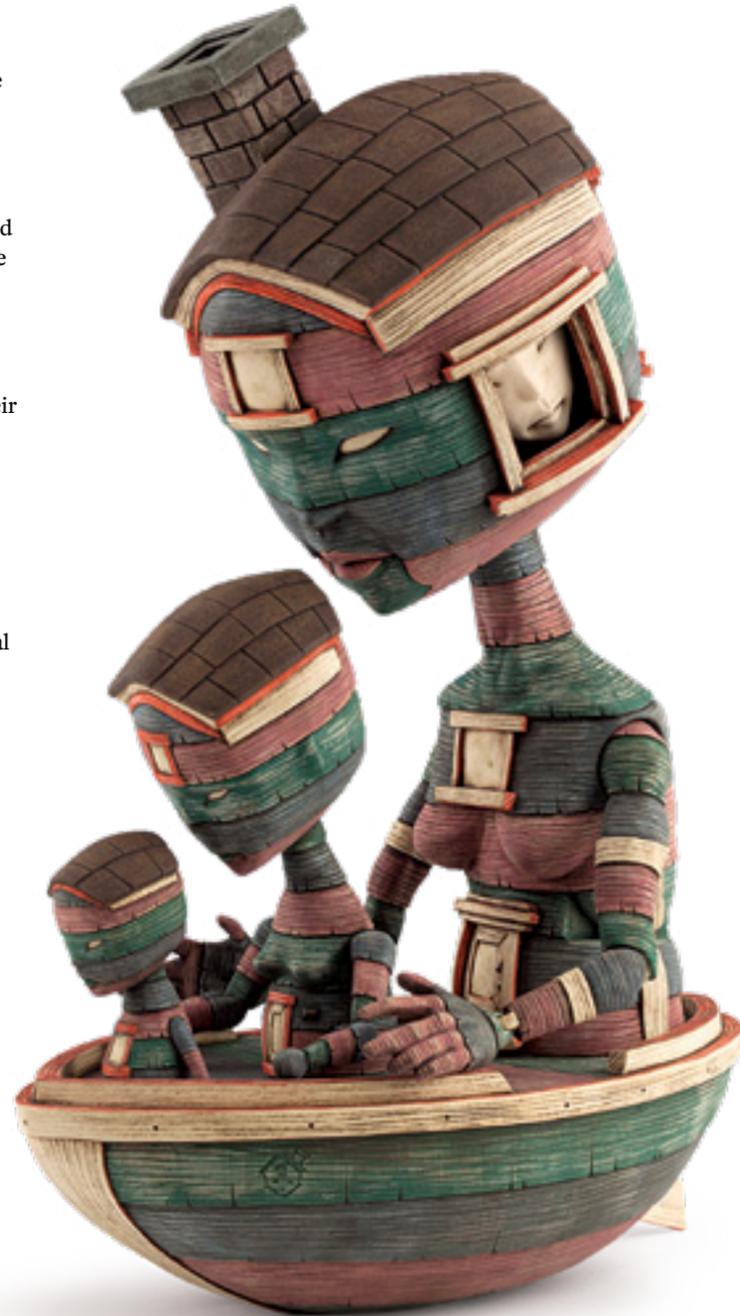


At Home in the World

*In an overwhelming universe,
Calvin Ma's charming
clay figures carry a sense of calm.*

STORY BY *Gussie Fauntleroy* PORTRAIT BY *Mark Tuschman*

IT'S NO BIG DEAL THAT TEEN-age Mutant Ninja Turtles were Calvin Ma's favorite action-figure toys as a boy. After all, the green warriors for good were wildly popular when the 34-year-old artist was a kid. And it turns out that his go-to choice of toys was almost uncannily appropriate as a harbinger of the work he creates now. The ceramic figures in Ma's Homebodies series not only carry their houses around wherever they go, as turtles do, they *are* the houses. Their large heads are topped with shingled roofs and brick chimneys, sometimes emitting spherical puffs of smoke. Their bodies, and the fantastical vehicles or whimsical steeds they ride, are ribbed and textured, like slats of wood.



That's one way for an artist with social anxiety to re-create the easy, familiar space of home, even as he moves through potentially uncomfortable situations out in the world. Ma has earned recognition most artists would covet – first place at the ACGA Clay and Glass National Juried Exhibition in 2013 and Best of Show at the Workhouse Arts Center Clay National competition in 2012. But, while gratifying, those and other awards have landed him in crowded artist receptions and other not-so-comfortable social events.

He tolerates those gatherings because, for him, making his figures is not only art, it's therapy. As he works, the San Francisco ceramist returns to the state of private, unfettered

Growing up, Calvin Ma loved action figures; his boyhood passion blossomed into an art career. Today the San Francisco ceramist makes expressive figures such as *Reserved* (2010, right) that draw on his struggles with social anxiety.

LEFT: **Feeling Small**, 2013, stoneware, glaze, stain, 13 x 5 x 9 in.

Small photo: Calvin Ma



Ma's *Homebodies* are "action figures" who feel most at ease and genuine at home.

imagination that held him in thrall as a boy, when stories of action and heroism unfolded through characters he could manipulate. Except that now, in his *Homebodies* and *Blend In* series, Ma's love of play and fear of crowds are the inspiration for his vulnerable figures doing the best they can in the world – like all of us.

Growing up in San Francisco, Ma always had small animal companions – hamsters, turtles, goldfish – and a couple of good friends. But, for the most part, he found it difficult to socialize with other kids. "I wanted to be part of a group, but something inside me prevented it," he says. So he spent long stretches of time lost in the world of action figures. The *Ninja Turtles* were appealing in part because, while the four characters have very different personalities, he says, "I loved how they all got along. The smart one, the tough one, the renegade, and the fun one – a happy, weird turtle family." Often, he would use the figures to replay a cartoon episode he'd just watched and then continue the story beyond the ending of the show.

By the end of high school, Ma had developed an interest in drawing, but his parents hoped to nudge him toward a "paying job." So he struck a compromise: He earned a BA in industrial arts from San Francisco State University, with the aim of working in the toy industry in product design. Initially drawn to polymer clay, he studied sculpting, model- and mold-making, and casting. After taking a few months off after graduation, he enrolled in the Academy of Art University. "With the first ceramics class, I fell in love with the material. It reminded me of being a kid with the action figures," he says.

Ma began his *Blend In* series as he was earning his MFA; in

Photos: Calvin Ma



Lighten Up, 2017, stoneware, glaze, 16 x 13.25 x 9.5 in.



Different Beat, 2017, stoneware, glaze, luster, 20 x 12 x 9 in.



Ma transforms uncomfortable moments into vulnerable figures doing the best they can.

The Walk, 2013, stoneware, glaze, stain, 16 x 14 x 6 in.

Photos: Calvin Ma



ABOVE:
Take Flight, 2017, stoneware, glaze, acrylic rod, 15.5 x 9 x 11 in.

BELOW:
Stag, 2015, stoneware, glaze, stain, 16 x 7 x 7 in.

2017, he revisited the series, making a new body of work for a solo show at Sherrie Gallerie in Ohio. Having made a plaster mold of what he calls a “generic figure” – big head, rounded belly, simple arms and legs – he began experimenting with various textures in stoneware. The bodies mimic elements of nature – a cactus, palm tree, honeycomb – attracting small animals and insects, fulfilling a desire for companionship, Ma says. He adds that the series “spoke to my personality, even as an adult, of always trying to blend in.”

Homebodies began as part of that series, with a figure trying to blend in as a house. Ma loved the way it looked and immediately recognized the wealth of stories such a character could tell. Here was an “action figure” who feels most comfortable and genuine at home. So whenever the figure goes out, the protective barrier of walls and a roof come along.

Often a creature or an odd mode of transport is part of the piece, just as animals and vehicles made Ma’s action-figure play more interesting as a boy. Now, however, the vehicles

or accessories that accompany the Homebody help tell a story about an emotion or experience. Ma remembers being in grad school and disembarking from the city bus at the university, along with scores of other students. Caught in a surge of torsos and legs as the crowd streamed onto campus, he found himself suddenly feeling nervous, awkward, and small.



He became so self-conscious that he had to slow down, re-focus, and remind himself how to walk. He connected that feeling with the AT-AT from *Star Wars*, a giant transport and combat vehicle with four lanky, giraffe-like legs: In *The Walk* (2013), Ma reproduced his discomfort through a long-legged Homebody concentrating hard just to get around.

Ma also riffed on the movie *Spaceballs*, a spoof on *Star Wars*, in which the film's goofy characters travel through space in an RV with airplane wings. Aware that he tends to take himself too seriously, he created *Lighten Up* (2017), in which a winged RV is a reminder to do just that. He plans other new works with Homebodies interacting with those of their own kind or with objects – a boom box, a typewriter, a camera – that stand in for feelings and memories he associates with artifacts from his past.

These days, Ma rarely sketches his ideas. In the studio he shares with his wife, ceramic artist Erika Sanada, he prefers to jump right into the making. He begins with the mold he created for the basic figure and adds texture, porcelain components such as small white faces, slab-built stoneware elements including vehicles, and color slips, firing each piece three times. Any hesitation he might feel navigating the world beyond his doors vanishes when he's working. "From the moment I conceptualize a piece in my head, I'm super-pumped to get in the studio," he says. "I love doing every bit of it."

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Calvin Ma will have a solo show at Tansey Contemporary in Santa Fe, June 22 – July 15. Gussie Fauntleroy is a Colorado writer and editor, and the author of three books on visual artists.



Brace Yourself, 2017, stoneware, glaze, resin, 10.5 x 5 x 4.5 in.



Sway, 2017, stoneware, glaze, 15 x 9 x 4.5 in.



Weather It, 2017, stoneware, glaze, 12 x 6 x 4.5 in.



One Step at a Time, 2017, stoneware, glaze, 9.5 x 4.5 x 4 in.



Cave In, 2017, stoneware, glaze, resin, 13.5 x 7 x 7 in.



Little Me, 2017, stoneware, glaze, 15 x 8.5 x 5.5 in.

Photos: Calvin Ma

The overarching theme of the *Blend In* figures is the desire for companionship.



At Arm's Length, 2017, stoneware, glaze, 9 x 7 x 4.5 in.