

ON FIRST IMPRESSION, Annabeth Rosen’s current work has the look of Antiquity. There is a chalky white dryness that seems to be eroding in smudgy dark patches. Signs of discoloration and decay suggest a prolonged exposure to the elements. These effects arrive from Annabeth’s layered glazing procedure. Her base clay is a rich brown earthenware that she fires with luminescent glazes—a bilious yellow and an acid chrome green. Atypically, she then recoats the entire surface with a porous white slip. This veil of slip, which cracks and crazes as it expands during firing, allows the clay body or shiny glaze underneath to be revealed, especially at jagged edges or sudden shifts in contour. The underlying glaze, then, appears to have erupted, staining the white skin from beneath.

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. The balls embedded at the top of this work seem to ooze a shiny, brown juice as though rotting on the vine, and the shadowy patches overall resemble years of accumulated soot on a limestone facade, where rain-water rivulets seep into and darken the crusty outer layer, or where residues of ash are eerie reminders of a historical conflagration.

The glaze now appears to be a hint of the past—a pentimento of darkened, fused colors. It is analogous to time and aging, not only in the ceramic process itself, but also in the imagery of nature eroding the manmade, the vagaries of natural forces attacking and overcoming futile attempts at permanence.

A fascination with the antique dates back to Petrarch, the first Humanist gardener. Petrarch viewed his work in garden design as being similar to his poetic oeuvre in promoting the virtues of contemplation and edifying thought of the ancients. Therefore, he employed statuary, architectural ornament and plant arrangements equally with respect to their symbolic power. And so, the Italian Renaissance garden came to be identified more as a product of man than of nature.

Annabeth’s current work similarly uses the power of plant symbolism. These statues are often positioned atop a thick, sturdy ceramic slab, securely grounding them with an architectural platform and establishing a context, a sense of place, for the play of nature and artifice. This is a place of theater—an image of moving, animated line, a packed, undulating mass that casually compresses and distorts the profile of the statuesque form. Her composite shapes, ambiguously lively yet dormant, appear to be tendrils entwining, girdling and then growing free from an implied structure beneath, as if nature, over time, has engulfed an old garden sculpture. For artists of the Renaissance, copiousness and abundance in nature translated into the capricious and the bizarre, resulting in grandiose ornaments of fantastic imagery. This in turn produced greater difficulties in rendering human complexity and invention, placing increased demands on virtuosity.

The distinctive elements of Renaissance architectural ornament have been present in Annabeth’s work throughout her career, especially in the various phases of earlier tile work. In these she adopted the format of the wall-mounted tile or plaque or its contemporary relative the modernist plate. Here is where the precedents of Luca della Robbia, the

Quattrocento master of glazed terracotta wall reliefs, are instructive. With their appearance of deep relief, Annabeth’s earlier tile work similarly animated the architectural space of the wall. Using a thick, flat slab, either rounded or squared, she applied her signature motifs abstracted fruit, leaf or flower-bud elements or the suggestion of foodstuffs, olives, macaroni or confections—either serially around the edge or individually in a unified pattern over the entire face of the tile. Now, the tile face itself has expanded into greater relief, the motif packed into chaotic, three-dimensional masses or mounds. These are organized not with any particular pattern in mind but by rhythmic accumulations of elements, including broken shards from previous pieces and newly hand-formed components that are reassembled, reglazed and refired or glued. Each slab has a sort of visual concentricity, which coalesce into focus, as if this is a portrait of an exaggerated tile rather than the tile itself.

Annabeth’s newest work is reminiscent of another Renaissance concept, that of the Mannerist “serpentine.” The theory proposes that to obtain the most graceful figure one should render it twisting like a snake in motion. In this serpentine mode, the posture of the figure reflects an effortless torsion, a movement in space that connotes inner energy, applying equally to both the figure as a whole and to its component parts.

Similarly, a third dramatic Renaissance style—the pastoral—comes to mind. Here notions of artifice and natural world collide, presupposing an aura of perfection in nature. The pastoral superseded the merely picturesque. It invoked an ideal richness and harmony through artistic manipulation. The pastoral artist would shear shrubs into tight boxes, compacting the leaves so densely that they began to resemble a green stone. Annabeth does much the same when she compresses thousands of bits of ceramic material, both exploded shards and fragments chiseled off previously fired pieces, into massive cubic forms. For pastoral effects, artists have manipulated nature in many bizarre ways, making it feel bloated, rough and decomposed, even to the extent of exploding holes in rock to create artificial underground grottos. These grottos test the boundary between natural forms and manmade, manipulated forms, further confusing the age-old question: Is it art or is it reality?

Annabeth has been inspired by her move a half-dozen years ago to a teaching position at University of California Davis. Abruptly extracted from a dingy Philadelphia neighborhood, surrounded by dark alleys and decaying brick, she began to experience the boundless world of verdant, sensuous West-Coast natural growth, although the sensation presumably is not unlike that of the interior of her Philadelphia warehouse studio/loft, which, after she had cemented floor-to-ceiling a brilliant mixture of tile mosaics, resembled a living grotto.

Moving to California, she says, initially gave her a profound sense of displacement. But now this feeling has been supplanted by wonder at the abundance and luxuriousness of her new natural surroundings, and has provided fresh imagery and increased dynamic structure to her work. Her current pieces manifest and grapple with the unique interpretation of postures culled from combining the practiced hand of the manmade with nature’s divine model.

—SARAH BODINE

CHECKLIST

1. **CHROMUS**, 2002, 12 X 23 X 23
2. **CINCTUS I**, 2002, 30 X 19 X 19
3. **CINCTUS II**, 2002, 32 X 18 X 18
4. **CIRRUS**, 2002, 29 X 20 X 20
5. **CORM**, 2002, 14 diameter
6. **DUO**, 2002, 21 X 10 X 10
7. **GLOME**, 2002, 12 diameter
8. **OMNINO**, 2002, 27 X 21 X 21

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MOVING IN SPACE

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