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TRANSLUCENT THREADS OF DAWN BY ELIZABETH KLEY

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by **Jacob Kiernan**

Regina Rex | 221 Madison Avenue | June 14–July 26th



What is a birdcage more than an ornamental set of fetters? An arabesque of soldered steel to house an avian companion. Unlike a menagerie, it does not try to imitate nature, providing comfort to the creature within. Instead, its ornate structure is a pleasure to those who look on from the outside. A birdcage is man's artful triumph over nature.

Elizabeth Kley's approach is different. In her show *Translucent Threads of Dawn*, she constructs beautiful, clay birdcages, now on display at Regina Rex. While the rolled steel of a utilitarian birdcage gives the illusion of freedom whilst entrapping its resident, Kley's earthen structures could scarcely contain a condor.

Two feet tall, each of the cages is constructed from slatternly columns, forming an extravagant, imaginary domicile. One is forged from muddled rectangles, another oblong circles, the third topped with triangles, the last made of kinky semicircles. The cages share an ornate and towering presence. Glazed on the outside in bright gold, lime green and turquoise, they remain undressed on the inside. Bare clay shows through the negative space. The cages possess a definitive pomp—erect and glamorous.

Translucent Threads of Dawn pairs Kley's cages with Conrad Ventur's colorfully, dark photographs of an elderly Mario Montez, one of Warhol's superstars, who acted in thirteen of his films. Considering Kley's own interest in drag, it is hard not to be reminded of the film that shares her subject matter's name. The brightly glazed exteriors juxtaposed with Ventur's photographs illuminates the pageantry of dress in each medium.

Likewise, just as the birdcages serves as an elaborate constraint, so can gender. Glamorous from the outside, an aviary ensnare a life within, as often does polarized conceptions gender. The conversation between Kley and Ventur's work highlights the boundaries of gender, constant negation in public and private space, and as interior and exterior perception. Like the columns of Kley's cages, dolled-up on the outside and raw on the inside, gender is a construction rife with pomp and pitted

with significance.



Elizabeth Kley. *Large White Three Part Lotus Bottle*. 2012. Glazed earthenware. 22 x 22 x 32 inches.

Clay, itself, is a material that begins as malleable, and then solidifies to an rigid final form. And, the field of ceramics occupies a precarious middle ground between art and craft, sculpture and painting, function and beauty. Like a drag queen, ceramicists are constantly navigating where and how to situate themselves within these preconceived boundaries.

Yet, Kley's cages are little akin to Ilya Chashnik and Constructivist pottery, which applied plainer design to supplement functional objects. More so, she seems to harken back to Futurist ceramics, which emphasized speed of construction, or parody Bauhaus pottery, which attempted combining art and utility to find a higher form.

In his ontological investigation of the nature of the “Thing,” Martin Heidegger takes as his essential example a ceramic jug. A jug is made of a material (clay), has form (that of a pitcher or carafe), and function (for pouring a fine Italian, or German, wine), but there is something more to the jug than just this. The jug, most essentially, contains something. And what it contains, Heidegger argues, is not just wine, but empty space, the void. He concludes, “the vessel’s thingness does not reside at all in the materials of which it consists, but in the void that it holds.”

What is most beautiful about Kley’s cages not the way she combines color and clay, pomp and crudeness, function and form (though these elements are sublime). What is most wonderful about her cages are what they don’t contain, a prisoner. The colorful glaze, elaborate structure, and gaping holes come together to imagine the bird that has flown free of its cage. The beauty of her cages are what they don’t contain.

Kley is a New York based artist and writer, who’s work has shown at Schema (2014), 39 Great Jones (2014), John Tevis Gallery (2012), the Georgian National Gallery (2011) among many other locations. She has written for Art in America, Parkett, ARTnews and several other distinguished publications.

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