



Art  
INCONVERSATION

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## JULIA KUNIN with Maria Elena González

On the occasion of her exhibition at Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, *Julia Kunin: Nightwood* (February 23 – April 21, 2012), Maria Elena González met with Julia to converse about her current work.

**Maria Elena González (Rail):** You and I have known each other for a long time. We are both sculptors, though we come from very different backgrounds, geographically and educationally. I came to the U.S. from Cuba with my parents in 1968. I went to school in Miami and received a B.F.A. from Florida International University in 1979 and an M.A. from San Francisco State University in 1983, where clay was king. But I never worked with it then. For me still, Pérez, the local carpenter in my hometown, had a lasting impact. What was your trajectory like?

**Julia Kunin:** I grew up in Vermont. I was a teenager in the '70s, which marked a revival of the studio potter. Hideo Okino, head of ceramics at University of Vermont, took me under his wing when I was in high school and let me work in the clay studio. I learned ceramics by being in the pottery shop, not through formal training.

I studied with ceramicist Ed Eberle at Carnegie Mellon for one year in 1982. Then I received a B.A. from Wellesley College in 1984 and my M.F.A. from Mason Gross at Rutgers University in 1993. It was a very exciting time in the early '90s.

**Rail:** It's interesting the effect direct experience rather than formal training had on both of us early on! Your current exhibition title is taken from the novel by—

**Kunin:** Djuna Barnes. Yes.

**Rail:** The exhibition features 18 pieces created between 2010 and 2011. Where were they made?

**Kunin:** Some of them were made in Brooklyn, and some of them in Eastern Europe. I have a kiln in my studio, and I do a lot of the work there.

**Rail:** So you had to deal with the logistics of creating sculptures in Brooklyn, shipping them to Eastern Europe, finishing them there, creating some new ones there, and then glazing and firing all of the work there and shipping it back here.

**Kunin:** Absolutely right. A lot of logistics, it was really an adventure.

**Rail:** Going through the exhibit and knowing a little bit about your influences—Palissy, 16th century gardens, scholar's rocks, etc.—I wonder if you could speak about some of these?

**Kunin:** I'll start with Palissy. I have a background in clay, and then I left it in the early '80s, and took it up again because I was trying to solve a sculpture problem. I was working with octopus imagery, because I loved the grotesque aspect of it, as well as the sexuality implied in the form, both its female and male erotic qualities. I had been working in glass and it wasn't working for me, so I finally decided to use clay because I had seen some amazing ceramic sculpture at the Asia Society in 2002 by Ah Xian. I just walked right into



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

this pottery shop in Williamsburg and said, “Can anybody teach me how to make a mold of an octopus?” And one of the potters there, Chris Russell, told me he would teach me how to make press molds, just the way that you press tiles into a plaster shape. He told me to look up the work of Bernard Palissy, who worked in 16th century France, creating platters that resembled ponds. Palissy would take direct casts from animals, and make platters covered with lizards, snails, and other elements from nature. He also figured out how fossils were made, and experimented with taking casts of animals and using them in his work. I just fell in love with his ceramics. There was this sort of over-the-top quality to them, and the glazes gave his ceramics a fantastical quality.

**Rail:** Who would want to eat from a plate full of lizards?

**Kunin:** [Laughs.] Exactly. There was a real eccentricity about it. His style was copied by many generations afterwards, and is called Palissyware. His work had a big influence on me because, yes, I had been planning to make these sculptures just out of octopi, but then I decided to try snails and other animals. The animals were a vehicle for making an abstract form that had these sort of other worldly qualities, so that when you approach the work, up close, you can discover things. The sculptures started to look like miniature landscapes. In addition, I have a great love of design and the decorative arts. I’d been looking at and reading about 18th century European porcelain as well as early Chinese porcelain. I’m interested in decorative objects that are used in daily life.

**Rail:** That’s very present in the work.

**Kunin:** The piece “Hanging Gardens” has snail shells on the bottom that were cast from real snail shells, and it has butterflies and snakes that were cast from toys. It’s basically a kind of rock formation that becomes a miniature world unto itself. I also put a lot of texture on my work because the glazes bring out all these unexpected colors in every little spot—you can even see lines on the butterfly wings. Turquoise comes out here, gold comes out there. I intentionally drip lots of liquid clay called slip to create a cascade-like feeling. Movement is very important to me. I think it’s just the way I work as a sculptor. But the thing about this process is that sometimes you don’t know when to stop! You could keep piling and piling and piling. And that’s something that you just sort of figure out as you go along. Sometimes I just want the plain rock surface to be evident.

**Rail:** Now, in your previous exhibition at Greenberg Van Doren, *Julia Kunin/Emi Avora: Against Nature* (2007), you had a piece called “Smoke” that had snails as well, didn’t you?

**Kunin:** Close. It was actually covered with Black-Eyed Susans. It had the quality of a shag rug texture because of all of the petals. You see the texture from a distance, then you come up close and you see the flowers. The other thing about “Smoke” is that the color of the glaze and the content of the work create a kind of tension. Sometimes the content of the work is not so pretty, you know? But the color kind of fuses it together. You see the beauty and then move in closer and say, “Oh yeah, that’s a snake there, those are drips, looks a little scatological, a little sexual, I’m not really sure what it is.”

**Rail:** How do the titles of your pieces come about? Are they related to the ideas in or content of the work? Do they come along as you’re working on the piece?

**Kunin:** I will say, with this body of work, the titles came later, because I was so involved in the pieces I couldn’t quite analyze them. I worked intuitively, not analytically. I did a lot of reading and I’d make a piece, it would remind me of something, and I’d research that source. When I went to my references and sources, titles came to mind. The pieces is titled “Pantagrue,” and that’s “Gargantua,” are called that because, to me, they started to feel like creatures. Those works are about the grotesque. The monster, the creature, the freak.

**Rail:** “Pantagrue” could be Godzilla’s cousin.

**Kunin:** Yes [laughs]. It has this feeling of uncontrolled growth, sort of a body that keeps sprouting out breasts, or something. Pantagrue is a giant in the tales of Rabelais.

**Rail:** Did you come across Rabelais when you were researching Palissy?

**Kunin:** You would *think*. I read Rabelais in college, and he resurfaced for me recently. He critiqued the church and the educational



Julia Kunin, “Golden Grove,” 2011. Ceramic. 13 × 11 × 8”. Courtesy of James Dee.

system in France, among other things; his stories are very scatological and very crude. And I feel like there's something about this uncontrolled growth that brought those stories to mind. But it's not a literal translation of them.

**Rail:** No, and I can see that it's not, but that was the source that sprouted these beautiful monsters.

**Kunin:** "Gargantua"—the name calls to mind something huge, but the giants in the stories would change their size; sometimes they were big, sometimes they were little. I feel like these pieces are about transformation. I guess you could say that about all art.

**Rail:** Transformation—you just took that word right out of my mouth because I'm looking at the glazes and they're so fantastical: chrome and hallucinatory. The first thing that came to mind was the *Transformers* movie. "Gargantua" in particular has this quality of being in flux.

**Kunin:** There's always this concept of changing. Every time the light changes, the color changes. This is why iridescent glazes are so exciting to me, because of what the surface does to the materiality. It totally transforms the work, in an unpredictable way! I never know how they're actually going to come out. I love the idea of the Baroque, of going over the top. There's something excessive about the work. I use luster glazes in the sculptures to emphasize the sense of uncontrolled growth. They are a little bit vulgar almost, vulgar and beautiful at the same time. Making this work, where you don't know what the end product is going to be, is kind of an addiction. There's this magical, mysterious outcome that goes beyond what I even intended.

**Rail:** I guess you're not a control freak.

**Kunin:** That's true. With clay, you have to let go, and you have to expect failure. Then sometimes you think something is a failure, and recognize that it's actually a success later. Sometimes I live with something for a year or two, then say, "Oh, I actually think that's a good piece." Although I knew "Gargantua" was my favorite right away. It had the golden glaze I was going after. It's a very rare glaze.

**Rail:** It's fantastic.

**Kunin:** You used the word hallucinatory. I want to talk about that because I've also been influenced by Art Nouveau lusterware ceramics. A lot of them have psychedelic colors. Psychedelic imagery in the '60s—think rock 'n' roll posters—incorporated Art Nouveau elements.

**Rail:** "Viridian Grotto," which is made of sponges, refers back to the scholar's rock in size and qualities such as its perforations, etc. And the glaze is still pretty hallucinatory.

**Kunin:** That is an earlier one—I did a lot of sculptures made of sponges. I'm interested in the exaggeration that it creates. In the earlier works I'd have piles of octopi that would create an abstract mass or a small landscape, but when you use the sponges they're less identifiable, more crude. They actually create sort of a Cubist structure. What I loved in this piece in particular is that it gives you a sense of place.

**Rail:** These were sponges that soaked up the clay and then were fired?

**Kunin:** Yes. I took industrial sponges, dunked them into a bucket of slip and then built with them. Sometimes I took an X-acto knife, cut a hole in one sponge and stuck another through it, and then piled them up. Everything's connected and twisted—actually, tied. I also thought a lot about John Chamberlain's foam rubber sculptures, which I love so much.

**Rail:** A couple of those pieces are at his exhibition at the Guggenheim now.

**Kunin:** I think they're brilliant. I was trying to do what Chamberlain did with foam, but with sponges. I'm still experimenting with the foam. I love the sensuality of the sponges, and I try to maintain that moment of the twist and the tie. It still feels alive.

**Rail:** Is it incredibly fragile? Because it's pretty lightweight?

**Kunin:** Yes. It is very fragile because they're hollow.

**Rail:** Yet it looks incredibly solid.

**Kunin:** That's good [*laughs*]. Eventually I learned that I needed to use porcelain because it's almost as hard as glass so it's the best clay to use for the sponges, but I use all different kinds of clays depending on what I'm doing.

**Rail:** Let's go back to the hallucinatory because I don't think we finished with that. You were talking about Art Nouveau and how hallucinatory imagery was in vogue at the time.

**Kunin:** Yes, it was. Much of Art Nouveau contains psychedelic imagery. Art Nouveau philosophy, as you know, holds that not just artwork, per se, but things that you use in everyday life should be integrated with imagery from nature: silverware or vases or tables or desks. The belief system wasn't just about the beauty of nature, its benign or benevolent status; it also revealed the destructive power of nature. You didn't just see beautiful butterflies. You might also see a snake or something menacing. I feel like in my work I am trying to combine both of those elements and create the tension between the two. This piece feels ghostlike to me. Its title is "Shapeshifter." The other thing about it is that it is very architectural.

**Rail:** It is totally architectural. You have a base foundation on which a shaft is piled on and different tiers or floors lead up to this bucolic explosion of some sort.

**Kunin:** I was trying to combine the organic and geometric decay simultaneously, and it's fusing the body with architecture, and other pieces fuse the body with landscape.

**Rail:** Chernobyl, Fukushima Daiichi?

**Kunin:** I feel like the fears of our time and the anxiety of our age have entered into the content of these pieces somewhat unconsciously.

**Rail:** How do you arrive at the figurative intimation in some of them, like the eyes, nose, mouth, and the one in the front with the two vertebrae?

**Kunin:** It got figurative when I started looking at scholar's rocks.

**Rail:** Like the Park of the Monsters at Bomarzo, which is populated by fantastical creatures?

**Kunin:** Right, like Bomarzo. I started to see the figure emerging from the rock. In the Shinto religion, there is a belief that there are spirits in rocks themselves, so the rock, even though it's still an object, might represent flowing water, or a spirit. Then I started seeing that even "Outlook Garden," which is made out of sponges, looks figurative to me. I decided to be more direct with the figure and I created "Nightshade."

**Rail:** "Nightshade" is descriptive in the sense that the color of the glaze is this dark purple-brown. I see a nose.

**Kunin:** Nose, mouth, and then there's another nose and eye. At the same time that I realized there was a figurative aspect in it, I started to look at a lot of work by Otto Dix, which had a huge influence on me. I always loved his work but I saw his series about World War I and I was looking at faces that were half-blown off with worms crawling through them—it was horrific but it really moved me. Both my grandfathers fought in World War I, on opposite sides. One fought for Germany, even though I'm Jewish, and one fought for the U.S. The Otto Dix works resonated and that imagery started to creep into my work. It was sort of an a-ha moment and I really wanted to create a face or a head that was decomposing. But I went to Cubism, which is embedded in this sort of deconstructive sensibility—I felt that Cubism drew me in. I'm thinking of Picasso, Braque. Once you start looking at the Cubists you're opening up a whole world. I was trying to combine that sensibility with organic decay, the decay of the structure of the body.

**Rail:** This probably has nothing to do with it, but somehow I'm seeing steel parts in it and I'm thinking of Mel Edwards's "Lynch Fragments."

**Kunin:** Oh, that's a really interesting comparison. Yes, Mel Edwards used locks and chains. There's the grit of that and it does look like steel and it has the Anthony Caro reddish, brownish appearance of the surface, but it is ceramic. This was made out of a red terra cotta clay, so when it was glazed a lot of the reds in the iron from the clay came through.

**Rail:** Into the glaze.

**Kunin:** Yes, you have red terra cotta combined with the metallic glaze that creates this real rusty steel look.

**Rail:** Back to a techy question, because they're all metallic, they're all wondrous lusters, but they're all different colors. Do you choose chrome gold or metallic purple or metallic green from the shelf or are these glazes individually mixed?

**Kunin:** Each one is different and some I can predict and some I can't. So far I've been fortunate. These pieces were fired several times. It's sometimes taking a risk because you might have something like this that looks beautiful and I'll say, let's try it again, and the second firing or third firing it might look worse. I might lose it. Some of the iridescence is achieved through a difficult reduction firing technique called fuming. It doesn't come out the same every time.

**Rail:** It's like cellophane, you know that rainbow cellophane that's beautiful when you crunch it up? "Phantom Flowers" is the most figurative piece in the show. At what point was it made?

**Kunin:** 2011. It definitely grew out of "Gargantua" and "Shapeshifter."

**Rail:** After "Shapeshifter" when you consciously decided to go more figurative into "Nightshade" and then "Phantom Flowers"?

**Kunin:** Actually, I made this at the same time as "Shapeshifter."

**Rail:** Almost looks like a gas mask.

**Kunin:** It is. I thought, I'll do a piece with the techniques I'm using now and see what happens. It just popped into my head. It's more figurative, like a vertebrae that becomes a body and the head is like a mask—there is actually a face inside there but nobody can see it.

**Rail:** It is completely obscured.

**Kunin:** You can't see it. It's totally dark. I took a mold of a gorilla head, which is inside there, and that's how it started. Then I built a framework around it and it began to look like a gas mask. So for me it is about death in a sense, but not just the horrors of death. It's a kind of memento mori. It also feels very ghostlike to me, as if it could float off of the wall.

**Rail:** I do want to ask, where is all the lesbian imagery now? I remember your work being very explicit about being a lesbian, about women and sexuality.

**Kunin:** The only direct reference is in the title of the exhibit. I was thinking about my work and all these figures and they really aren't gender-specific. I feel as if when you make a sculpture of a monster or a freak you're going beyond gender in a sense, or I felt I was. It kind of becomes completely other. If you look at L.G.B.T.Q. history, of course gays and lesbians were considered to be freaks so there is a tie-in, I think. When I created imagery that had to do with masks in my earlier work, it was about masking one's identity. That's not prominent here, but there is a subtext of the mask and what role the mask plays. It's very subtle and the reason I use the title *Nightwood* is partially because night in that book symbolizes hidden sexuality and transgression. The night part of it, for me, is about the unconscious, the subterranean—the mysterious feeling in the work. The idea of costume and the idea of the burlesque is vaguely present in these pieces, as is the carnivalesque—the idea that when you're in a crowd and everybody's wearing a costume and mask it disrupts the hierarchy of who's who and who has power.

**Rail:** Correct.

**Kunin:** And that's kind of implied in "Pantagruel" and "Gargantua," where you have that idea of monsters and freaks and strange creatures—these are hybrids of creatures and they're surreal portraits. There is that carnival aspect to them a little bit. "Janus of Flowers" is two upside down gorilla heads; in the Janus myth, one head is looking forward and one head is looking behind, looking to the past.

**Rail:** That's who Janus is, the god of beginnings, endings, and transitions.

**Kunin:** Exactly. And that is really important to me: that tension of being in both places at the same time or thinking about both places

at the same time.

**Rail:** Hindsight, foresight.

**Kunin:** Yes, what happens when you make a decision or don't make a decision.

**Rail:** But it's upside down. Is there meaning in inverting it?

**Kunin:** Yes, the reason I did that was because I wanted this to feel like a chunky, abstract mass.

**Rail:** It's pretty abstract because I actually hadn't noticed the nose, the nostrils, etc.

**Kunin:** It's not meant to be immediately identifiable and even if you don't identify it at all, it's okay. While I was working on the piece the title made sense. Creating that tension is intentional and creating an abstract form is intentional, giving the viewer hints of realism at the same time.

**Rail:** And the butterfly piece is—what's the title?

**Kunin:** This is simply called "Butterfly Rock." It's kind of this chunky landscape and sometimes it feels like a creature unto itself because there's so much movement in it, not that that's what I intended. Part of it is that I wanted to see what would happen if I piled up all these butterflies and made this horizontal form. You know, what would it look like? And how would I make it landscape-like? Scholar's rocks often have holes in them so you can see through them. Their irregularity—

**Rail:** —is so seductive. There's one more piece I want to talk about: the one I call "the chicken."

**Kunin:** Perhaps the butterflies start to look featherlike. You're seeing it as the whole abstract shape, which is great. It happens to be a gorilla head. It doesn't matter if you know what it is or not. It became obscured—totally obscured. The idea is that the butterflies are either taking over or emerging from it. It's called "Nectar" because they're getting nectar from the head. It has octopi on it as well. This is more or less taken from an Otto Dix piece that I saw, not that he used butterflies. It's about something being invaded, but I also think of Redon because of his use of butterflies, and because his pastels are iridescent to me. I love the way he creates orbs or a head floating in space.

**Rail:** It brings to mind a head floating in this blue, aqua, reddish, purple on the top background, like this metallic—it's not metallic but this gradation.

**Kunin:** Right, and it's definitely dreamlike. I have always loved his work very much, as well as the work of the Symbolist poets and artists. What I like about them is they were all about correspondence, about senses being taken into account in the work. Whether it be a visual work of art or a poem, the senses merge. And that's part of it, an homage to Redon, but it's also like Brancusi's "Sleeping Muse." As you isolate the head from the body, you can't help but have these art historical references there. It can be seen as a gruesome thing, chopping a head off a body, but it doesn't feel that way to me.

**Rail:** In sculpture particularly there's such a history of just the head and Spolia, Romans digging up the Greek statues, then the Romans replicating the Greeks. Plus, there's the whole museumology of preserving the past and holding onto certain things that were found, like the head or a foot or a hand or a nose or whatever. The dismemberment doesn't necessarily translate literally to the physical human body but it addresses the history, particularly the history of sculpture, where sometimes you only see fragments. With "Winged Victory" where is her head or her arms?

**Kunin:** Exactly. Yes, and we accept it. You make an excellent point because a lot of this work involves parts of animals and some of the work does have to do with seeing how works are presented in historical ways in museums. Fragmentation of the body is very much a part of my work.

**Rail:** The fragmentation of the body doesn't read in your work to me as cruel or violent. It's using it as sculptural element.

**Kunin:** It's a vehicle.



Julia Kunin, "Nectar," 2010. Ceramic. 9 × 14 × 11".  
Courtesy of James Dee.



**Rail:** If you're trying to address violence, you failed.

**Kunin:** [*Laughs.*] Fine. For me, there's just this bit of mortality implied in the work, maybe not violence.

**Rail:** There is darkness. In the small piece from the previous show, I wrote down just the word "darkness."

**Kunin:** There's a sense of the fleeting, of the temporary aspect of life in general that we see in the history of still life, that we see in memento mori. You have the tension between the fecundity of life and the destructive power of nature. I'm playing with both of those in a lot of these pieces.

**Rail:** Is instability and fluidity a concern in "Somnambulist"?

**Kunin:** I was trying to make something that looked like a skull and a mask combined with Cubist multiple planes.

**Rail:** Why is Cubism of your interest at this moment in time?

**Kunin:** I think there's a nostalgia for modernism that's crept into my work in the past eight years. I think as a sculptor I seem to keep going back to the forms that I grew up with and trying to transform them and bring them into a contemporary light. With "Somnambulist" I wanted to create the feeling of either liquid pouring out of this head or legs trailing down and pooling.

**Rail:** They're definitely legs. Were you a somnambulist?

**Kunin:** I never was but I feel like there's an element of sleepwalking in this work, sort of like you're halfway in a dream state floating through this mysterious house. It was exciting technically, figuring out how to construct these pieces with the beads and assemble them with aircraft cable. It was fun to make. The idea that the pieces could come into our space, get off the pedestal, be a little more literally free-flowing, and confront the body and space of the viewer in a more direct way was exciting. Whereas in the other work you place yourself in the world of the piece, this work comes into our world.

#### CONTRIBUTOR

**Maria Elena González**



Julia Kunin, "Outlook Garden," 2011. Porcelain. 32 × 16 × 11". Courtesy of James Dee.