paths to double back on one-way streets and endless, orange-coned roadway improvement projects.

Crawling and perched throughout Zimmerman's ruinous vignettes, grim-faced clay figurines, seemingly without race, gender or age, labor in rough-hewn detail. Their uniforms are generic — some wear bright sweaters, marked with shiny glaze "X" suspenders, suggesting secondhand and ill-fitted clothing. In Zimmerman's city, there is no cult of style. Sweatshirts, hats and harlequin patterns echo Goodwill bins.

These denizens of "Inner City" brawl, drink, doze...or bear loads: ceramic guns, shovels, earthenware jars, heavy slabs of sheetrock and I-beams. Some laborers struggle alone, others, in cooperation. Their faces are set with the



hard grins or grimaces of those who bear the grinding weight of “progress.” Scale is mutable — some of the larger figures are up to 9” tall — but for the most part, there are few distinguishing features between them.

Coming from a tradition of large-scale vessels and monumental clay sculpture, Zimmerman admits to not having studied the human figure to great extent in the course of his training as an artist.

“I use the ceramic figurine as a foil for depicting monumental scale,” said Zimmerman in an interview with curator Judith Tannenbaum. “They are the workers, low-lives — generic people. Stretching the metaphor, my people are the badly made ones, the cast-offs, the losers.”

One figurine that stands out from the masses is glazed blue from head to toe. He bears no burden, but sits contemplatively atop a tower, casting his gaze over the tumbled skyline. Is he a god...or a ghost?

Nearby, others drink and smoke in a ruined nook, clutching large, earthenware jugs.

Framed in a window overlooking downtown Providence, one grouping resembles a Roman frieze. The figures march in close formation, an impossible stack of bricks engulfing the space where their heads should be. Bodies without brains, brawn without reason.

Underneath a viewing platform designed for the museum’s gallery by architect Tiago Montepegado, looms a 10-foot wide bridge, lofted high on irregular pilings and glazed in red iron oxide. The viewing platform is unimpressive; the God perspective it should provide offers not enough heaven, just a little purgatory. The bridge, on the other hand, asks more questions. Devoid of life, it is by far the largest ceramic component in the room. Its wide, barrel arches frame a span far too narrow for any imagined traffic. The road surface itself is haphazard, a clay mess of slabs crews have tossed onto roadways during construction projects. The supports suggest ladders, but there are no climbers.

It’s a hell of a public works project amidst the rubble. With its unsettled aura of activity and disrepair, is “Inner City” in ruins, in the process of being built, or systematically dismantled?

| Meredith Cutler

ALL: Arnie Zimmerman and Tiago Montepegado. Installation views and details from “Inner City,” RISD Museum of Art, Providence, RI, 2009. ©Arnie Zimmerman, courtesy of Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design. Providence, Rhode Island. Photography by Erik Gould.



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