

CURRENTS | Q&A

Beth Katleman on Her Ceramic Curiosities



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

By PENELOPE GREEN
Published: January 12, 2011

Beth Katleman is a ceramic artist who plays with dainty forms and techniques, subverting traditional shapes to her own mischievous ends. Her delicate earthenware reliefs in wild colors recall the 18th-century porcelain rooms of European royalty — except when you look closely, you might see the Campbell Soup kids brandishing a safety razor among the rococo flowers and vines, or the Pillsbury Doughboy tucked inside an ornate doorway.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

[Enlarge This Image](#)

In the late 1990s, Ms. Katleman was invited by the John Michael Kohler Arts Center to be an artist in residence. She performed her work at Kohler, the kitchen-and-bath company that is a major funder of the center, embellishing sinks, bidets and toilets with an explosion of earthenware reliefs in Jordan Almond colors. In 1998, one toilet made its way into the Christmas windows at Barneys New York; that same year, another was included in a show called "Bathroom" at the Thomas Healy Gallery, nestled in between work by [Andy Warhol](#) and [John Waters](#).

Recently, she has been working in porcelain, casting cheap toys and curios — grinning snails, fake Barbies from China, thumbnail-size pencil sharpeners molded into world monuments — in ghostly white ceramic, and

- RECOMMEND
- TWITTER
- E-MAIL
- PRINT
- REPRINTS
- SHARE

Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com.
[Privacy Policy](#) | [What's This?](#)

[Log In With Facebook](#)

What's Popular Now

Norma Lyon, the 'Butter-Cow Lady,' Dies at 81



Many Variables in a New York Math Museum



MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED VIEWED

1. Findings: A Release Valve for Cyclists' Unrelenting Pressure
2. Across Europe, Irking Drivers Is Urban Policy
3. Opinion: Shyness: Evolutionary Tactic?
4. Teacher Grades: Pass or Be Fired
5. New Drugs Fight Prostate Cancer, but at High Cost
6. One Math Museum, Many Variables
7. The Hidden Route to Machu Picchu
8. Roger Cohen: America, Awaken
9. The Health Consumer: Sit Up Straight. Your Back Thanks You.
10. Norma Lyon, the 'Butter-Cow Lady,' Dies at 81

[Go to Complete List »](#)



Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

creating tiny tableaus from them. Next week, she is installing "Folly" at the Jane Hartsook Gallery on Jones Street, setting 50 miniature landscapes on a wall painted bright turquoise. It looks like the wallpaper in an English country estate, pastoral and graphic, except that the three-dimensional landscapes cast spooky shadows and, as your eye adjusts, you find all of Ms. Katleman's favorite kitschy objects rendered as precisely as Lladro figurines.

I know this is old history, but before the Kohler center's invitation, had you ever worked in toilets before?

I had not! For a while, these were the things I was best known for. I thought, Oh no. I'll be forever known as the toilet artist. I have one set in our apartment. Sammy and Natasha, my 8-year-olds, think everyone's mom makes toilets.

To clarify, Kohler invites a few artists a year to use their factory to make sculpture; it's called the Arts/Industry program. It doesn't have anything to do with their product line, but I just really wanted to make a toilet.

I'll bet toilets pose special challenges as a medium. What were they?

Well, when they are fired, they are like liquid glass. I think they fire at 2,500 degrees. They hand it to you right out of the mold, and I just piled stuff on. They told me none of it would come out, that the toilet would warp or bend. When it didn't, the Kohler engineer brought his boss to the studio. They couldn't believe it hadn't collapsed. Yes, it's a challenging medium.

Your new medium puts you in terrific company, with artists who mess around with wallpaper and also with toile, which your landscapes recall. I am remembering when Virgil Marti made wallpaper from the school photos of boys who had bullied him in junior high, and the toile embroidered by Richard Saja, a Brooklyn textile artist, who stitches cockroaches and flames and other impish images onto pillows and sofas.

There's been a tradition of artists inspired by wallpaper. It's so polite. It's domestic and cozy. You think, English country houses. You feel comfortable. You are used to feeling like it's in the background, and that it's safe. So, as an artist, you can use that to mess with people's heads. Wallpaper puts people's defenses down, and you can exploit that a little bit.

Where do you find all the gewgaws for your pieces? Do you have a favorite flea market?

Since the 26th Street flea markets are no longer, I shop online. I get immersed in these weird subcultures, like the fairy garden Web sites where little old ladies who make fairy gardens find the tiny bridges and such.

The World War II diorama sites are good, and ones for souvenir miniatures — there are whole Web sites devoted to miniature buildings. My miniature buildings are from pencil sharpeners. Friends will e-mail me, "There's a sharpener of Mount Rushmore on eBay!"

I also collect vintage Playmobil plants. I find contemporary ones in my kids' toys, and at kids' birthday parties. You don't want to invite me over.

"Folly" runs from Jan. 20 to Feb. 17 at the Jane Hartsook Gallery, at Greenwich House Pottery, 16 Jones Street, second floor; Ms. Katleman's "Folly" sculptures will be for sale (\$2,400 to \$4,500 each). Information: (212) 991-0003, greenwichhouse.org or

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 20, 2011

An article last Thursday about Beth Katleman, a ceramic artist, misidentified the group that provided her with an artist-in-residence position in the late 1990s. It was the John Michael Kohler Arts Center — not Kohler, the kitchen and bath company, which helps finance the arts center.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: January 25, 2011

A Spare Times entry in some editions on Friday about a display of 50 miniature landscapes by the ceramic artist Beth Katleman at Greenwich House Pottery in Manhattan misstated the address. It is 16 Jones Street, not 16 Great Jones Street.

A version of this article appeared in print on January 13, 2011, on page D2 of the New York edition.

E-MAIL

PRINT

REPRINTS

IN THEATERS
JULY 15

 Get 50% Off The New York Times & Free All Digital Access.

Get Free E-mail Alerts on These Topics

[Ceramics and Pottery](#)

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



SCIENCE »



A Release for Cyclists' Unrelenting Pressure

N.Y. / REGION »



For Many Immigrants, Marriage Vote Resonates

OPINION »



Op-Ed: No Trash, No Crash

OPINION »

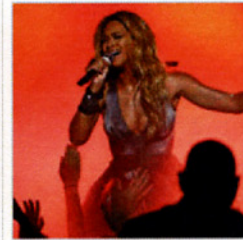
Bloggingheads: "Islamic" Terrorism
Faiza Patel of the Brennan Center for Justice and Arun Kundnani of the Open Society Institute on the sources of terrorism.

BUSINESS »



Reaching for the Wheel

MUSIC »



A Farewell (for Now) to Old Selves