

# A Mild-Mannered Doctor With a Passionate Sideline

## A Chat With the Artist

By **KATE TAYLOR** | October 25, 2006

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IF CHRISTOPHER ADAMS, NOW A RESIDENT IN DERMATOLOGY, SOMEDAY HANGS HIS ARTWORK IN HIS MEDICAL OFFICE, his patients will be surprised. Mr. Adams's sculptures are not soothing. They are too alive and exotic — in some cases, downright fierce. Some resemble headless squid; others look like spiny plants. A few could represent a mutant species of insect. Frank Maresca, an owner of Ricco Maresca Gallery, where Mr. Adams is having his first solo show, describes the sculptures, made in clay and glazed to achieve dramatic coloration and textures, as looking like "the natural world kind of gone alien."

Mr. Adams made his art only for himself, until last year two friends, Peter Stamberg and Paul Aferiat — architects with connections in the art world — discovered his sculptures and decided that they should be seen. Now he has a gallery. He had a sold-out debut at the Scope Art Fair in March; among the buyers was the director of MoMA, Glenn Lowry, who purchased a piece for himself. And Messrs. Stamberg and Aferiat, who are moonlighting as artist-managers, are in talks with several museums about possible solo shows.

Despite his sudden success, Mr. Adams, who graduated from Harvard and Columbia Medical School, has no plans to give up medicine. He says he needs something to get him up in the morning and that the constraints of his day job fuel his art. Indeed, one can hardly imagine him being more prolific, since he already produces at a manic rate: He estimates that, in the last two and half years, while finishing his training and starting his residency, he has made between 1,500 and 1,900 pieces.

Psychologists could cite Mr. Adams as a perfect example of the dual artistic and scientific mind. His art is inspired by biological forms but goes far beyond them; in doing so, it expresses a side of Mr. Adams's personality that neither personal interactions nor his medical work discloses. According to his friends, Mr. Adams is frequently quiet; in an interview, he comes across as sweet and gentle, as well as unaccustomed to talking about himself. The personality that comes out in the work is more violent — if also, like the dermatologist, attuned to detail and skilled at physical manipulation.

Mr. Adams's background in biology "became a part of his vocabulary, and he uses it to express himself," Mr. Maresca said. "Whatever is going on in Chris's brain, these very alien sculptures are part of his being. They're the equivalent of a Rorschach test — not a test someone would show to Christopher, but a Rorschach test that

came out of his head."

Mr. Adams describes his background as "plants, bugs, and fish." One of the thrills of his childhood, he said, was to be driven into Cambridge to the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard, where he studied the glass flowers and stuffed animals. He chose to go to Harvard, he said, in part because of its huge collection of dead fish.

The evolutionary chain that led to Mr. Adams's current work began several years ago with a foray into making ceramic planters for his many plants. (He says he "obsessively mail orders" succulents — aloe, cactuses, gasteria, and haworthia — from nurseries in Arizona.) "The initial ones were pretty much a flower pot with tentacles on it that held it on the ground — sort of like if you took a squid, turned it upside down, jiggled it, and froze it," he said. He gave them as gifts, but they turned out not to be very practical. "They were very unstable and fragile," he said. "Inevitable they fell off windowsills. Apparently cats liked to attack them as well."

After turning the pots around so that they hung on the wall, he decided that they had an aesthetic life of their own, and so ditched both the plants and functionality. During the last two years, he has refined the form, arriving at an arbitrary two-tiered structure with 18 appendages, within which he achieves incredible diversity by varying the size and shape and color of the appendages.

"The analogy I think of is with a concept in nature called adaptive radiation," Mr. Adams explained. "There's a certain group of fishes [called African cichlids] in the Rift lakes of Africa. Pretty much nothing was living there until one of these things got there, and from this one ancestral, prototypical species you now have this immense array of hundreds or thousands of different species. They have different colors and different trophic behaviors and different mating behaviors, but they all look pretty much the same — they all hearken back to the ancestor."

His sculptures invoke other biological concepts, as well. Some are almost camouflaged, while others are large and brightly colored, as in species where sexual selection favors large, brightly-colored individuals. Some are pure white, "like organisms that disappeared into caves and over time lost their pigment," Mr. Adams explained, "so you have stark white salamanders and crayfish and crickets."

Mr. Adams also achieves unusual effects with his materials. He stretches the clay into unbelievably long tendrils, twists it into corkscrews, and flattens it into leaves that seem like they'll break at the slightest touch. He uses combinations of glazes that bubble or crack — fatal flaws in pots or dishes meant for functional use, but effects that he deliberately seeks.

When a reporter suggested that it's not uncommon for doctors to have such avocations, Mr. Adams immediately agreed. "When I was working in the entomology department at Harvard, they acquired a collection of moths from Dedham, Massachusetts," he said. "It was from a pediatrician named Dr. Winter." The collection comprised 30 or 40 cabinets of, he said, "exquisitely mounted" specimens. It moved him deeply. "This was his quiet life's passion. During the day he was Dr. Winter, the community pediatrician, but in the middle of the night, he was out there with a spotlight netting moths."

For a long time, Mr. Adams wrapped his sculptures and stored them away, imagining a future for them perhaps similar to that of Dr. Winter's moths. That vision has changed now, and Mr. Adams' sculptures may be more likely to end up in museums than in warehouses. Still, like Dr. Winter, he seems happy to lead a double life: by day, mild-mannered dermatologist, scraping off moles and examining rashes; by night, the creator of a surreal natural world, brought to life in his mind and fixed in clay by his hands.

*Until November 18 (529 W. 20th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-627-4819)*

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