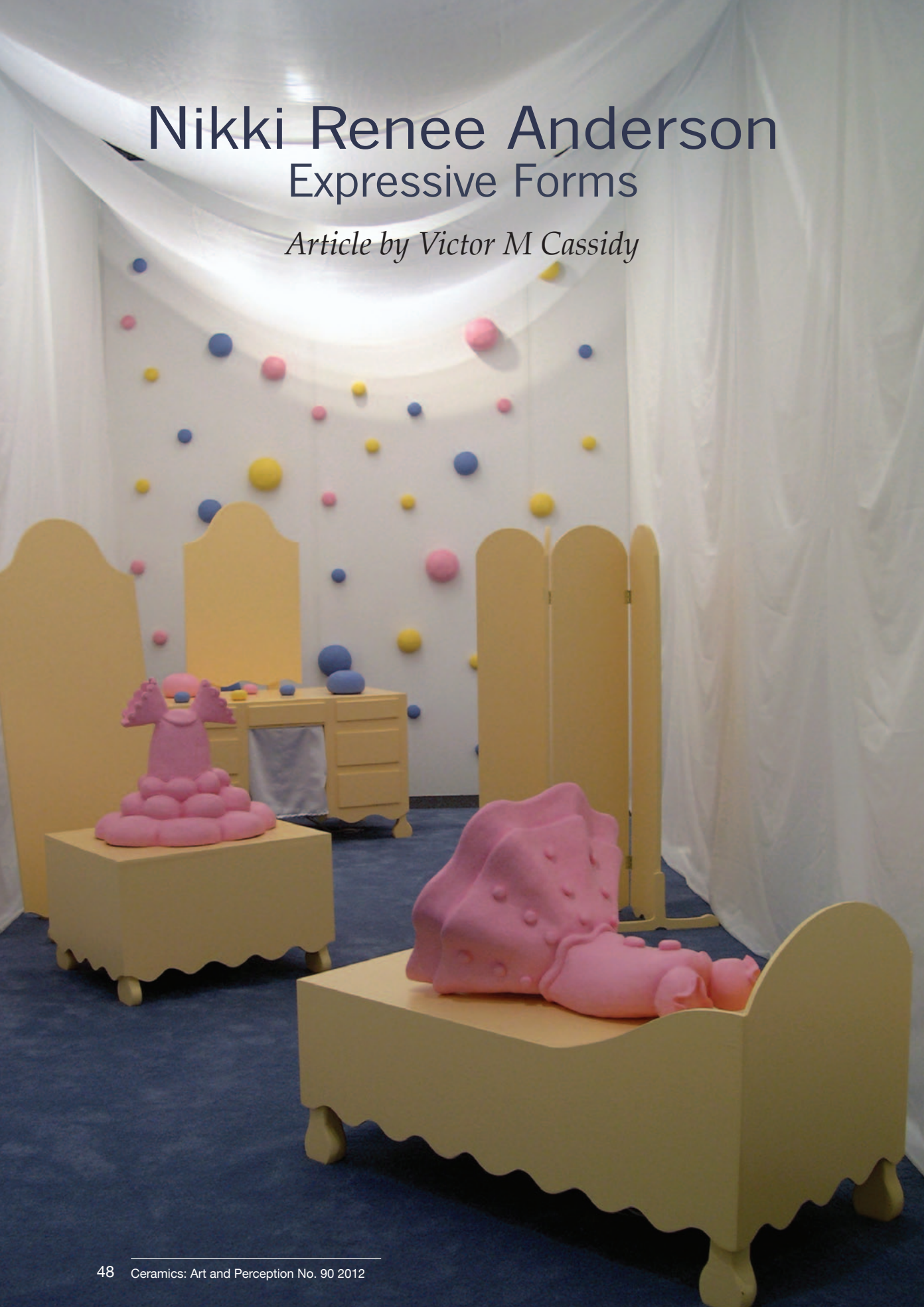


# Nikki Renee Anderson

## Expressive Forms

*Article by Victor M Cassidy*





MANY ARTISTS NEED QUIET TIME AFTER SCHOOL, sometimes years of it, to develop a personal style, perfect technical skills and learn how to market their work. Not so with Nikki Renee Anderson, who completed her MFA in 2002 and since has produced three-plus bodies of mature work. Anderson is a ceramics sculptor whose subject is the female experience. Her sculptures are typically small and she generally mounts them on the wall, often in multi-piece installations. Her round, plump forms suggest cakes, candies, pillows and plant or body parts. Rather than seeking to invent new forms, Anderson explores the expressive possibilities of her visual language. Always there is humour in her sculpture and a sense that she delights in life's pleasures.

Working with white clay, Anderson uses the coil and pinch process to make a form and finishes the surface with tools, deliberately leaving some imperfections. She bisque fires each piece, paints it with acrylic paint and then pours coloured acrylic resin over it in different ways, depending upon her expressive needs. She has painted her sculptures in a variety of colours, but mostly white.

#### PRIVATE SPACES

Trained as a sculptor in college, Anderson experimented with wood and metal before she discovered ceramic, which seemed more versatile to her. The artist's early work came out of her childhood experiences. As a little girl, she had watched – and sometimes helped – her baker father shape pastries. Later, she made sculptures whose pleasing rounded forms recall sweet rolls, cupcakes, candies and the like.

Anderson's early work also suggested girlish fantasy, social relationships among little girls and the birth of personal identity. In 2003, in a project space at Chicago's spring art fair, she exhibited *Dressing Room Dramas: Pink and Ruffled*, an ambitious room-sized installation with white fabric walls and a dark blue shag rug on the floor. Brightly coloured blue, yellow and pink domes of ceramic adorn the back wall. Inside are folding screens, flat forms that resemble old-fashioned mirrors and painted wooden children's furniture that the artist built.



Facing page: *Dressing Room Dramas: Pink and Ruffled*. 2002.

Ceramic, wood, fabric and sound. Dimensions variable.

Above left: *Cherry Desires (Detail)*. 2008.

Ceramic and acrylic. 9 x 6.5 x 6 in.

Above: *Sugar Plump #6*. 2011. Ceramic and acrylic. 10.5 x 10 x 6.

Atop the table is a ceramic sculpture with three rings of rounded forms, surmounted by a pineapple shape with flared upside-down dress forms sticking out at the top like ears. A megaphone-like sculpture emits sound and a dress/megaphone-shaped piece lies on the carpet. These objects are coloured Pepto Bismol pink, which the artist terms "pink with an attitude that's intended to make you feel queasy".

*Dressing Room Dramas* presents a private space that maps the beginnings of identity, Anderson says, because "the objects in those spaces become metaphors for identity". The megaphone-like sculpture emits the sound of soft, childish voices whispering nursery rhymes. According to the artist, the voices in this piece are based on psychological experiences. "My voice becomes representative of the voices we all hear inside of ourselves," she says, "which can be strengthening, self-doubting and eerie." *Dressing Room Dramas* is over-the-top female, but that is just what some little girls like.

Anderson explored the female experience in work that she showed at the Koehnline Art Museum near Chicago during 2007. In these sculptures, she broadened her focus to include things that women love: jewellery, cosmetics, candy and ice cream. Her *Jewel Boxes* is five small wall-mounted wooden boxes (one is a drawer) painted white. The boxes contain white ceramic sculptures with coloured acrylic resin poured over them. Anderson conveys the sense of a private experience by constructing these works so viewers must approach them to look inside.





Nikki Renee Anderson



Top: *Bulging Cherry Series (Installation View)*. 2010.  
Dimensions variable.

Above left: *Bulging Cherry #6*. 2010. Ceramic and acrylic.  
14 x 7 x 7 in.

Above right: *Nubbin Drawer*. 2006. Ceramic, resin and wood.  
10 x 11 x 15 in.

One of the five *Jewel Boxes*, called *Lollypop Box* contains a shape that the artist connects to candy, cosmetics and the female body. It looks like three balls of ice cream in a line with a cone at either end. She has poured turquoise acrylic resin over it, so the shape seems almost to float in the liquid that has hardened beneath it. A second box contains a shape like the soft frozen confections that are dispensed spirally into cones. Mauve acrylic covers this sculpture to make it look utterly delicious. *Nubbin Drawer*, a third box, contains three forms like sweet rolls covered in hot pink acrylic. No one can resist the nubbins, which just seem to ooze calories.

#### WHISPERING BODIES

The subjects of *Whispering Bodies*, Anderson's 2010 solo show at the Elmhurst Art Museum near Chicago were childish fantasy, play and self-indulgence. She made round, plump and often asymmetrical forms in white ceramic that suggested cherries, *derrières*, circular pillows with cloth-covered buttons at their centres and pastry bags. She poured red acrylic over the forms so it dripped down the sides and she installed the work on walls or shelves. She wired some pieces for sound so visitors heard indistinct soft whispers.

The artist produced four related series of sculptures for *Whispering Bodies*, which she showed on four walls of one gallery. *Bulging Cherries*, in the boldest series, she explores "the idea of simple geometric shapes and squeezing dessert/body forms", the artist says. The artist takes the word bulbous to amusing extremes, distancing the



sculptures from the body parts they resemble by speckling their surfaces.

*Whispering Bodies* marked an advance for Anderson. She simplified and focused her visual language while moving away from narrative toward greater formal exploration and complexity.

#### VOLCANIC LANDSCAPE

Late in 2010, Anderson was a resident artist at SIM, The Association of Icelandic Visual Artists, Reykjavík. During August of 2011, she exhibited the Iceland work (11 new ceramic sculptures) in the Satellite Space at the University of Texas, San Antonio. During her residency, Anderson had photographed ensembles of her sculptures outdoors in Iceland's mossy, rocky volcanic landscape. Her San Antonio show included five inkjet colour photographic prints.

In this new sculpture, Anderson shifts focus from the domestic space to the garden and her forms evolve toward the biomorphic. She makes plant-like shapes and paints the surfaces in pale colours so the overall effect is much less juicy, tactile and comic than her earlier candy/sweet roll pieces.

The new forms have shallow depressions at their centres which surround small hemispheres that seem to be floating there. These depressions may be star-shaped, diamond-shaped or triangular. Lines radiate from the corners like creases on a circular pillow. While these forms could be read as pistils and stamens, the artist is wary of becoming too literal.

Anderson pours coloured acrylic resin into the depressions on her pieces to create a glossy focal point for the sculptures, which she wall-mounts.

*Above left: Icelandic Garden #1. 2011. Archival inkjet, photographic print, 16 x 24 in.*

*Right: Icelandic Garden #2. 2011. Archival inkjet, photographic print, 16 x 24 in.*

*Below: Nikki Renee Anderson in her studio.*

After years of working with acrylic resin, she has mastered this process, but accidents still do happen and sometimes she welcomes them. Overall, these sculptures are more at peace than the artist's earlier work.

The five photographs are great fun. In one of them, we see nine off-white forms with matte surfaces that recall candy kisses and two egg shapes that could well be made of pure sugar. These look to be growing out of the mossy landscape or sinking into it perhaps. The pieces are two to three feet tall and look larger than they really are – Anderson does not want the scale to be known. Another photograph shows a white plant-like form that seems to be growing out of a moss covered rock and flopping over to one side. The other photographs are equally puzzling, equally daffy.

Nikki Renee Anderson has quieted down a bit, but she has not lost her sense of humour. That is good news.



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