

Fantastical Fortitude and Utter Uneasiness: Art Historic Dialogues of Hybridity, Otherness, and Femininity in Shary Boyle's Porcelain Sculpture *Snowball*

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Shary Boyle's diverse interdisciplinary practice is one that engages in artistic dialogue with prominent art movements that took root from the eighteenth to the twentieth century within Western culture. Although this aspect of Boyle's work is not usually discussed by researchers and critics, these active-cross communications play an important role in her oeuvre, conflating styles, ideas, imagery and materials. The juxtapositions within her work, aim to create connections in order to express new configurations of identity, the individual, and his/her relationship to the collective narratives and ideologies of history. It is therefore evident, that her work instils notions of hybridity, ambiguity and the unease of in-betweens.¹ In the following discussion of Boyle's porcelain sculpture *Snowball* (2006), it is imperative to consider the work within a contemporary context characterized by the resurgence of craft and decorative art movements.² Drawing inspiration from William Morris's 1888 essay *The Revival of Handicraft*, which states that "it is impossible to exclude socio-political questions from the considerations of aesthetics," this paper will examine the cultural, racial, and gender-based questions provoked by Boyle's *Snowball*.³

As *Canadian Art* editor Lorissa Sengara notes, Boyle's practice is extremely diverse; it is a practice that includes drawing, painting, live collaborative perfor-

mance, light-based projection installations, and as previously noted: porcelain sculpture.⁴ In utilizing such diverse media; Boyle's oeuvre engages with both contemporary and historical visual vocabularies. Her work consistently and often simultaneously evokes the ideas and visual styles permeating art movements, such as Rococo, Chinoiserie, Baroque, Gothic Revival, Arts and Crafts, and Art Nouveau.⁵ As curator Matthew Brower points out, Boyle's work can be seen within a growing trend in contemporary art that "re-engage[s] with tradition, [through] not simply a shallow and traditional look, but a return to historical classical sources."⁶ In Boyle's engagement with art historical discourse, acknowledges how century-old ideas continue to resonate today within both art and daily life. *Snowball* in particular offers a salient example of Boyle's strategy at work. The work depicts a female figure with animal and insect details; the sculpture instills notions of otherness, hybridity, and femininity, revealing a conscious dialogue with historical discourse. Conflating Chinoiserie and Rococo, *Snowball* produces a critical space for the viewer to re-examine and relate to these concepts.

In order to discuss *Snowball's* relationship to Chinoiserie and Rococo it is necessary to explore the significance of the porcelain medium in European art history. Boyle's interest in sculpture developed in tandem with her research on German porcelain production, more specifically the work of J.J. Kändler (1706-1775): a sculptor known for his porcelain figurines that recreate festivity scenes of high society.⁷ Like most European porcelain work of the period, Kändler's practice can be classified as Chinoiserie: a style reputed to conflate imagined and borrowed Eastern aesthetics and European visual motifs.⁸ As noted by Hinton and Jackson, it was heavily influenced by the preceding Rococo style, celebrated for its natural motifs, asymmetrical composition and elaborate decorative elements.⁹ The two styles often overlapped and were frequently employed as the preferred aesthetic within domestic settings.¹⁰ As art historian Elaine Paterson notes, the aesthetics of Rococo, especially Chinoiserie, are symptomatic of the developing European Orientalism, where 'Asian' is defined as the exotic 'Other'.¹¹ Paterson goes on to suggest that this discourse emerged in tandem with an idealized image of European femininity, defined as "elegant, refined, fragile, and beautiful," evident characteristics that are synonymous with the porcelain medium.¹²

Boyle's *Snowball*, currently housed in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, engages with both of these discourses. Consisting of a mere twenty-four centime-

tres in height, this free-standing female figurine, utilizes enamel, porcelain and lustre as its defining media.¹³ Encrusted with small white flowers, her body is entirely concealed by this cascading floral parade, while exposing only her eyes and nose to the viewer. Leaning back slightly, she gazes upwards as her erect pose is evocative of propriety and sensuality. Her left hand leans against the mouth of a large bird as her right hand touches the tail of another resting against her hip. Leafy green vines entwine her body, waist and neck, as a large butterfly crawls down the front of her skirt. Where one might expect to find her feet; a lone, claw-like foot emerges from a lacy slit. A bulge in her skirt further propels the peculiarity of this work. It is the juxtaposition of such elements that elicits the presence multiple unknowns. Does the sculpture represent a mysterious creature concealed by a flowery garment? Or are the flowers, bulges, and claw, constituents of a hybrid body? Perhaps she is not consumed nor concealed by nature, but rather becoming one with the other elements of the natural world.

A comparison between *Snowball* and the history of European porcelain production reveals Boyle's concern with notions of hybridity and otherness. Although not directly referencing Orientalism, Boyle draws on the concept of the 'Other' through the amalgamation of styles. It is imperative to note, that Rococo and Chinoiserie styles, are themselves, a fundamentally hybrid aesthetic.¹⁴ Boyle's use of elaborate plant and animal life shows a dialogue with Rococo, exemplified by the twisting vine surrounding the figurine's body recalling the acanthus leaf: a prominent motif of Rococo.¹⁵ The disproportionately large birds and butterfly, as well as the asymmetrical composition, are equally emblematic of both Chinoiserie and Rococo. Moreover, the encrusting effect of the white flowers enveloping her body is indicative of the grotto and rocaille textures of Rococo. The numerous references to these styles, place the artwork in a dialogue with the production of European porcelain figurines of the past, hereby marking *Snowball* an evident 'Other'. As consequence, this figurine is congruent with other racial bodies that inhabited the European Orientalist imagination of the preceding centuries. Often portrayed as having opposing qualities, these 'Othered' bodies were depicted either as elegant and regal or as contorted and subservient. Both are ultimately disempowered, as their representation as one-dimensional fictitious beings are defined by an outside force. The 'East', as imagined by European artists of the eighteenth century, consisted of a hybrid of exoticized Asian bodies, landscapes, pagoda architecture, and fantastical creatures.¹⁶ Despite being a large and diverse continent, the complexity of Asia

was supplanted by the view that it could be represented through reductive motifs. The uneasiness of hybrid visualization is expressed through European desires and fantasies, both imagined and referenced, resulting in the conceptualization of East Asian aesthetics.¹⁷

Imagined and in part real, the figure represented in *Snowball*, is also a hybrid of a woman and an entity suggestive of a monster. It is difficult to tell if she is suffocating by the floral adornment or proudly growing the flowers from her own body. Similarly, the viewer cannot be sure whether the large birds are foreboding in their advances or are amicable loving pets. Is she supported by the leafy vine surrounding her, or about to be strangled by it? Boyle engages these ever-resonating Orientalist dialogues of hybridity and 'Otherness' by emphasizing the elements of difference in the sculpture. Her unique style and vocabulary builds on and dialogues with the vocabulary of historical European porcelain figurines, whilst offering a contemporary perspective that showcases otherness in a way that brings it to the forefront of the work. Here she presents a hybrid: an imagined figure displaying a complex site of intercrossed experience, where agency is nuanced and not always clearly understood. In these ways, she forges her vocabularies with those that precede her. In the fantastical and imagined female figure of *Snowball*, Boyle further propels such dialogue founded on the discussion of 'Otherness' and hybridity. While challenging contemporary Orientalist views, the concept of hybridity and otherness are visually evidenced by her work.

Another significant element of this work is its exploration of femininity in relation to porcelain and Chinoiserie during the eighteenth century. Elaine Paterson notes that within an eighteenth century European context, women played an active role in introducing foreign exotic objects such as porcelain and china into the home.¹⁸ Paterson elaborates on the relationship between femininity and porcelain objects, noting that both women and china porcelain were regarded as objects of display, praised as "elegant, refined, fragile, and beautiful."¹⁹ The visual articulation of femininity in relation to porcelain objects, are elucidated by art historian Beth Kowaleski-Wallace in her article *Women, China, and Consumer Culture in Eighteenth-Century England:*

A woman's close proximity to china thus enabled a semiotic process which allowed her to be 'read' as a particular kind of surface: like the china she holds in her lovely hands, the woman at the tea-table is flawless and delicate. She is aes-

thetically perfect, yet also sometimes hollow and empty, waiting to be filled. Her perfect surface makes her appear superior, yet, after all, she is ultimately made of clay; she is of this world, merely mortal. [...] She can be ‘molded’ into shape, made to assume the pose or attitude that best expresses her family’s status.²⁰

The conceptualization of femininity is evidently embedded in a discussion of European porcelain china objects; a discourse apparent in Boyle’s *Snowball*. Although this female figure is thin, possesses smooth skin and delicate facial features, the endemic growth of the flowers disrupts this feminine ideal. As flowers themselves usually evoke ephemeral delicacy, an evident contrast is noted as Boyle’s flowers are strong, vibrant, and suggestive of a fortification enclosing the figure’s body. Such an exterior is evocative of strength, protection, and defence. The attributes of porcelain itself, smooth and fragile, is congruent with the nature of the flower-garb depicted. However, the strength and hardness of porcelain challenge these conceptions of femininity that reductively defines it as fragility, beauty, and elegance. In an essay by Josée Drouin-Brisebois, she discusses the way Boyle’s porcelain artwork “takes [the] craft into a psychological arena that inverts the traditional content of these types of figurines. [She is] interested in revealing the layers of class, repression, and objectification embodied by what is now generally classified as hyper-femme kitsch.” Boyle goes on to affirm that her work does indeed aim to “challenge our assumptions about fragility and the feminine.”²¹ There is an inherent ambiguity in which the agency and context entices the viewer to question whether this figure is in or out of control, consuming or being consumed, being held and supported or overtaken in fear.

Kowaleski-Wallace explores the connection of consumption in relation to the conceptualization of the feminine as construct, within eighteenth-century Europe:

Throughout the long eighteenth century, China is much more than a metaphor for the female condition. It is also a crucial reminder that femininity is an ongoing, historical construction, one subject to changing economic interests and pressures. The transformation of the female as object to the female as subject involves as well the historical construction of woman as consumer: in an age when a woman’s ‘duty’ increasingly involved her management of household resources, female patterns of consumption

became a statement about a woman's identity. [...] During an age of imperial expansion, a woman's agency to consume became both her political imperative and the potential cause of her personal demise.²²

Kowaleski-Wallace's discussion of woman as consumer are both reflected, and inverted in Boyle's sculpture. The ambiguities in the sculpture yield a complex understanding of consuming and consumption in relation to this idea of femininity. The female figure in the sculpture can be ambiguously interpreted in either way, whilst questioning the strength of the dichotomy itself; her relationship to the enveloping flora can be one of being consumed, as well as one reflecting all-consuming production. Boyle plays with this form of visual femininity and ultimately discards it as unnecessary. Her ability to push the two extremes into a place of in-betweens and thus transforms the hybrid into a strong source and site of agency.

By contextualizing Shary Boyle's porcelain-based sculpture within the history of European porcelain and china production of the eighteenth century, *Snowball* exemplifies Boyle's ability to engage in a critical dialogue with both past and present visual vocabularies. In addition, it reveals the hybridity and 'Otherness' that still haunts the Orientalist legacy. Furthermore, Boyle examines how femininity is visually constructed, as well as the relationship of female body to porcelain as medium. *Snowball's* strength lies in its ability to actively engage with century-old stereotypes still resonant in today's society. By creating an uneasy in-between in which these historically-based ideas conflate with contemporary referential expressions, we are allowed to experience and contemplate this thick psychological space in an open and useful way. Rather than didactically disengaging and disconnecting from the discourses of the past, Boyle's conflation of contemporary quotation and historical motifs allows a complex articulation of present-day realities. *Snowball* provides a space to think about our relationship to these realities and possibilities for the future, where the value of hybridity, strangeness, gender, status, race, and culture are determined less by structures of power and capital, and more by self-determination. Within an acknowledged, collective network of shared power, we see how Shary Boyle's *Snowball* actively engages with this critical dialogue of hybridity, otherness, and femininity.

Endnotes

1. Walsh 85-86.

2. Sheila Heti and Josée Drouin-Brisebois, *Otherworld Uprising* (Toronto: Conundrum Press, 2008), 27.
3. William Morris, "The Revival of Handicraft," in *The Theory of Decorative Art*, ed. Isabelle Frank (New York: Yale University Press, 2000), 169.
4. Lorissa Sangara, "Porcelain Dreams and Nightmares," *Canadian Art* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 96-98.
5. Ibid., 97.
6. Ibid., 55.
7. Clare Le Corbeiller, "German Porcelain of the Eighteenth Century," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 47, no. 4 (1990): 8.
8. Anna Jackson and Morna Hinton, *The V&A Guide to Period Styles* (London: V&A Publications, 2002), 58
9. Ibid., 50-52.
10. Ibid., 50.
11. Elaine Paterson, "Studies in the History of Craft and the Decorative Arts" Concordia University, Montreal, QC, September 13, 2011.
12. Ibid.
13. Fraser, 54.
14. Dr. Paterson, lecture, Concordia University.
15. Jackson and Hilton, 50.
16. Paterson
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, "Women, China, and Consumer Culture in Eighteenth-Century England," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 2 (1995/1996): 159.
21. Heti and Drouin-Brisebois, 31.
22. Kowaleski-Wallace, 165.