



KEVIN SNIPES
UNCONTAINED

January 22–February 26, 2015

List Gallery
Swarthmore College

*I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –*

*Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of eye –
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –*

—Emily Dickinson

Kevin Snipes: Containing Possibilities

By Andrea Packard

I have been delighted to organize *Kevin Snipes: Uncontained* and this accompanying catalog, which were made possible by the Marjorie Heilman Visiting Artist Fund and the Kaori Kitao Endowment for the List Gallery. We are grateful to both the Heilman family and Kaori Kitao for enabling us to engage with such an accomplished and innovative artist.

When scheduling exhibitions at the List Gallery, the Swarthmore College art faculty and I look for artists who embody the highest standards of craftsmanship, innovation, and conceptual rigor. Recognizing such a paragon in Kevin Snipes, we also realized that his artwork would particularly inform Swarthmore’s upper level ceramics course titled The Container as Architecture.

This intriguing topic of study also speaks to a broader audience. For, of course, we all live in varied containers, including the classrooms we study in, the bedrooms we sleep in, the body we inhabit, the institutions we participate in by chance or by choice, and the person we imagine we are. Too often, we are overly contained by thought structures such as racial stereotypes. Kevin Snipes’ graphic images of figures and the elasticity of his sculptural clay forms call attention to the way such structures are both inherited and created.

Like other important contemporary artists, Snipes helps us reconsider and transform those age-old oppositions that underlie ideological structures: high and low, male and female, “us” and “them”—the list goes on. He critiques such oppositions by deftly blending diverse languages including ceramics, sculpture, drawing, cartooning, and painting. He defies oppressive or hierarchical habits of thinking by being a multiplier of meanings and differences, crafting and embellishing the different facets of his containers in ways that invite us to move away from fixed viewpoints and rigid notions of identity.

Moving around Snipes’ bulbous and colorful porcelain vessels, such as *Boxer*, we see that each side of the container is distinct. His figures simultaneously bend to accommodate the clay surfaces on which they are painted and stretch in ways that disrupt the symmetry and predictability of traditional vases and boxes. In *Three Girls*, Snipes paints figures on a three-sided vase so that their forms torque and interpenetrate,

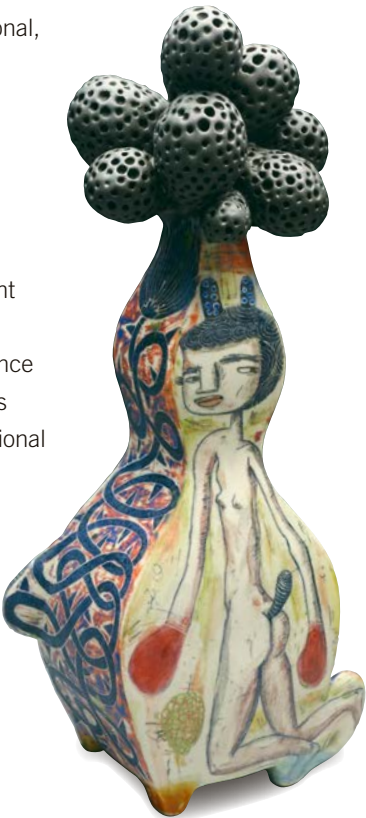
suggesting a dance in which identities alternately merge and separate. The vase has an opening at the top that suggests something of its interior space, but that space is not a vacancy to be filled with water and flowers. Nor does the form remain static, like a decorative object. Instead, *Three Girls* is slyly asymmetrical, urban and urbane, and animated with a life force that cannot be contained.

Similarly, *Braids*, combines multiple views and unexpected juxtapositions that challenge habitual ways of seeing the human body—the primary container of cultural identity. The dark black face of a man on one side and the head of a nude woman on the opposite side are both crowned by glorious braids. Their braids extend up the “neck” of the vessel and intertwine in a single bouquet. In contrast to the neutral or wary expressions of the figures, Snipes paints the narrow tapering sides of the sculpture with brightly colored spheres that seem to levitate like balloons and merge with the massive crown of hair. Conveying multiple notions and emotions, the work is simultaneously male and female, poignant and festive.

Like *Braids*, numerous other works culminate in a voluptuous crown of hair, a form that the artist likens to a hovering black cloud. Beneath this cloud, the figures in *Boxer* and *Animal* sprout horns and tails—stark reminders of institutionalized oppression and the bigoted privileging of White as normative and Black as “other,” or less than human. Such images provoke profound sadness, yet Snipes’ ingenuity in recombining and transforming ethnicized images conveys a

countervailing spirit of levity, spontaneity, and critical self-consciousness. Snipes’ intimate scale, vernacular drawing style, and unconventional forms further encourage a slower, more nuanced consideration of the vessels’ multiple viewpoints and their wide range of imagery, from the decorative to the provocative.

In her essay, “Kevin Snipes: Suspended Discretions,” Syd Carpenter relates the artist’s creative strategies to varied historical and contemporary contexts. She points out that like Aaron MacGruder, creator of *The Boondocks* comic strip, Snipes deploys a multilingual vernacular approach that is simultaneously confessional, urban, idiosyncratic, and ironic. I would add that like Pablo Picasso, another multiplier of meanings who subverts hierarchical structures, Snipes combines different viewpoints in ways that convey the elastic resilience of the psyche. He speaks truth to power with emotional authenticity and insight, but it is his genius for invention that convinces us: we too can change.



Boxer, 2015, porcelain, glazes, underglaze, and oxide wash

Kevin Snipes: Suspended Discretions

By Syd Carpenter

Kevin Snipes records encrypted conversations and implied narratives on small curiously designed porcelain pots. Using humor and conceit as his methods, his drawings depict a cast of performing cartoonish figures in a display of contorted gestures and suggestive signals. Elaborately coiffed heads bend at right angles, eyes dart, sinuous limbs hang limp or twist improbably. However received, the response to Kevin Snipes' charmed and unsettling offspring ranges from the sympathetic to the hilarious.

Since the mid-19th century, when humorous cartoon caricatures first called out the antics of politicians and their crew, the cartoon has served as a vehicle for the delivery of truth, lies and opinion. Pre-dating the satirizing cartoonists, the informant court jester employed humor to provoke or mediate the actions of a capricious monarch. And not unlike that medieval master of contradictions, the sly fool, Snipes' pots hint at vulnerability while implying the dangerous and obscene. Or maybe more closer to home, a Kevin Snipes pot is like a private note on folded paper, partially sealed, but too tempting to ignore. When viewing a Snipes pot,

our discretion is suspended, as we become voyeurs, onlookers, betting on deliberately concealed narrative outcomes. A fool's game indeed. But the attraction to these pots is undeniable and one view invites another.

Kevin's pots converse with various historical and contemporary voices. From a contemporary perspective, Aaron McGruder, creator of *The Boondocks* comic strip, and British potter, Grayson Perry, come to mind. Like McGruder, Snipes uses a pop culture idiom, the comic strip, with its highly graphic style and accessible appeal to explore the interior experiences and perceptions of young African American males. Both artists take it personally. Although to be sure, Kevin Snipes' use of the ceramic pot, an object associated with both domesticity on one end of the spectrum and ritual on the other, is an unlikely if not shrewd choice for engaging complicated if not downright thorny issues. No one expects challenging content from their porcelain. That would be in violation of its association with all things delicate refined and un-offensive. Graphic depictions of the unseemly or disturbing are more often reserved for lower caste or lower temperature clays, making Snipes' pieces that much more subversively appealing. Which is reason to suggest an alliance with Grayson Perry's confessional narratives on large exquisite and elaborately painted pots that also explore spaces of humor and uncertainty. For both Perry and Snipes, locating their stories on a pot amplifies the intensity.

Despite his use of materials and processes originating in the distant past, he doesn't overtly borrow visual cues from his predecessors although the knowledgeable eye

will note resonant connections. Each distinctive in form, the pots are clearly hand built porcelain under mishima and scraffito designs, methods going back through centuries and across cultures. His brush is evident in the application of color and mark, his skill taken for granted. These visually loaded objects, so contemporary in their appeal and covert confessional content are also links to a traditional, identifiable past. Idiosyncratic shapes elevated on short feet recall 17th-century Japanese Oribe ware. Small scale, contrasting blocks of color, textile patterns, and brushed stroked signs combine to complete the connection.

Greek and Roman red on black pots are also distant cousins. On these, ideally proportioned figures glide through ample space to illustrate chosen aspects of heroic exploits and the serenity of domestic life. They are, after all, commemorative in their intent. In contrast, Snipes' figures exist in confinement and compression, their movements limited by the double-sided contours of the irregularly shaped containers. A Snipes figure is a distorted inhabitant of an ambiguous space, a mischievous genie trapped in a bottle. Either enabled or inhibited by its own anatomy, the figure is an implicated player in a strange but perhaps familiar narrative. The details of the narrative are suggested, but tightly edited by the shape of the pot and the figures' contortionist stance. Left to their own intuitive devices and/or baggage, viewers are on their own. But make no mistake: Snipes' pots are of their time. Commemoratives they are not. Kevin Snipes' pots remind us that our personal script is in progress and the intrigue of uncertainty guaranteed.



Tower, 2015, porcelain, glazes, underglaze, and oxide wash, 11 x 4.5 x 3 inches
See title page for an alternate view of *Tower*.



Birthday Cake (two views), 2015, porcelain, glazes, underglaze, and oxide wash, 10.5 x 7.5 x 4.5 inches





Triple Decker (two views), 2015, porcelain, glazes, underglaze, and oxide wash, 9 x 5 x 3 inches



Three Girls (three views), 2015, porcelain, glazes, underglaze, and oxide wash, 12 x 6 x 5 inches



Peanut Gallery (two views), 2015, porcelain, glazes, underglaze, and oxide wash, 13.5 x 6.5 x 4 inches



Stack, 2015, porcelain, glazes, underglaze, and oxide wash, 13 x 5 x 3 inches



Braids (two views), 2015, porcelain, glazes, underglaze, and oxide wash, 14 x 6.5 x 3.5 inches. Right: Photo by Andrea Packard





Crown (two views), 2014, porcelain, glazes, underglaze, and oxide wash, 11 x 6 x 4 inches



Datz Dope Box (two views), 2014, porcelain, glazes, underglaze, and oxide wash, 8.5 x 6 x 4.5 inches



Thug Mask, 2015, porcelain, glazes, underglaze, and oxide wash, 11 x 6.5 x 4.5 inches

