

# ANNABETH ROSEN

Nancy Margolis Gallery, New York, NY  
February 27 – April 12, 2003

"Of all the remarkable things in ceramics," writes Annabeth Rosen, "the explosion of a piece may be the most shocking." In addition to recovering the fallout from accidents of the kiln, Rosen works with a hammer and chisel, prying loose fragments of fired clay to form sculptures as gnarly and convoluted as they are explosive. If all the breakage suggests energy verging on violence, her reckless recent works also have an irrepressible buoyancy.

Complex in process as well as character, Rosen's sculptures, assembled from the agglomeration of distinct sculptural components, often involve chalky white slip fired over deep-colored glazes. The surfaces that result are ashy, as if from the aftermath of disaster, though other associations come to mind: the white-powdered faces of classical Chinese theater, or African ritual face painting; a sense of ghostliness and also of power, expressed as something opposite to shadow, an illumination with no external source.

At the same time, humor abounds. In some cases, the glazes are reticulated in a way that mimics cantaloupe rinds or lemon zest. Other forms are dented and fuzzed to suggest fruit gone soft with rot; there are stripes, and knobs, and roundish forms sliced like radishes destined for a plate of *crudités*. Some components resemble mushrooms or gourds, or gourds so attenuated their rounded heads and elongated tails could be massive sperm; there are also comma-shaped forms that are vaguely vaginal, and an abundance of curving tubular shapes made with extruded clay. In the accompanying catalog essay, Sarah Bodine writes, "The antique surface is analogous to the way old linen begins to yellow, foxing splotches discolor parchment paper, or lichen clings to marble statuary, eating away at nose and fingertip." But we are also led to less decorous comparisons: festive, clownish, brash, Rosen's work can evoke a full plate of food begging to be thrown.

Along with a near endless range of surface texture, the sculptures' overall shapes vary too, though not as widely. The prevailing impression is of living organisms, both emergent and self-cannibalizing. Some of the sculptures are squat and blocky, others are small towers that taper at midsection and erupt, gently, at the top. *Chromus* is a short, squarish work that swirls at its core with a snake pit of coiled forms. *Glome* and *Corn* are globular, their floury white balls and pods erupting like a spectral bloom. *Cinctus I*, a pile of tubular and knob-headed forms, rises from a square base to a narrow waist before expanding into a crown of distinctly phallic rods. Though *Omnino* is a shade smaller, and its tapering body rises to a crest that is a relatively compact jumble, it positively explodes with color, texture and exuberant formal discord.

Rosen's earlier work involved variations on ceramic tiles, with sculptural articulation of enormous vigor sprouting from square flat surfaces. These tiles had affinities with architectural ornamentation, from Luca della Robbia's glazed terra-cotta plaques, icons of abundance, to Antoni Gaudí's improvisatory integration of curvilinear architecture and decoration, to Louis Sullivan's muscular, ornate decorative programs for early skyscrapers. In Rosen's recent, free-standing work, oddly enough, it is easier to see connections to painting: Giuseppe Arcimboldo's 16th-century images of fruits and vegetables that form hidden faces seem relevant, as do Julian Schnabel's broken-crockery paintings and their unconcealed bravado. An affinity can be discerned, too, with the gestural abstraction of John Chamberlain's sculpture. Indeed, it could be said that what Chamberlain's early work was to automotive metal, Annabeth Rosen's is to fired clay: as muscular as it is delicate, and brimming above all with surprise. —NANCY PRINCENTHAL

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