

RICCO MARESCA GALLERY NEW YORK

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THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE **Toni Ross**

The best creative work—the work that makes you see the world a little differently—almost always transcends conventional categories, which is another way of saying that it exists at the intersection of things that do not usually go together. And so it is that Toni Ross’s sculpture is both figurative and abstract, both heavy and light, both rough and smooth, both delicate and strong. It projects a sense of great serenity, and yet it seems full of energy. Her forms feel fresh and new, yet they are primal and basic too, and resonate with a sense of time.

The word “balance” keeps coming to mind, since so much of Ross’s work involves the search for, and the discovery of, equilibrium. Her ceramic pieces are worlds unto themselves, worlds in which the forces of nature, the reality of materials, and the instinct toward composition are all held in complex, delicate balance. The equilibrium is hard-won. It is not the simple counterpoint of a line here, a line there; you feel the struggle to shape a material, the effort to delve beneath the surface of form, to work out the mysteries, to express the notion that however hard and set these ceramic pieces are, true and permanent equilibrium is elusive, and that no piece is an answer in itself, but part of a larger search.

The relatively small size of these pieces enhances their strength and gives them another level of paradox. A sense of power is easy to express through size; it is much more difficult to convey within the small, contained space of pieces that are measured in inches rather than feet. But concentrated intensity is very much part of what Ross is making—and then holding onto, not letting the sense of intensity diminish even as she resolves the piece into a harmonic, balanced whole.

Ross has sculpted many shapes—tall vessels, flat curving planes, intersecting planes, tiny pyramids—but it is the cube that has preoccupied her most of late. Her boxes and cubes can evoke the feeling of architecture, but buildings themselves are not her subject, and the last things in the world that her pieces could be are architectural models. They are not models of anything. Yet the containment of space, the essential mission of architecture, is very much what she is exploring, and she does it with subtlety and mystery. What is inside that ceramic cube, partially ripped open? Is the string that surrounds it holding it together, or just a decoration? And it is not only the cubes that raise these questions. Is there something behind the piece that looks to be two-dimensional, but that we know is not? Is the space that matters the space that is contained, or the space that is defined in some other way, by not being enclosed?

Some of the cubes sit flat on the ground; others are slightly tilted, and several are on an edge or balanced on a corner. The balancing cubes at first glance recall the work of Tony Rosenthal, or Isamu Noguchi, but Ross’s cubes are different, and not only because they are so much smaller. They look to be not so much balanced on a corner as dug into the earth at the corner. You feel the connection between the cube and the surface it is on. These cubes do not prance on their corner; they are anchored to their corner, and they make you think of being under the pull of gravity, not transcending it.

You feel, too, the presence of clay in this work, fully and constantly. Part of it is in the texture, in the exquisite roughness of many of these surfaces, less like pottery than like the raked sand of a Japanese garden. And much of it comes from the absence of a glaze, since even the most beautifully wrought glazing inserts a new layer of material in between the artist and the viewer, putting the work at a greater remove. Glazed ceramics are finished, and aspire to a shiny perfection. Ross's unglazed pieces all share a natural color, far subtler in its murky, muddy tones than any bright glaze could be. They evoke the aura of process, and hence the fact of incompleteness. The piece may be finished, but it reminds you that it is part of a world that is never complete.

If expressing the materiality of clay is the most important thing in establishing the tone of this work, the string is increasingly prevalent in Ross's pieces, becoming the clay's counterpoint: it is tensile and taut, light and thin where the clay is heavy and solid. It entered her pieces almost inadvertently. She first experimented with string as a way of creating traces of lines as the pieces were fired in the kiln, and then realized that the string interested her as a material that, on its own terms, could enter into a new kind of discourse with the clay: instead of just inscribing lines on the clay, the string could remain and be a three-dimensional line, it could bind the clay and at the same time dance across its surface. Clay, in its raw state, is flexible, almost fluid, and the string's malleability evokes the sense of movement that the clay has lost by being fired. The string is a critical part of the composition, but it feels more temporal than the fired clay, since we know that it could change at the flick of a finger, whereas the fired clay is rigid and fixed, no longer fluid.

The sense of remnants, of leftover pieces, is also present here. Some of the smaller pieces are quite literally remnants, sections broken off from cubes to allow the cubes to balance on an edge or a corner—which Ross has then used as the basis for other pieces. Many of the compositions are made up of multiple remnants, joined together to make new wholes, sometimes combined with more complete geometric shapes. These compositions provide another kind of metaphor for completeness, the notion of a whole made up of disconnected, disparate parts.

When you look at Ross's work, you think about things like this, but not, in truth, for very long, since it is the real gift of these pieces to take you beyond the intellectual exercise of form into a realm of feeling. These compelling works —and they are all, without exception, possessed of a quiet, firm beauty—are, in the end, ruminations on emptiness and presence, inquiries into the role the physical object can have in making life better. It is hard not to think of Japanese aesthetic traditions here, as well as of Cycladic sculpture. Ross's work is outwardly simple, natural, and understated, and it manages with minimal gesture and not a hint of excess to evoke an entire inner world.

Paul Goldberger

Stele #24, 2016 | stoneware and slip | 18.5 x 15.25 x 5.5 in (47 x 38.7 x 14 cm)





Strata #3, 2016 | stoneware and slip | 27.75 x 20.25 x 2.25 in (70.5 x 51.4 x 5.7 cm)





Strata #5, 2016 | stoneware and slip | 35.75 x 20 x 3 in (90.8 x 50.8 x 7.6 cm)



Stele #21, 2016 | stoneware, slip and cotton thread | 18 x 8.75 x 5 in (45.7 x 22.2 x 12.7 cm)





Untitled, 2016 | stoneware and slip | 9.5 x 8 x 8.5 in (24.1 x 20.3 x 21.6 cm)





Strata #4, 2016 | stoneware and slip | 25 x 10 x 2.12 in (63.5 x 25.4 x 5.4 cm)



Stele #26, 2016 | stoneware, slip and gold leaf | 8.75 x 6 x 2.5 in (22.2 x 15.2 x 6.3 cm)







Strata #2, 2016 | stoneware and slip | 27.5 x 16.75 x 2.25 in (69.8 x 42.5 x 5.7 cm)



Stele #20, 2016 | stoneware, slip and hemp thread | 18.25 x 15.75 x 6.5 in (46.4 x 40 x 16.5 cm)







Stele #19, 2016 | stoneware, slip and hemp thread | 17.75 x 13.5 x 5 in (45.1 x 34.3 x 12.7 cm)

Stele #4, 2016 | stoneware and slip | 13.62 x 9 x 4.5 in (34.6 x 22.9 x 11.4 cm)







Stele #15, 2016 | stoneware, graphite and slip | 11.5 x 8.25 x 4 in (29.2 x 21 x 10.2 cm)

Untitled, 2015 | stoneware, slip, gold leaf and cotton thread | 16.5 x 15.25 x 15.25 in (41.9 x 38.7 x 38.7 cm)







Untitled, 2015 | brushed black and white slip stoneware | 11.75 x 10.75 x 11.75 in (29.8 x 27.3 x 29.8 cm)



Untitled, 2015 | black and white slip stoneware and hemp thread | 11.75 x 10.87 x 10.5 in (29.8 x 27.6 x 26.7 cm)







Stele #23, 2016 | stoneware, slip and hemp thread | 17.2 x 6.75 x 5.12 in (43.8 x 17.1 x 13 cm)





Tablet, Cubical Moon #15, 2016 | black clay and slip | 3.75 x 3.75 x 2 in (9.5 x 9.5 x 5.1 cm)

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