



CLAUDIA ALVAREZ HAD MANY GROUP SHOWS IN 2012; a fall solo show at Scott White Contemporary Art in La Jolla, California; work at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Nebraska; and work at Art Toronto and Art Miami through her Dublin Gallery, Blue Leaf Gallery. This review will discuss the work exhibited at Scott White and Art Miami by appraising the artist's themes, ceramics techniques and background.

To show children without clothes or barely clothed

Top left: *Girl with Gun and Pit Bull*. 2012. Glaze, underglaze and oil on ceramic. Sizes varied.
Top right: *Surrender (Installation View)*. 2012. Underglaze and oil on ceramic. Sizes varied.
Below: *Pendencia (The Quarrel)*. 2012. Ceramic. 33.5 in. x 8 ft x 12 ft.



A Review by Jan Garden Castro

fighting – showing aggression or vulnerability – is to highlight the depth to which violence pervades the American culture. They are smaller than life-sized or the sizes of infants, increasing the psychological sense that these are, in fact, defenceless little humans. Their fighting or bullying each other demonstrates learned behaviour. The focus on girls with guns may seem at first like role reversal, but I remember growing up imitating the hero/villain scenarios seen on TV when I was young, so this has been going on for a long time.

As anecdotal support for Alvarez's strong and original direction in ceramics, I just saw *The Sheik and I*, a film about American ignorance of Arab culture made by Iranian American Caveh Zahedi. In this irony-filled film, Zahedi is making a movie in which his toddler carries a toy machine gun and leads some East Indian boys who are protesting Arab injustice against Indians. In a similar vein, poet Lisa Fay Coutely, recently awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry, opens her poem "On Home" with these lines about her sons:

*All winter long my sons have pointed guns
in my face and with their mouths popped
the triggers. The oldest wants to spoon me...¹*



Right: **Bully 1**. 2012. Glaze, underglaze and oil on ceramic. 30.5 x 17 x 13 in.

Below: **Pendencia (The Quarrel)**. 2012. Ceramic. 33.5 in. x 8 ft x 12 ft.





Left: *Kid with Hoodie*. 2012. Fabric on ceramic. 35.5 x 15 x 11 in.
 Right: *Kid with Cape*. 2012. Mixed media on ceramic. 33 x 16 x 15.5 in.
 Above images from Blue Leaf Gallery at Art Miami 2012.

These are stories about normal children whose parents are letting the world know that their toddlers think it is fun to play with guns, to act out aggressive and other behaviours.

Alvarez's ceramic figures are not all girls; boys, dogs and other subjects exist. Yet focusing on girls shows that girls imitate all adult behaviour – sometimes the worst adult behaviour – and teaches us not just that we have to be better role models but that we need to address cultural norms that accept and even reward violence and rage. The pink hoodie is a feminised version of clothing that sometimes is worn by sinister characters, rap artists, or even victims of gun violence (Trayvon Martin); above all, the hoodie is a 'street' culture garment even if it is now 'fashionable'. Similarly, the cape was once standard in horror or cloak and dagger movies and now it is a power fashion item. When Alvarez adds one pink or one blue piece of clothing, she even asks us to question the notion that girls should wear pink and boys blue. We do not need to stereotype ourselves.

Alvarez's white stoneware figures, from 20 to 37 inches high, start out as coils of clay (no grog) flattened to cylinders. From these she forms life-sized bodies into varied positions that stand or otherwise balance their own weight. The bodies shrink in the firing process. The first firing at low temperatures preserves the fingerprints and mark-making in the clay. For the second firing, she uses transparent underglazes and diluted colour pigments with grolleg to give the figures a shiny, watercolour-like patina.

Alvarez was born in Monterrey, Mexico but immigrated with her family to the US at the age of three. In 1999, she earned her BA from the University of California, Davis, where she studied painting with Wayne Thiebaud and learned how to mix colours. She has spent years developing her colour glazing techniques. While earning an MFA from California College of Arts, Oakland/San Francisco (2003), she met Viola Frey and studied ceramics with her student, Hedi K Ernst. Alvarez also studied glaze chemistry with John Toki.

Claudia Alvarez has been awarded artist residencies at FUTUR in Switzerland; the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska; China Century Entertainment Inc, in Shanghai, China; Gruber Jez Foundation in Cholul, Mexico; and AIR Vallauris in Vallauris, France. Her work has been shown in group and solo exhibitions worldwide. Her work is in the permanent collections of the National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago, Illinois; the Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, Nebraska; the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo Ateneo de Yucatan, Merida, Mexico; and El Museo Latino, Omaha, Nebraska.

ENDNOTE

1. From *In the Carnival of Breathing* by Lisa Fay Coutley. Black Lawrence Press.

Jan Garden Castro (www.jancastro.com) is author of *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*, *Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne* and other books. She is Contributing Editor for *Sculpture Magazine* and has a monthly online blog "In the Studio" at Sculpture.org. Claudia Alvarez's web site is www.claudiaalvarez.org.