

# James Tisdale

# SOUTHERN GOTHIC

BY KAY WHITNEY

The strangeness and intensity of James Tisdale's subject matter—including prostitutes, Ku Klux Klan (KKK) members, and masked figures—is heightened by the theatricality and air of innocence of the pieces. His work grapples with the ominous issues of racism and social caste that are present in American culture but often not discussed. Tisdale's work resonates with current events—the deaths of the young African-American men Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin, and the 50th anniversary of Selma's Bloody Sunday—but is also suffused with meanings that raise the topical to the universal. The content of some of his work is confrontational, sometimes creating such discomfort that one of his sculptures was recently accepted for and subsequently rejected from an exhibition in Alabama that was to include a lecture and workshop.

## Poetic and Probing

Tisdale's work presents a range of characters whose gestures and expressions suggest intense inner dramas. The work's depth comes from a dual treatment of his subject matter; he tears away at social masks and also exposes his characters as vulnerable and human, combining the ugly with the beautiful. It is this combination of gentle compassion and deep curiosity regarding the hidden recesses of the psyche that is the hallmark of Tisdale's profound and original sculpture. The work is deeply poetic, intimate, and intuitive; it's also a probing investigation into realities that are intimately personal as well as social. He creates a world that can be grim—full of cruelty, heartbreak, and desperation—but also one characterized by enormous joy. What is consistent in his work is an attraction to the misfit, outcast, and eccentric. He never judges or parodies; he identifies closely with his subjects, finding





1 *St. Steppin' and Fetchin'*, 27 in. (69 cm) in height, 2013. 2, 3 *Ain't No Bed of Roses*, 24 in. (61 cm) in length, 2014. 1–3 Heavily grogged white earthenware or terra-cotta clay, fired to cone 1, then fired multiple times to cone 03.

deep connections with their experiences. Tisdale refers to his work as autobiographical, a product of growing up in Mississippi, but also uses it to represent broader themes—racism, sexuality, and religion.

Tisdale employs grotesque, uncanny, and sometimes humorous imagery to describe a culture of violence, bigotry, and religious intolerance. He is interested in the pathos of racial confrontation, poverty, and the isolation of people who have been stigmatized for living outside the norm. The combined influences of a devout Southern Baptist childhood, German Expressionism, Renaissance religious imagery, and Southern folk art mark his work deeply; the combination produces startling, dream-like figures wrapped in an atmosphere of intense solitude.

#### Process

Tisdale's pieces employ various techniques. Using terra cotta or heavily grogged white earthenware, he builds his pieces with coiling and pinching methods. The surfaces are created with several layers of underglazes, stains, and glazes. Sometimes these are wiped off and reapplied, sometimes treated like watercolors. The initial firing is to cone 1 followed by multiple oxidation firings to cone

03. Tisdale's use of color is rich and saturated; he employs extreme contrasts between flat matte areas and areas of high gloss.

As a result of his residency in China, Tisdale's work has become subtler, he uses fewer colors and has simplified his forms. Tisdale deals in extreme and sometimes mysterious situations; the dramas he depicts are simultaneously innocent and sinister. He employs numerous dichotomies of reference; love and hate, virgin and whore, stereotypes of blackness and whiteness, the personal versus political, innocence against the forces of bigotry, and racism. His figures are slightly monstrous and cartoony, flirting with kitsch and sentimentality, satirical but never cruel.

#### From Personal to Universal

Tisdale has made several mother-and-child pieces in which the female figure is black and the child white. These pieces reference his own childhood experience of being raised by a black woman in the ferociously racist south of the '60s and '70s. The works concerned with racism are often cryptic but, like most of his work, also incantatory and extravagant. Pieces such as *Southern Madonna* and *Ain't No Bed of Roses* evoke the bizarreness and ambiguity of the





4 *Stereotypical Pieta*, 24 in. (61 cm) in height, 2013. 5 *Southern Madonna*, 29 in. (74 cm) in height, 2013. 6 *Southern Peacock*, 29 in. (74 cm) in height. 7 *Standing Alone*, 28 in. (71 cm) in height, 2011. 4–7 Heavily grogged white earthenware or terra-cotta clay, fired to cone 1, then fired multiple times to cone 03.

relationship between black women and the white children they are raising. Tisdale invokes the ironic truth that black women raised many white Southern racists.

*Southern Madonna* portrays a plump, half-naked black woman wearing an apron, flounced skirt and holding a plump white child on her hip. Under her yellow apron is a skirt covered with eyes; the skirt-with-eyes is a motif Tisdale often uses and refers to the notion that God is always watching and sees all. The child has a pacifier firmly gripped in its mouth, wears a white hooded cap and a facial mask that mimics the hoods and masks worn by the KKK during their gatherings. *Ain't No Bed of Roses* has a somewhat more mythical and metaphorical configuration; the half-nude, black mother figure is lying on her stomach, one hand pressed to her heart. Her knotted hair is tied up in a kerchief—a reflection of the racist cliché of the southern mammy. Underneath her is a pile of red roses, an unobtainable luxury. This time, the pacifer-faced, masked and hooded boy baby is literally riding on her; she is saddled with him. The title broadcasts the sentiment; it's a given that the lives of these women were emphatically no bed of roses.

*St. Steppin' and Fetchin'* and *Stereotypical Pieta*, are influenced by classical sculpture. Tisdale lived in Italy while he was completing his MFA and the compositional style and religious imagery of the Italian Renaissance permeates these works. The content riffs on minstrel shows—the racist, comedic vaudeville skits performed by white actors or musicians in blackface. These routines perpetuated stereotypes of Afro-Americans as lazy, superstitious buffoons. The imagery of *St. Steppin'...* is based on the story of Saint Sebastian, a Roman soldier who secretly converted to Christianity. When it was discovered that he was a Christian, it was ordered that he be killed

by arrows. Tisdale gives this image of martyrdom a different spin by recasting it as an allegory of racism. The clumsy figure is heavily influenced by southern folk art and its title alludes to a racial slur and minstrel show stereotype of African-Americans. As he says, he uses the tree as “the icon for the whipping post of the Jim Crow—era as well a symbol for the present day obstacles unjustly placed before many.”

*Stereotypical Pieta* is stereotypical in the sense that it re-employs and reinterprets the conventional representation of the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Christ. Tisdale departs from the convention by presenting a dead Christ in blackface, a Christ whose body is both white and black. This complex work is about hypocrisy and the use of religion to further racism; the KKK often emphasizes its Christian beliefs to justify its violent bigotry. As Tisdale says, “people hide behind the veil of religion to justify their hate and fear of someone who is different.” The Virgin Mary bears two small eyes in the folds of her head covering, symbols for the watchful eyes of God. The figure of Christ is racially ambiguous—incorporating two different skin colors—and reminding the viewer how Christ's injunction to love thy neighbor is often ignored or distorted.

*James Tisdale is currently the Ceramic Program Coordinator at The Contemporary in Austin, Texas. In 2010 he was a resident artist at the Pottery Workshop in Jingdezhen, China. He has also had residencies at the International Ceramic Studio in Kecskemet, Hungary, The Clay Studio in Philadelphia, and the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Helena, Montana. He is a past winner of a NEA grant.*

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