Sheboygan, WI
Annnabeth Rosen
John Michael Kohler Arts Center for the Arts
Annnabeth Rosen’s work is both wild and wistful, her surfaces packed with whimsical detail and characterized by odd color juxtapositions. Although they bear a distant relationship to the large platters of the eccentric 18th-century French ceramic sculptor Bernard Palissy, her works are utterly original. Blending obsessively repeated detail with the concern of late 20th-century object-making, form and surface perform an intricate balancing act, neither in control of the other. Rosen manipulates form as if it were a constantly shifting pattern and treats form as if it were dimensional. She unifies the aesthetic and the conceptual, cramming them with meaning and detail. The work is elegant, beautiful without appearing decorative, seductive without being cheap thrills. The Kohler exhibition, skillfully installed by curator Lisa Berger, is a small retrospective of the past four years of Rosen’s work.

Rosen’s current work bears no relation to the ceramic vessel tradition, instead, an arena that continues to attract many ceramic sculptors. It renews a cohesive link to building construction, particularly that given known as fantastical architecture, than to the sculpture tradition. This is a consequence of her process; the pieces are assembled in floor-like layers, recasting the feeling of architectural space. Although they employ neither the mathematical logic nor the standard right angles customary in Western architecture, her use of a planar orientation with structures rising from it makes a metaphorical link to building construction. Her work seems to have some precedent in the works of visionary buildings such as Antonio Gaudi, Bruno Taut, and Simon Pfeil, constructor of the Watts Towers in Los Angeles.

Several of the pieces are pierced and single-layered. These tile-like works are not relief forms but penetrate shapes that allow light to pass through from behind, denying descriptive and decorative adjunct to form. Rosen’s pieces fuse form and decoration.

Rosen’s objects could not be made from any substance other than clay; there is an appropriateness and an inevitability in her choice of material that constitutes a substantial part of the work’s meaning. Thickly layered and carefully weighted, her sculptures still imply fragility because they are so apparently constructed from clay. The once-yellow, white, and green colors of her pieces accumulate rather than disguise their mineral origins. The layers of glaze are utterly evocative as skin, as a glass-like, frail membrane that, while tinting the surfaces, leaves the edges exposed, revealing their earthenware substrate. These glazes are also crackled, mimicking the intense action of the heat that produced them. Rosen fabricates her work in an unorthodox manner, embedding shards of previously fired pieces into a layer of unfired clay. These shards, which resemble accretions of broken crockery, consist of an enormous number of pieces that simulate warped butters, stale biscuits, and other foodstuffs. The density and weightiness of their parent material. Her works forge a connection to the huge, organic terracotta decorative plaques employed by Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and many other turn-of-the-century architects. Rosen’s work is a postmodern variation of Chicago school architectural detailing, combining Neoclassicism with her own variant on biomorphic form. Whereas architectural ceramic functions primarily as a外壳, leaves the edges exposed, revealing their earthenware substrate. These glazes are also cracked, mimicking the intense action of the heat that produced them. Rosen fabricates her work in an unorthodox manner, embedding shards of previously fired pieces into a layer of unfired clay. These shards, which resemble accretions of broken crockery, consist of an enormous number of pieces that simulate warped butters, stale cookies, pieces of tubing, or dried flowers. Rosen assembles her objects through accretion, a deeply obsessive, repetitive process. The final results resemble gigantic, inedible pastries yet also bear the mysterious air of unidentifiable historical artifacts. Their appearance is both baroque and monolithic. The finished works continue to evidence the process, enabling the viewer to comprehend the amount of time needed to complete them. This sense of duration, of sustained, patient assembly, is a crucial element that Rosen imports from the craft world. In her work, craft is demonstrated and defined as a process that produces an object through careful, skilled handwork.

Clay is a deeply referential substance, a kind of prima materia that contains within its specific material an enormous range of cultural associations and references. Ceramics are the stuff of civilization, a prime indicator of culture. Despite their rich and varied art historical past, ceramic works have long been grouped with the minor decorative arts. Within the present-day art world, clay remains to some extent a scorned and disreputable substance, bearing negative associations with utility, reduced value, and amateur art classes. Even when accepted as a “high” art material, clay is burdened with associations antithetical to the ambitions of many sculptors. Almost any other medium, even materials with prehistoric origins such as steel and aluminum, is assigned higher value merely through the Romanic notion of the artist’s transformative touch. Rosen...
is utterly aware of the problematic associations, conscious of playing
at an aesthetic edge. The specificity of her materials is important to her;
clay references a particular field of endeavor rather than a particular
set of conceptual notions. The sheer peculiarity of appearance, the
tempestuous yet organized surfaces speak of a sensibility remote from the
readily-made and distanced objects currently fashionable in this
new century’s sculptural practice.
—Kathleen Whitney

Sackville, New Brunswick,
Canada
Dennis Gill
Owens Art Gallery

Ever since the Fall, snakes have
gotten a bad rap. Not only, so
the story goes, did the snake lose
its legs for beguiling Eve, but the Bible
has culled it to become ever since.
Blaming a whole species for a
human being being, well, human,
is rather harsh. Being human,
there’s always someone with a
certain sympathy for the devil,
someone rooting for the under-
dog. So snakes, the devil’s proxies,
have their partisans. Snakes also
have been, and remain, rich symbols
in Western art. Think of
Michelangelo’s female serpent
on the Sistine Chapel ceiling.
Dennis Gill is aware of the many
readings of the snake image in our
culture and others, and he plays
with them in his exhibition „Snakes
and Objects. “ The eight works in
this show (two inside, six placed
around the quadrangle in front of
the gallery) all included the same
iconic image of a snake that Gill
has been using since the mid ’80s.
I first saw it in in the House of the
Mogul of the Moment. There is no Reason (1987),
in which several steel snakes, iden-
tical in form, “slithered” across the
floor toward a space heater. The
heater sat on a slate sheet, one
side of which was cut to mimic the
shape of the snakes. The elements
of that work—found objects, serial
snakes, serious intent larded with
humor—have resurfaced 12 years
later in this exhibition.
The first work one saw was
Snake and Rail, set in a circular
pitch of grass in the middle of
the university’s main courtyard.
The steel rail occupied the lawn
with a weighty placidity, offset by
the placement of a steel snake at
one end. The snake seemed to be
slithering off the rail, as if walking
the plank. It was a journey to
nowhere, both humorous and
somewhat sad.

Further on, in a larger patch
of leaf-strewn lawn, one stumbled
over three more works. Snake and
Rail, in the middle of the lawn, was
the simplest work in the show—a
10-foot length of two-inch square
stock steel sprouting a snake at
one end, as if the bar had been
forged into Gill’s by-now-familiar
snake image. The single bold stroke
of the bar slashed across the lawn
like a barrier—a definition of space
akin to Richard Serra’s Third ARC,
though without that work’s monu-
mental qualities. Like Serra’s ARC,
Snake and Rail diagonally intersected
a pedestrian pathway, but it did
so temporarily and modestly, forestalling
any protest at its interfer-
tion into public space. The work
was a metaphor for both sculpture
and birth, as the snake struggled to
be born from its material of origin.
Perhaps, too, the steel bar is like a
cast-off snake, the midstness of
potential being shed in favor of
an utterance in form.

Off to one side of the lawn was
Snake and Pipe, a six-foot length
of wall casting with another snake
positioned in front of it, as if the
snake were seeking shelter in the
pipe. Snake and Hose contrasts a
steel snake with a coil of bronze
garden hose, an elegant formal
analog as well as a confrontation
weighted with poetic allusions to
self-image, mirroring, and to the
process of metaphor itself.

Snake and Ladder was propped
up against a large tree in another
corner of the lawn. The 16-foot
high steel ladder was missing sev-
eral rungs at the bottom, making it
impossible to climb. At the ladder’s
foot was another snake. With this
“snake in the grass” as guard, or
was it also frustrated in its desire
to flee? Gill left that up to the view-
er. Dennis lies at the root of these
works, whether it be the physical
desire so often symbolized by the

Dennis Gill. Snake and Rail, 2006. Steel, view of work as installed outside the Owens
Art Gallery.

serpent or the desire of the viewer
to make a sculpture a useful object,
if only as a sign.

Two additional pieces were
shown inside. The witty Snake and
Hanger combined the shelter ana-
logy of Snake and Hose. This snake
found its shelter, safely indoors,
lying across a working radiator. The
difference in heat between the air
and the metal snake caused the
metal to “swarm,” making it clam-
my and wet, true to the clichés
about snakes, if not to the reality.
The last piece was an atypical
work, for the show it net for Gill.
Medusa of Muses was made from
a sheet of fireproof insulation printed
with the snake image and then
wedged up into a rough ball and
held with Tyvek tape. At first it
looked like garbage from a con-
struction site. But the shadow
cast by the Tyvek bundle formed
the profile of a face. Thus Medusa
appeared in the play of light.