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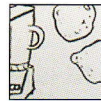
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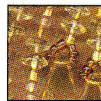
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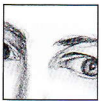
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## Burial Equipment for the Perceptive Parodist

Death is often a private matter, and prolonged public grieving is taboo. Mourners are to grieve in private spaces. Often, art works that deal with death are sombre, dark and meditative. The subversive work *Budget Ushabtis* by ceramist Monica Martinez is not. It juxtaposes death with humour, creating a transgressive space to approach a serious subject without the dogmatic trappings of societal taboos and/or religion.

Martinez is a third year ceramics student with a strong sculptural base. Her *Budget Ushabtis* piece consists of ten terracotta pseudo-self portraits. The ushabtis are sculpted with symbols in their hands representing activities that Martinez hates to undertake.<sup>1</sup> She explains the impetus for this work: "I have always had an interest in Egyptian culture and art, but this work was inspired by the *Egypt, Greece and Rome: Art of the Ancient Mediterranean* exhibition that was held at the Glenbow last year. The ushabtis in

particular had me thinking about what a modern person of limited means would have made to take over the day-to-day drudgery of their lives. In ancient times, it would have been a figure to harvest the grain, while today it would be a figure to harvest Safeway..."

An ushabti is a small figurative statue found in ancient Egyptian tombs. Its function was to take the place of the deceased in the performance of manual labour tasks in the afterlife. These tasks were symbolically represented with objects in the hands of the figure. The smaller, crudely modelled ones were produced in large numbers out of painted clay or faience for "persons of moderate means."<sup>2</sup> The figures were prefabricated in workshops and, once purchased, craftsmen would simply insert the appropriate name.

Martinez's ushabtis are made from terracotta, a material that is viewed by some as "lower" compared to precious porcelain. They are also made from one mold after

which the symbolic implements are added. These symbols break from the traditional ones found on the Egyptian ushabtis and give strength to Martinez's through their humorous juxtaposition of the ancient with the contemporary.

Humour is subversive. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician and scholar, asserts that laughter is the voice of the people, and it "builds its own world versus the official world."<sup>3</sup> Martinez's purposeful use of painted terracotta relates to this notion of class. Her ushabtis are not for the imagined tombs of the elite super-rich of today; they are for her. The humour found in Martinez's *Budget Ushabtis* is not satire, a stinging assault on human and societal hypocrisies where the satirist serves as a public awakener. Instead, Nicholas Roukes, an author, artist and humourologist, provides the term "perceptive parodists" as a more suitable term to describe humourists such as Martinez: "The perceptive parodist is a mimic who is acutely observant of reality. Parodists lampoon the customs, fads and trends, and curiosities of society and life, usually by imitating a serious subject in a ridiculous manner." The perceptive parodist may also mimic and lampoon fine art conventions and specific canonical works.

*Budget Ushabtis* references canonical Egyptian art to juxtapose the theme of death with humour. This creates a transgressive space that opens up discussion around both death and life after death. It fosters discussions relating to work and class, because the symbols for each individual would be different depending on his or her class. This transgressive, dialogue-filled space is a mark of the strength of Martinez's work and one can only hope that her collection of ushabtis will continue to grow.



Monica Martinez. *Budget Ushabtis*. 2007. Terracotta, acrylic paint. 8.75" x 2.5" x 1.5".