Forbes

Art To See Now In LA: Russell, Nevelson, Fujita
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Kleiner Schaeferhun by Robert Russell, 2022

Over the last two months, I saw some great art exhibitions in LA that you should know about:

Robert Russell, Anat Ebgi Wilshire Gallery, Robert Russell: Porzellan Manufaktur Allach (on view through April 22, 2023).

Robert Russell's hyper-realistic large-scale paintings of German porcelain figurines stand out from work by his contemporaries as representational but not figurative. What's also striking is that Russell's paintings are not so much about painting itself as about the dissonance between image and subject.

Porzellan Manufaktur Allach depicts porcelain ceramic objects such as birds, a rabbit, a flappy-eared puppy, a standing bear, and German Shepards sitting regally, or depicted happily in profile, tongue hanging out.

Although a painterly investigation of the figurines, their surfaces, and how they refract light, Russell's work is conceptual in nature, in that his works achieve greater meaning when we learn their context.

As described in the exhibition text, these figurines have a sordid history: "The Allach Porcelain Manufacturing company was established in 1935 just outside of Munich. The factory was funded by Henrich Himmler of the German Reich in order to produce the finest porcelain objects celebrating purity, Aryanism, the occult, and Germanic culture to give as gifts to the SS Soldiers. As the war progressed, the factory lost its labor source and moved production to the Dachau concentration camp where Jewish prisoners, amongst other slaves, were forced to continue their production. Until they were liberated in 1945, these prisoners, living in unimaginable circumstances created figurines of such things as puppies, sheep, rabbits, and perfect Aryan children."

Knowing this, it is impossible to see the paintings the same way. The very seeming docility or happiness of the animal figurines, suffused as they are with an aura of domestic bliss, become charged with evil once seen in context of the Nazi regime. Suddenly those nice German shepherds are understood to be the same vicious dogs used by the Nazis against Jews and others in the ghettos, concentration camps and extermination camps. Set against vacant, horizonless backgrounds, the figurines present as sanitized belying the fictional narratives of the Nazi regime and their desire to create a "pure" "Aryan" race, free of what they called "filth and vermin" (i.e. the Jews, the Roma, the disabled, homosexuals) – making Russell's paintings all the more powerful.

Finally, it is also worth noting that at a time when a good deal of contemporary art, curation, and art criticism is focused on issues of identity, particularly among persons of color, ethnic minorities, and endangered communities, Russell is one of the few contemporary American artists whose work grapples with being a Jewish artist. In creating work that confronts Nazi lies while reminding us of how such evil fictions was manufactured, literally and figuratively in collectible art objects, Russell expands how we think of "Jewish Art" in contemporary work, giving the show a lasting haunting resonance.