

About Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak's *Boxed* Series By Melana Zyla Vickers

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Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak's *Boxed* series explores the numerous meanings conjured by a given English-language figure of speech or play on words. By placing miniature plaster-white modeled human figures on various grounds, ranging from embroidery to family pictures to paper money, she creates tiny stages for these figures, where they act on their surroundings and the surroundings on them. With this approach, the artist strikes a whimsical, ironic, sometimes comedic note. She says this is a contrast to some of her more somber work. Yet whimsy and irony are very much a part of this artist's overall, intelligent style.

Bodnar-Balahutrak cleverly layers several meanings into each work in the *Boxed* series. And by presenting her works as windows or miniature stages, she invites the viewer to dream up many more.

Going for the Gold, its "stage" less than six by four inches, holds at least five times its size in significance. It is very much centered on hopes for a child. A gold wire with a circular end moves among the four adult figures -- the lucky, victorious sperm, perhaps? Or is it a gold wedding band, weaving the figures together in marriage? Whatever the case, it heads toward a higher goal within the frame, a baby. The baby is seen floating, in a deified pose, above the other figures. It is also encased in a glass box, an allegory of artificial fertilization, or a sign of its unattainable nature. The viewer is left curious about the four adult figures: Who are the man and woman? A prospective husband and wife? Other suitors? Relatives? Fertility specialists? Who are all these people needed for the driven woman, or man, to get to the gold? The irony in the piece and in the title is unmistakable.

Art-si-do is a play on "do-si-do" or "back to back," the lyric from the country square dance. To have fun and succeed at square-dancing, one needs to have a large group of people. Bodnar-Balahutrak seems to be suggesting the same is true of art, as a group of eight figures, some evidently from an earlier generation than the others, works together with one golden palette. The piece evokes joy, hinting at the importance of relationships and at the way some people help to lift others up.

Tri-umph is in a similar vein, with two figures reaching toward, or assisting, a third. Triumph, though, has an irony to it. The top figure looks as though he's hanging on for dear life. The bottom two figures may be playing catch-up. Are they wheezing and grasping their way up, "umph, umph," trying to get to the top figure?

De-face, which features an older male figure in overalls and a wide hat, and a picture of an elderly male priest, is among the series' more provocative pieces. It shows the figure in overalls holding, or rolling up, or ripping the picture as if it were a billboard image. Perhaps the figure and the picture are the same person, with *De-face* offering a comment on how removed a public face might be from the person behind that public face. The artist notes the priest is in fact her paternal grandfather. Whatever meaning she intended to inject into *De-face*, it's probable that the man she knew, and the one his parishioners knew, were quite different people. Alternately, the figure may be unrelated to the priest and may be defacing the picture, suggesting the highly contemporary — and also perennial — theme of conflict between clergy and lay people.

Break-through, featuring a male figure shoving a foot through a Ukrainian banknote, is possibly the most political piece, as the artist uses it to comment on the first currency issued by an independent Ukraine, her ancestral homeland. *Break-through* can be read as an optimistic image, the personification of Ukraine breaking through to the world of independently issued money and the end of Soviet domination. It can also be read as ironic criticism. When the coupon was issued, the country had been suffering from hyperinflation, and therefore the break through the floor of the coupon can be seen to refer to prices breaking away from the currency's value. The figure may also be protesting the terrible economic legacy Ukraine inherited from its Soviet overlords — kicking the currency and the economy itself.

As with much of Bodnar-Balahutrak's work, one cannot view *Boxed* without being stimulated and provoked. *Boxed* leaves the viewer feeling as though she has had an interesting conversation — not a bad reaction to art that was created around a theme of plays on words.

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