

Carrie Olson: Fear as Commodity

By Christopher A. Yates

Fear is contagious and seductive. Every day the news and entertainment media bombard us with disasters both real and imagined. TV shows like *Law and Order* and *CSI* present a new horror every week. Our politicians pander with promises to get tough on crime or to protect our borders. Author and medical doctor Marc Siegel explains in *False Alarm: the Truth about the Epidemic of Fear*, “Statistically, the industrialized world has never been safer. Nevertheless, we live in fear of worst-case scenarios.”¹ As a biological function, fear protects us from danger, yet in today’s political and cultural climate it can lead to debilitating anxiety and hysteria, opening the door for individuals, companies, organizations and governments to step in with ill-conceived solutions or coercive measures of all sorts. We consistently act in response to fear. It is a potent drug.

Carrie Olson explores fear as commodity. Her work is driven by the allure of consumer culture. After all, there is nothing more lucrative than sex, death and fear. She applies the conventions of retail display and marketing to both satirical and sinister ends. Often drawing upon the aesthetic of the high-end boutique, her installations consistently exploit the idea of material object as status symbol. With wealth comes the illusion of freedom and control. It enables the fabrication of identity and can transform fear into desire.

Trained as a ceramicist at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston (BFA) and the University of Colorado at Boulder (MFA), Olson uses porcelain as a vehicle for social commentary. Her individual works maintain a profound elegance and attention to craft. Yet each piece is subservient to a whole and can only be fully understood in the context of her installations that engage provocative, multi-layered themes. Anchoring many of her recent ideas

is the respirator mask. The form flows through our cultural landscape as a symbol of both protection and protest, as well as (sometimes) panic. Ceramicists use these masks to protect against airborne particulates, as do artists who must avoid the fumes of toxic resins.

Demonstrators wear them to rail against environmental destruction and nuclear proliferation. Stoking our survival instinct, they surface again and again with every news story of disease or disaster. Offering a strange dichotomy of empowerment and powerlessness, the respirator/gas mask form appears in pop-culture contexts as well, and circulates within the steampunk and fetish underground.

Observing the groundswell of interest in personal protection devices after 9/11, Olson began thinking of the respirator mask as a collectible object and fashion accessory. During a 2005 residency at the International Ceramic Research Center in Skaelskor, Denmark, she cast them in Limogés porcelain, a material that connotes wealth and exclusivity. White and pristine, the respirators are delicate and intricate.

In her exhibition at CUE Art Foundation, *Marburg Respirator Display Wall* features a series of Limogés respirators mounted on a surface covered with elegantly patterned blue wallpaper. The installation calls attention to the Marburg virus—the cause of Marburg hemorrhagic fever. Rumored to have been weaponized by the former Soviet Union, the horrific and usually fatal virus originates in Central and East Africa. The stuff of both scientific fact and science fiction, it exists as a lingering threat. Olson has digitally transformed the image of the virus into a decorative pattern; the configuration of the virus seen through the microscope is visually pleasing. Tastefully transformed with references to traditional blue and white porcelain, the deadly entity becomes exotic and strangely enticing.

Several pieces included in the CUE exhibition consist of colorful, wall-hung, vertical

paper banners upon which are mounted white porcelain disks hand-carved in low relief. Sometimes paired with respirators, the banners reference the ceremonial standards used in ecclesiastical or military processions. Each banner/disk combination exudes power. Like the *Marburg Respirator Display Wall*, the banner's patterned design is an enlargement of a unique and deadly microscopic element. The colors found in the banners covertly address the Homeland Security's color-coded terror-alert system. Like the respirators, the alert system offers a mixed message of protection and menace. Veiled in secrecy, the criteria for threat levels have never been made clear. Touted as a means to inform, the system has been used more insidiously as a method of control. When alert levels rise, large swaths of the public change their day-to-day routines and bend to the will of the state. (Former Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge actually admitted that in 2004 he was asked to manipulate the Terror-Alert Chart in an effort to give President Bush a political advantage).² Rather than directly citing the existing alert system, Olson masks threat with the beautiful and ornate in objects designed for entertainment, diversion and escapism.

Titles of the banner/disk works — *Smallpox Wonderbar*, *Ebola Moresco* and *Anthrax Shadow Waltz* — add a level of darkly humorous complexity, juxtaposing the names of deadly diseases with references to music and dance. The patterns on the disks are appropriations of the choreography of the Depression-era movie director Busby Berkeley, whose elaborate productions created mesmerizing, magical worlds. Escapism is a natural human coping mechanism. During the Great Depression, many sought refuge from fear at the movies. By appropriating Berkeley's dance patterns for her carved ceramic disks, Olson creates hypnotically desirable objects that mask dire intent.

In an earlier body of work, Olson explored desire of a different kind. Her 2007 exhibition *Prosthetic Ornament and the American Dream*, presented at Texas Women's University in Denton, Texas, offered an implant boutique furnished with glass cases and consultation chairs, and adorned with sexy posters. White porcelain prostheses filled the space, their smooth biomorphic surfaces bearing her Rococo-influenced embellishment. Not the kind of prostheses that restore lost body parts, Olson's objects are intended to restructure the body into strangely compelling forms. Commenting on the sub-dermal implants—buttocks, breasts, pectorals, facial enhancements—used in cosmetic surgery or in body art (one thinks of the surgically altered, self-transforming French artist Orlan), the installation was ultimately about the remaking of the self. Like the tattoo phenomenon, what might seem limited to a deviant underground surfaced in Olson's presentation as potentially mainstream and infinitely alluring. Such works capitalize not only on our fears of aging, but on the search, however futile, for some sort of physical ideal.

In Olson's work, ornament is control. When we adorn and alter our bodies or fill our lives with consumer goods, we are in effect seeking power over fear. The more we consume, collect, and decorate, the greater the potential for self-deception. Fully engaged with the ceaselessly self-perpetuating marketplace of fear, Olson seduces us while simultaneously challenging us to cast a clear eye on our present historical moment.

1. Siegel, Marc, *False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear*, Hoboken, New Jersey; John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005, p. 15.

2. Baker, Peter. "Bush Official, in Book, Tells of Pressure on '04 Vote," *New York Times*, 2009, Nov. 20, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/21/us/21ridge.html>