

# Wendy Walgate Exuberance

Article by Glenn Allison

ON HER OWN SPLENDID WEB SITE, THIS IS HOW WENDY Walgate introduces herself: "I am a ceramic artist working in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. For over 25 years, clay has been my medium and through the years, I have moved through functional work to sculptural pieces. In my studio in an old warehouse, I make accumulations of slipcast, fired animals and I play."

For a grown-up to confess publicly that, as a vocation, she plays, is almost heretical, especially in a climate of overdetermined academic intellectuality, in a field proud of technical idiosyncrasies. Yet nothing so succinctly expresses the core of Walgate's creative enterprise. It takes courage to play, really play, pleurably, in a thoroughly uninhibited fashion, for certain conditions alien to the normal adult psyche are requisite. Purpose must be obliterated, planning annulled, and constructive outcomes avoided. It requires surrender to the unknown, a state that most adults find terrifying. It leads to an embrace of the unexpected. And in the end, play fosters a penchant for fantasy if not an addiction to wonderment. Like laughter, play is extremely difficult to sustain.

From Latin we have the term *ludic*. It means literally 'playful', and refers to any philosophy where play is the prime purpose of life. *Ludic* connotes anything that is 'fun'. Not surprisingly, it shares a root with *ludicrous*: things amusing or laughable through absurdity, incongruity, exaggeration and eccentricity. The line between the two, as Walgate's work demonstrates, is rather broad and fuzzy and manic frenzy may lurk in the shadows.

Walgate's work is based not on the structural integrity of the singular ceramic object, but rather on the principle of accumulation, the intuitive piling of toy-like component parts assembled in play. Here, various adhesives are used post-firing to achieve combinative configurations. The innocence of colour and the succulence of earthenware gloss are often the rationale that brings parts together and narrative possibilities of the associated parts can imply a cohesive form. It seems initially that the paradigm of the Peaceable Kingdom, of blissful coexistence, is at work. Composition seems to continue until either exhaustion or surfeit is achieved. Frequently, the problems of surplus, overabundance and excess are implied. Stockpiling, storage and display can also



Top: *Bye Baby Bunting Cradle*. 2007. White earthenware, slipcast, glazed, vintage wooden toy cradle. 19 x 18 x 9 in.

Centre: *Play at Being*. 2007. White earthenware, slipcast, glazed vintage wooden cheese drum. 24 x 16 x 16 in.

Above: *Sleigh Ride*. 2008. White earthenware, slipcast, glazed, vintage wooden toy sleigh.



signal systemic collapse, when objects lose their original significance or cultural mooring, await the reassignment of meaning, the reinterpretation of context.

An old weathered ladder acts as a framework for a knotted, tormented clothesline strung with innumerable figurines perforated for the purpose. Both manic desperation and pent-up frustration emanate from this back-yard icon.

The components strung on the ladder, compiled according to the first appearance of the type, top to bottom, are followed here by the number of times that particular cast appears as you read down the seven rungs: cottage (3), capsicum (6), navel orange (6), snail (2), recumbent cow (2), piglet (6), fish (4), horse head (2), goose head (3), teddy bear (4), turkey (4), puppy (2), dolphin (2), squirrel (2), resting pony, butterfly (2), apple (6), rabbit (2), gargoyle (4), alligator (2), mouse (4), wolf (2), cat (2), elephant head (2), guppy (3), goose (3), sheep, kitten, frog (2), snake (2), seated pig, lamb, pony head, raccoon, egg, polar bear, monkey mother and child. Some moulds, such as the various heads, may well have been intended to produce bookends, while others seem now to be of indeterminate original purpose. Piglets, puppies, guppies and cats are cartoon-like, simplified more than other more naturalistic representations such as the kitten, alligator and polar bear; while the dolphin, cottage, snake and butterfly have been stylized to a degree by populist graphic idioms. Throughout, different scales are impulsively mixed, while colours are totally capricious. For instance, the navel oranges are never just that. Those appear in navy, lilac, turquoise, lime, aubergine and mottled mustard. Glazes can be transparent, opaque, satin, glossy, matt or patinated, lending variance to the surface value and textural appeal. Walgate adjusts her palette according to her needs, from full and vibrant polychromy to sober monochrome effects and here, the analogous range of purples through blues to greens, drawn from dreams of the Canadian prairies, slant this piece toward melancholy, testy with tension.

Importantly, Walgate's modular activity releases her from the grip of the kiln, allowing her to indulge the primacy of ideation rather than process. From the plethora of finished modules she continuously makes, she can create ensembles based on any configuration, any imaginable categorization. Currently, found objects such as old toy house furniture act as matrices to the ceramic compilations.

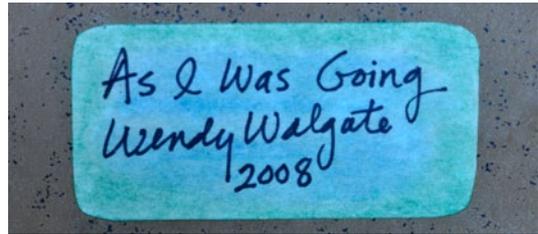
Tiny snippets of texts are collaged, sometimes on glazed surface, sometimes on the antique object, providing interpretive accuracy. For example, to reinforce the classic cautionary tale, the text of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* is applied to the back of a red boy's

*Top: Prairie Dreams Ladder. 2007. White earthenware, slip-cast, glazed, wood ladder, clothesline. 96 x 25 x 12 in.*

*Left: Horizon Mantle. White earthenware, slipcast, glazed, wooden mantle. 18 x 24 x 6 in.*



*Small Delights.* 2008. White earthenware, slipcast, glazed, 'Midwinter' dessert tray, twine, satin. 14 x 11 x 11 in.



*Top: Cry Wolf Toy Box.* 2007. White earthenware, slipcast, glazed, wooden vintage toy box. 19 x 25 x 14 in.

*Centre: Wendy Walgate Signature.*

*Above: Study on Blue Czech Pitcher.* White earthenware, slipcast, glazed, vintage Czech milk pitcher. 12 x 6 x 6 in.

tool chest dating from the 1930s. A wolf is repeated six times, threading his way through a heterogenous animal enclave. The young man at the top of the structure wears a cue card around his neck reading, 'Cry Wolf! Cry Wolf!' – an apt phrase considering the condition of the species in North America today. Such clues are miniscule, their discovery affirmative, yet they point to an ambiguity not endowed in any of the component parts.

Walgate is shrewd enough to recognize that these unlikely, at times unwieldy, accumulations mimic the *wunderkammen* that were the very origin of museum collecting in the west. They also point to successive generations of stylized animal ornaments from tourist gift shops that have populated all of our lives. Each cast is laden with personal meaning and often affected by pop symbolism, if not Disneyfied sentiment. Through combination, Walgate can torque those values so that they speak of a fecund imagination exerting its own history, while implying more serious trajectories of social criticism.

Wendy Walgate's work is transgressively flamboyant, excessively indulgent and threateningly abundant. They are the very definition of *Exuberance*.

Glenn Allison is Curator of the Thunder Bay Art Gallery in Ontario, Canada