

Art in America

KLARA KRISTALOVA

Lehmann Maupin and Perrotin

Klara Kristalova's crackle-glazed stoneware figures reference both traditional porcelain Dresden dolls and their kitschier cousins, Hummels. The Prague-born, Sweden-based artist recently showed 24 new works at Lehmann Maupin and Perrotin. Crudely painted and roughly shaped, Kristalova's sculptures, many the size of a child, play off of the low-brow associations of her medium. In a 2012 filmed interview, Kristalova stated, "Glazed ceramic was a despised material in my education . . . and for me that was good, because I was not into making important art. I wanted to do something different, and more playful, more close to myself."

At Lehmann Maupin, the exhibition "Big Girl Now" delved into Kristalova's ongoing exploration of female identities as they morph through childhood, adolescence and womanhood. Positioned at the entrance was *The Invisible* (2014), a 4-foot-tall girl with dark shoulder-length hair and a featureless face. Appearing like a clumsy, somewhat cartoonish version of Degas's 1922 *The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer*, she wears a pink blouse, gray skirt and Converse sneakers. As with all the work, there is no modeling to indicate musculature—arms and legs are tubular. In the main gallery, a large black plinth—an ersatz stage—contained 10 other figures. Kristalova has previously used scale to create a particular dynamic between her work and the viewer; here, the plinth required visitors to look up at the sculptures, elevating their status. The best pieces employ allegory, and allude to womanhood in various states of becoming. *Keyhole Woman* (2013) has a large keyhole-shape cavity in her back. Is she waiting to be peered through, or asking to be unlocked? *Young Girl Growing* (2013) depicts a figure with branches ascending from her torso; she holds one as if it causes her discomfort. *Petrified* (2013) depicts a female head. Large and awkward, it is painted to resemble stone, recalling the *moai* statues on Easter Island and perhaps suggesting the psychic stasis of objectification.

The Perrotin exhibition, titled "Underworld," presented 13 works (all 2014) on individual white plinths of varying heights. The pieces showcased Kristalova's Scandinavian reverence for the natural world and contained the artist's familiar motifs, including animal-human hybrids, masks and doubles. Adding complexity to the creepy cuteness of the sculptures—which often seem like a child-woman's neutered scream embodied in clay—was a new, subtle suggestion of adult sexuality. In *Owl Woman*, the figure is seated on her pedestal, legs crossed, wearing a black cocktail dress and ankle boots. Her round white head, beaked and textured with feathers, is that of an owl. The piece brings to mind Pauline Réage's 1954 novel *The Story of O*, which culminates in the protagonist, O, being tied to the ground wearing only an owl mask. The mask, which seems to symbolize the freedom of birds, illustrates the irony inherent in the character's submission: O feels most free in her sexual enslavement and abdication of self. Another work features a circus trainer wielding a whip over a seated bear; it's provocatively titled *Marriage*. The bear's posture echoes the owl woman's, and the countenances of both are more human than animal.



Klara Kristalova:
The Invisible, 2014
glazed stoneware,
47% by 14% by 11%
inches; at Lehmann
Maupin.

Kristalova sculpts, paints, glazes and kiln-fires her work entirely herself in her Swedish woodland studio, and the extremely insular, repetitive and personal nature of her figures can limit their capacity for expansive storytelling. Seen en masse, one wonders if, and when, the artist's repertoire will expand beyond her forest-dwelling friends and avatars. Her newer direction toward adult-oriented themes of dominance and submission just might clear a path out of the woods.

—Aimee Walleston

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

ART IN AMERICA 159