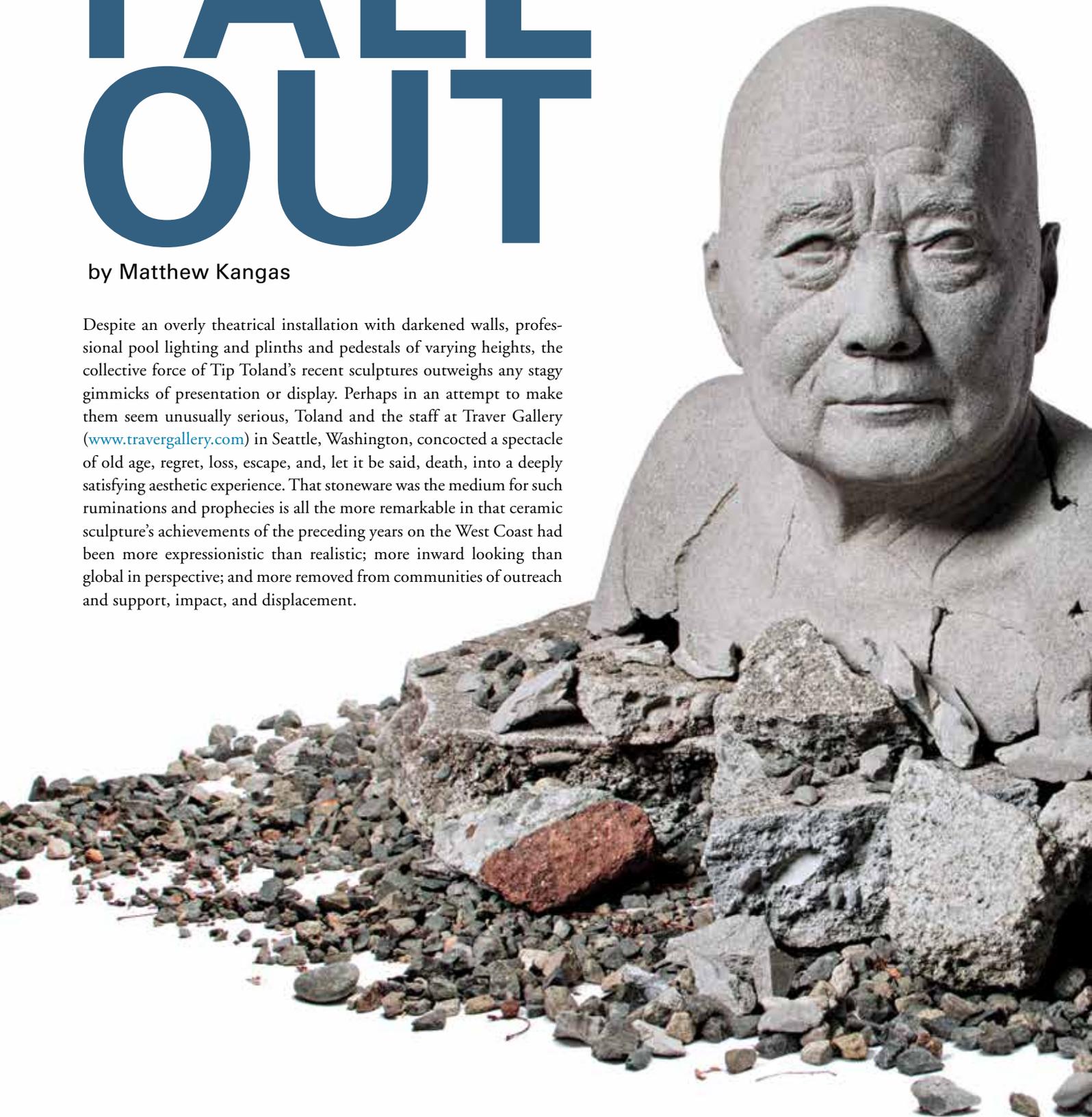


TIP TOLAND FALL OUT

by Matthew Kangas

Despite an overly theatrical installation with darkened walls, professional pool lighting and plinths and pedestals of varying heights, the collective force of Tip Toland's recent sculptures outweighs any stagy gimmicks of presentation or display. Perhaps in an attempt to make them seem unusually serious, Toland and the staff at Traver Gallery (www.travergallery.com) in Seattle, Washington, concocted a spectacle of old age, regret, loss, escape, and, let it be said, death, into a deeply satisfying aesthetic experience. That stoneware was the medium for such ruminations and prophecies is all the more remarkable in that ceramic sculpture's achievements of the preceding years on the West Coast had been more expressionistic than realistic; more inward looking than global in perspective; and more removed from communities of outreach and support, impact, and displacement.



Reverberations of Policies

The exhibition title, “Fall Out,” is not fallout in the once-familiar Cold War nuclear aftermath sense but apparently more in the reverberations of policies worldwide that lead to migrations, ethnic cleansing, and dispersals of millions of people united or divided by geographic or cultural coincidences of history. In the sense that Toland’s six figures are either life size or smaller, embody the connotations of the word naked more than nude, and are hence vulnerable to suffering and oppression, they embody a range of geopolitical and domestic issues. These issues are mostly related to ageing in societies of enormous income inequality and to the physical ravaging of coercive relocations of people shoved by forces of militant religions or corporate greed.

Full Force of Sculpture

The darkened, carefully lit room made it harder to take in the full force of each sculpture. For once, the art seemed to be too much for the windowless, George Suyama–designed central gallery at Traver Gallery, so great is the emotional force Toland has instilled in her

1 *Refugee*, 28 in. (71 cm) in diameter, stoneware clay, paint, chalk pastel, concrete, 2017. 2 *Remembrance*, 4 ft. 8 in. (1.5 m) in height, stoneware clay, paint, chalk pastel, 2017.



characters, all of which were made in 2017. *Refugee* is half-torso more than bust, arising Venus- or phoenix-like from crumbled red-clay and gray stone rubble matching his dried-out skin. Survivor of bombing or ghost of genocide victim? The refugee's long, last look back at the devastation suggests the biblical Lot's wife, her fate of turning into salt or, in this case, fired stoneware.

Toland's refugee/escapee with Asian features is echoed in the life-size, full-frontal *Remembrance*, a freestanding figure with arms raised in defensive posture, head and eyes uplifted. While *Refugee* recalls Samuel Beckett's character, Winnie, permanently buried

up to her neck in his play *Happy Days* (1960), Toland's defender confronts a void rather than accepting one. *Remembrance* is simultaneously triumphant and defeatist.

Before we discuss what Toland has done to depict women and their plights in old age, it is worth examining the one androgynous or perhaps even hermaphroditic figure on view. The proportions of *Cloud* are enormous—a bulging, morbidly obese figure with shaved head—but its diminutive size (7×13×11 inches), tricks us, infantilizing the misfit, adding innocent horror to perinatal vulnerability. Toland's warnings extend to genetic mishaps, which may be just as much a social issue as the displaced men and blitzed-out older women she has cunningly carved.

Perhaps a behavioral bookend to *Cloud*, *Tantrum* replaces the calm, dream state of the sleeping baby with the raging anger of an older woman among the tatters of a battered mattress. With George Segal's white-plastered bronze people as a chilly predecessor, Toland has individualized a possibly demented or institutionalized woman helplessly embodying poet Dylan Thomas' words to his dying father, "Old age should burn and rave at close of day; / Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Discussion of World Issues

Sans theatrical appurtenances, Toland's sculptures take on a rational, sensible quality, closer to late-period Robert Arneson's political screeds than Jack Earl or Ron Mueck. Rebuilding West Coast figurative ceramic sculpture, Toland creates her own new





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lineage, one that could also include Stephen De Staebler, as well as Doug Jeck's horrific dismemberments and disjointed Classicism. Because Toland's men and women are naked rather than nude (à la European Classicism), they bring a jolt of contemporary urgency to the gallery, reasserting ceramic sculpture's significance in the discussion of world issues.

All the same, the walking dead or debilitated people Toland makes come alive are not reducible to social or political issues. Their very individuality (up to and including self-portraiture) in *Refugee*, *Tantrum*, and *Remembrance* offsets the ambiguity of *Cloud*, the great enigma of the exhibition.

Beauty Parlor, a bust of an older woman with a mixture of different adolescent girls' hair styles of extensions and braids, submits to cosmetician Tip's fantasies, eyes closed, refuting the futility of geriatric self-adornment. If there is one ounce of humor in this show, it is the faintly comic expression of the woman in the beauty parlor, enjoying it all, but submitting to something she and others will no doubt regret and discuss later. In Seattle, where women over 75 routinely have blue hair, not gray-blue, but ultraviolet or turquoise-blue, *Beauty Parlor's* heroine seems right at home, aware of the futility of fighting death, but facing it with acceptance and a comic shrug.

the author *Matthew Kangas is an independent Seattle art critic and curator who is the author of numerous books.*



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3, 4 *Tantrum*, 5 ft. 6 in. (1.7 m) in length, stoneware clay, paint, chalk pastel, synthetic hair, mattress, 2017. 5 *Cloud*, 31 in. (79 cm) in length, stoneware clay, paint, chalk pastel, 2017. 6 *Beauty Parlor*, 36 in. (91 cm) in length, stoneware clay, paint, chalk pastel, synthetic hair, 2017. All photos: Ben Lerman. All images courtesy of Traver Gallery.