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## ELISABETH KLEY *Ozymandias*

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Elisabeth Kley's exhibition *Ozymandias* at the new Canada Gallery space, presents ten ceramic works; they are urns, bottles, and containers, and all the pieces are habitations of one sort or another. Aeschylus laments the dead Greek warriors futilely besieging Troy in *Agamemnon* with a description of their interment: "packing smooth the urns with ashes that once were men." In Kley's case as well, three of the smaller vessels, *Flask with Eyes* (2015), *Flask with Axes* (2015), and *Flask with Flags* (2015), were inspired by the purpose of holding the ashes of a dear friend, the artist Kathleen White, and thus are both a final resting place and a surrogate body created anew by the artist. Besides that melancholy purpose, ceramic vessels have always been enigmatic objects. Perhaps because of their obvious use value they take on a heightened meaning when they become purely ceremonial—almost sacrificial. These pieces are trophies, portraits, and mnemonics in the most literal sense.

The artist is boldly dedicated to the tradition of ceramics; these are vases and flagons—they retain their practicality rather than fired and glazed clay used as a sculptural medium (not that there is anything wrong with that). Kley reminds us that pride of place in ancient Greek, Chinese, Japanese, and a host of other cultures, is at least in part devoted to ceremonial ceramic vessels. The exhibition layout is succinct and blunt, and follows this dedication to the potter's art: the walls are bare and the ten pieces sit in a diamond formation on plinths aligned with the center of the back wall. A hemisphere of white-on-black vessels faces us as we enter the space, presenting a massy grouping of dark bulbous forms. They almost float, sitting on their simple unassuming white plinths. Walking back through the diamond shaped grouping of nine pieces, the opposite sides of the vessels are black-on-white—a lighter, more calligraphic effect. The competing



Elisabeth Kley, *Large Black & White Flask with Seraphim & Cross*, 2015. Glazed earthenware, 22 × 22 × 9 inches. Courtesy Canada Gallery.

black-on-white/white-on-black format of the vessels enables them to have a dialogue, if not an argument, Janus-like, with themselves.

The walls are bare except for a pair of Kley's wall paintings on either side of the long narrow space and a set of delicate black-and-white relief prints on ethereal Japanese paper. The paintings are solid, floor-to-ceiling rectangles of interwoven tendrils enclosing six-winged seraphim and Greek crosses, a design sourced from a 17th-century Ottoman textile design, made for the Christian market. These frame the grouping from the back of the gallery, and despite the sparse color scheme, the effect is a flickering, blink-inducing, and engaging vista. The prints, all schematics of flasks and urns, with titles such as *Louie F.* (2015), *Cleopatra R.* (2015), and *Egyptian Bottle Print* (2015) serve as a primer for Kley's inclusive methods of inspiration: alternative and underground totems combined with an avaricious pursuit of subtle and often overlooked symbolism residing at the borders of textiles and the margins of manuscripts.

The show's title "Ozymandias" leaves an enigmatic gulf between the central thrust of the poem—the dissolution of human ambition over time—and Kley's affecting, often witty, yet reserved works. But Shelley's poem is also a poem about sculpture and how it can and cannot retain meaning forever. Once the fearsome and egotistic mask of the King of Kings is ripped off and deposited in the sands of time, the trunkless legs are all that is left, and they become pathetic, perhaps sympathetic and all too human. Without the context, the symbol becomes merely an image, and Kley clearly is in love with the image that has the mystery of a symbol behind it but not the clear meaning. *Large Black & White Flask with Seraphim & Cross* (2015) uses the same design as the wall painting—a cross enclosed within a curving tendril, and punctuated at each of the diagonal corners by a now disembodied, single, angel's wing. The cross, emblazoned on this large bottle is dripping with meaning, and contained within each of its quadrants is a pair of initials, but it doesn't seem particularly Christian. The letters explain only that there is a specific meaning to this set of symbols.

Kley collects her vocabulary of symbols from sigils, textiles, the internet, and various aspects of material and underground culture. Positioned together at Canada Gallery, the individuality and distinctness of this glossary of signifiers—most of which seem to emerge from antiquity or the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley—comes through despite their similarities of color, shape, and aesthetic of execution. Kley's hand, conveyed through painted glazes and stains on the vessels, is delicate, as in *Large Black & White Flask with Tree* (2015) based on a Central Asian textile from the 7th – 9th centuries, but can be rough and blocky at the same time via the spontaneity of the application. The imagery that plays out on the vessels has a reassuring familiarity as it draws from the collective stock of forms seen in architecture and throughout the history of visual culture, but within this scope, the artist gives a wide berth to the viewer to guess the meaning of each vessel, lending an openness and accessibility to the work. Positioned in close quarters, as they are at the gallery, the assembly of objects begins to resemble a company of knights with their heraldic insignia. Kley has said that she invoked Ozymandias as a reference to the current scourge of monument destruction in the world. Her bottles and flasks assembled in serried ranks are a bulwark against this iconoclasm.