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# 'Shary Boyle: Outside the Palace of Me' Review: A Theatrical New York Debut

At the Museum of Arts and Design, the Canadian artist proves to be a keen storyteller through ceramics, videos and even an animatronic puppeteer.

By *Brian P. Kelly*

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Installation view of 'Shary Boyle: Outside the Palace of Me' at the Museum of Arts and Design PHOTO: MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN

## New York

Shary Boyle is a lot of things: sculptor, painter, draftsman, performer, filmmaker. But above all she's a storyteller. That is abundantly clear in "Outside the Palace of Me," the Canadian artist's solo show at the Museum of Arts and Design that warrants as many descriptions as she does: transportive, theatrical, whimsical and captivating, to name just a few.



Installation view of the exhibition featuring the work 'Procession' PHOTO: MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN

Curated by Sequoia Miller of Toronto's Gardiner Museum, where the show originated, and organized here by MAD's Elissa Auther, the exhibition—spread across two floors and comprising some 70 objects—is an applause-worthy New York museum debut for the 51-year-old artist. Stepping out of the elevator the viewer is plunged into darkness as three faces made of porcelain, stoneware and terracotta stare out at them. This prelude, a section called “Backstage,” sets the tone for the entire show: We're about to be transported into a world of performance where we are among the *dramatis personae*. And with no wall labels and just a Playbill-like handout as our guide, we're tasked with writing the script to the show ourselves. What follows is a celebration of bygone forms—sideshowes, silent films, Punch-and-Judy puppetry, cabaret—that grapples with contemporary issues.

Passing through a literal curtain into the brightness of the show feels like we've been thrown onstage midact, as music from a curated playlist fills the space. Scored exhibitions rarely work, but this is the rare exception, with tracks ranging from Elliott Smith to Anderson.Paak to John Prine noticeably coloring our perception of things, shifting works from brooding to playful to ominous and back again.

This is where Ms. Boyle begins to truly unfold her stories, some emotionally straightforward and plainspoken, like a Thornton Wilder work, others more mercurial and elusive, like an experimental Beckett production. An example of the former, her “Procession” is a clear reference to the Black Lives Matter



Shary Boyle's 'Centering' (2021) PHOTO: PATEL BROWN GALLERY

protests in the wake of George Floyd's killing, with dark stoneware figures marching in a line, menaced by armed forces in combat gear. But the surrealist mermaid crawling across the ground, the top-hatted gentleman in a wheelchair, the kneeling flag bearers—all these expand the aperture of the piece, taking in both recent racial-justice actions and those of the past; anti-nuclear marches of the '80s and second-line parades in New Orleans; Carnival and Alexander Calder's "Circus." Walking around and studying these diminutive figures (most less than a foot tall), we wonder what they're celebrating or objecting to, and what our role is in

the affair—observer, participant, detractor?

Slipperier are Ms. Boyle's works on paper. Symbolically charged, their deeper meanings seem to leap forward then dart away like a dancer flitting in and out of a spotlight. "Punch" (2019) shows the traditionally abusive puppet clad in a nun's habit, smiling menacingly as its papery, spotted hands clutch a rosary. A commentary on the history of misogyny? The performative aspects of religion? The ways powerful systems have been used as cover for nefarious deeds? Flit, flit, flit.



Shary Boyle's 'The Collaboration' (2019) PHOTO: PATEL BROWN GALLERY

Identity is a central theme throughout the works here. “The Collaboration” (2019) shows a trio of colorful women of various shapes and sizes painting a grayscale figure. Inspired by a 1960s “paint-in” at a Toronto coffeehouse, it’s both a paean to self-acceptance but also a reminder that our own personality is shaped by others. In a similar vein, “Judy” (2021) is a multi-armed, lifesize, animatronic puppeteer. Operating several characters that represent archetypal women—the Activist, the Old Wife, the Witch, the Worrier—she playfully reveals the multitudes we all contain while also being constrained, and in this case literally manipulated, by forces outside our control. And “Centering” (2021) extends the idea of control: A sequined, skirted sculpture sits atop a coin-operated pottery wheel, turning into a whirling dervish when powered on.

The ceramic sculptures in a section titled “The Cast” are each a little triumph. A colorful peacock spider perches on top of a jet-black hand with dazzling nails in one. In another a lustrous silver fountain spills over the heads of three figures colorfully costumed in a nod to Meissen porcelain. Elsewhere a raw terracotta character modeled on a Hummel figurine but with the head of a creature from an illuminated manuscript strides by a simple fence, blending artforms low and high. (A stumble here: These sculptures are set close to a wall, so it’s impossible to circle them and completely explore the many delightful details that make them so enchanting.)



A detail of Shary Boyle's 'Judy' (2021) PHOTO: PATEL BROWN GALLERY

The second floor of the show is sparser, but Ms. Boyle's narrative gifts are on full view. Projections inspired by shadow puppetry, which she has executed using a simple, classroom-style overhead projector and colored transparencies, provide bite-size vignettes, some funny, some spooky. A girl on a swing zips through the air too fast, launching off her dress—and skin—leaving a skeleton behind. Moths are drawn to the warm light of an oil lamp. A bat does a little dance.



Installation view of the show highlighting Ms. Boyle's projections PHOTO: MUSEUM OF ARTS AND DESIGN

Also here are several of the artist's films, which are often inspired by the silent cinema of the past. The most affecting is "Forever Young Love" (1999) in which Ms. Boyle's white-gloved hands act out a passionate romance, only to have one of the lovers tragically die, the mourning survivor burying the remains and planting a final kiss on the grave. While the concept may be simple the execution is transcendent, and brought me to the brink of tears. Who would have thought

that gloves could stir such emotion? That is the magic of theater—and of Shary Boyle.

**Shary Boyle: Outside the Palace of Me**

*Museum of Arts and Design, through Feb. 25, 2024*

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