

Antiques & **Abundant Beauty**
Collectibles by Alice Simpson

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Dolly Dimples, Baby Thelma, Baby Ruth, Jolly Nellie, and other Circus Fat Folks' true life obsession with food was, like my own obsession with clay, their deepest joy and the defining passion of their lives. Many of us, men AND women, struggle with "hungers," yearnings for pleasures be it food, love, possessions, control, power. Hunger, in all its metaphorical forms, is part of our personal and public conversation.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Whether we approve or disapprove, Circus Fat Folk were part of entertainment history. ABUNDANT BEAUTY, a sculptural series, explores hunger and issues of appearance and identity through images of these historical, professional performers at a time when obesity was a sign of health and prosperity. Found serendipitously on the internet, postcards, souvenirs from circus and carnival sideshows, many photographed by Charles Eisenmann and then Frank Wendt from 1840 to 1930 inspire my clay portraits.



Unknown Woman



Baby Ruth



Baby Thelma



Dolly Dimples



"...Revealing of society a century ago, circus women were displayed in a sexually titillating fashion and in erotically charged scenarios, while at the same time being billed (with a big wink) as examples of unblemished purity and domesticity." -- writes Dr. Janet Davis, "The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top", University of Texas.

Traveling carnivals, with Fat Folk as part of Freak Shows, provided a source of entertainment and reflected the values, fears and issues of society at large. When the circus came to town, people traveled miles by wagon or train to see clowns, and trapeze artists,

to marvel at the exotic and terrifying animals and to peer at anomalies of nature, like Siamese Twins, Mustached Ladies and Fat Foll

Professional performers like *Dolly Dimples* Geyer, "The Most Beautiful Fat Woman in the World," *Baby Ruth* Pontico, "one of the fattest women ever to appear in the [Barnum & Bailey] circus" and *Jollie Nellie* Terrell, who appears in a cameo appearance in the film noir classic, 'Nightmare Alley' with Tyrone Power, were happily married. Interviews note that they loved their work, the companionship they found in a haven from strict societal constraints, along with financial opportunities within the carnival environment.

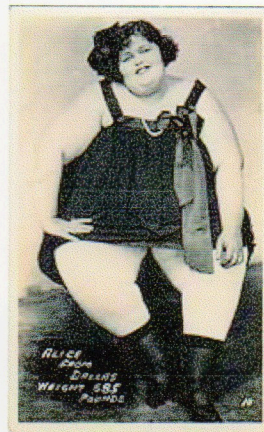
PROCESS

Each of my sculptural works was coil built, in white or brown stoneware, with an awareness of the relationship of dainty hands and feet to body mass, the provocative nature of their poses and spirit of expression. It was a sensual experience to round enormous juicy arms, sculpt deeply dimpled elbows, fashion ample thighs with curves of fat over muscle and to persuade the distortion of each face, hidden amidst its multitude of chins.

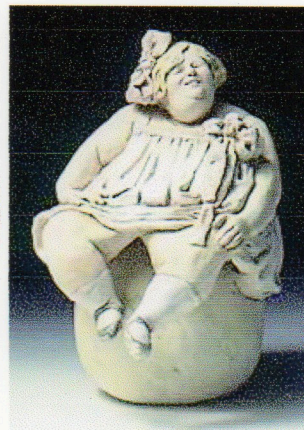
On AN UNKNOWN WOMAN, BABY THELMA, DOLLY DIMPLES and most others, rutile oxide was brushed, then wiped off, to accentuate and add a more complex expression. I sculpted their mouths open to imply a voice of hunger beneath the playful facade. In keeping with my handmade Artist Books, which incorporate text, I inscribe obscure messages about hunger and longing. At the leather hard stage, sections are cut, hollowed to approximately one quarter inch thickness and reassembled with slip. In order to capture the character of tinted photographs, a wash of whitened acrylic color barely identifies a dress, corsage, hair bow or shoe after firing. BAB RUTH's portrait is a contrast between textured, flecked clay, flatness of fish sauce and the sheen of glaze in her bow.



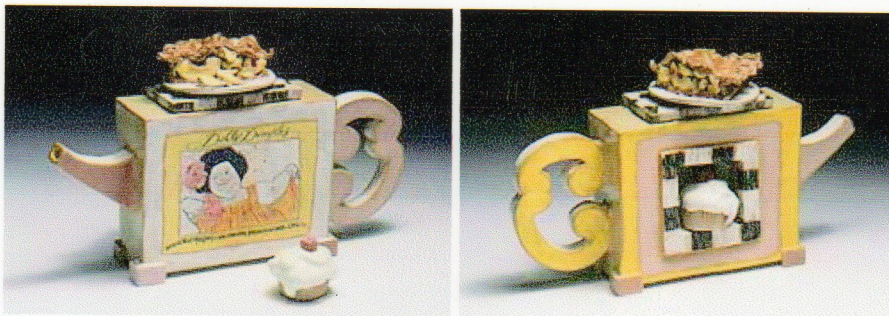
Jolly Nellie



Alice from Dallas



On JOLLIE NELLIE, one of a series of terra cotta dinner plates, with a sgraffito technique, the drawing and text are scratched through a layer of slip with a fine pin tool.



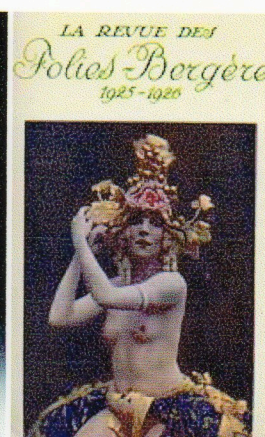
DOLLY DIMPLES, a nonfunctional stoneware teapot is topped with a generous slice of peach pie and has an iced cupcake secreted in a surprise back shelf.



MADAME X ON A VELVET STOOL is a work of the Muses—with her inspired 'do' observed on a Broadway bus. The expression of her hands echoes the tassels of the pillow, which seems to fly away from her ample form. A Chippendale ottoman, with mid 18th century cabriole legs and claw-and-ball feet, seemed the perfect extension to her attitude.

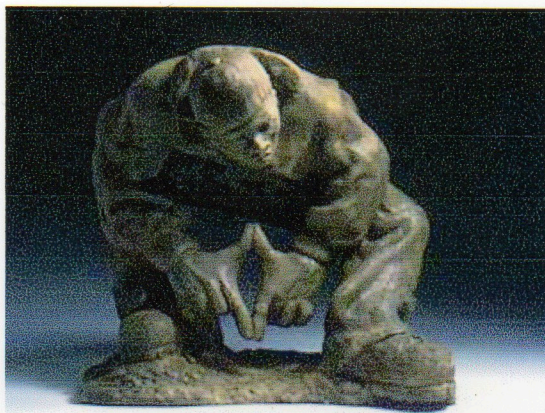


While not a Circus Fat Lady, **TAMING THE GHOSTS** was inspired by a 1925 Folies Bergere program cover. The text, "Searching to transcend its wounds by taming the ghosts of history," was arbitrarily selected from a review by Christopher Isherwood in the The NY Times.



Developing works like the **URBAN MOTION** and **ABUNDANT BEAUTY** series has been the antithesis of my early work as a fashion illustrator and graphic designer, working with companies like Estee Lauder, Revlon, Max Factor and Helena Rubenstein, as well as fashion magazines. Despite a lifetime of drawing and painting the figure, clay is a new medium. In this medium, I discover the bliss of making. I spent more than a dozen years creating Artist Books about dance, until 2003, when I literally dreamed of working in clay and woke to that new direction.

URBAN MOTION, inspired by Hip Hop, began that dream. In **STREET WISE** (aka **APOLLO**) and **THE THREE GRACES**, mythological clay gods and goddesses masquerade as street. The Graces, Thalia, Euphrosyne, Aglaia, danced to the music of Apollo symbolized all that was noble, beautiful and pure. They presided over banquets, dances, and other pleasurable social events, and brought joy to gods and mortals. Like the Muses, they endowed artists and poets with the ability to create works of art. Imagine meeting the young jazz musician, who would pose for Thalia, (figure on the left) outside NY's Thalia Theater.



STREET WISE (aka APOLLO)



THE THREE GRACES

It seems abundantly clear that my direction will continue to be about theater, music, dance, performers and performance. As a daughter of a renowned vaudeville eccentric dancer, the need to entertain seems to be part of my gene pool. Within this realm, I search for a darker, less conventional beauty, contradicting the mainstream, hoping to occasionally challenge the norms of acceptance and comfort.



With an award-winning career in Graphic Design and illustration, Simpson taught drawing, design and packaging at the Fashion Institute of Technology, (F.I.T.) NY, School of Visual Arts, NY, and Otis-Parsons, LA. She is the proud mother of three-time Grammy nominee Michael Simpson, music producer (DustBrothers). She lives in New York City. Simpson's works are internationally exhibited, in public and private collections including:

- Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts - Jerome Robbins Dance Collection
- Lincoln Center Theater- Andre Bishop, Director
- The Victoria & Albert Museum
- Yale University
- Harvard University - Theater and Music Collection
- Dartmouth University
- Stanford University

For more information: www.alicesimpson.com.

Sculpture Photos: D.James Dee; Historical images: David B. Denholtz, James Taylor, Karl Niedershuh at www.showhistory.com/The Doghouse Collection & Syracuse University Library; Alice Simpson's portrait: Ric Schmitt.

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