

**On the Cover:** Henry Moore, *Working Model for Sheep Piece*, 1971. Bronze, 56 in. long. Photograph reproduced by permission of the Henry Moore Foundation.

## Features

- 16 The Enigma of Henry Moore**  
Moore's ultimate goal was the combination of emotion and great truths or themes.  
*by Brian McAvera*
- 24 Ephemerality of the Moment: A Conversation with Margo Sawyer**  
Her work has both systematic logic and the spontaneity of momentary decisions.  
*by Kate Bonansinga*
- 32 New Directions in Non-Objective Sculpture**  
Recent non-objective art embodies qualities beyond geometric structure.  
*by Collette Chattopadhyay*
- 38 The Atelier Revisited**  
Over the past decade, some sculptors have expanded the notion of the atelier.  
*by Virginia Maksymowicz*
- 44 Site/Work/S: A Public Forum**  
A project in Houston raises questions of memory, history, development, and the public.

## Departments

- 6 News**
- 7 Forum**
- 8 Focus:** Larry Bell *by Ileana Marcoulesco*
- 10 Focus:** Giuseppe Gabellone *by Andrea Bellini*
- 12 Focus:** Mike Baur *by Victor M. Cassidy*
- 14 Commissions**
- 80 Postscript:** ISC News

## Reviews

- 57 Billings, MT:** Tracy Linder
- 58 Long Beach, CA:** Tania Mouraud
- 59 Pomona, CA:** Nina Jun
- 60 San Francisco:** Ulrike Palmbach
- 61 San Francisco:** "The World on Its Head: Contemporary Belgian Art"
- 62 Santa Monica:** Nancy Sansom Reynolds
- 63 Washington, DC:** "F2F: New Media Art from Finland"
- 64 Boston:** "From a Distance Approaching Landscape"
- 65 Baltimore:** Barbara Chase-Riboud
- 66 Kalamazoo, MI:** Truman Lowe
- 67 New York:** Judy Moonelis
- 68 New York:** Marjetica Potrč
- 69 Philadelphia:** "Old World/New World: Common Ground"
- 71 Sheboygan, WI:** Annabeth Rosen
- 72 Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada:** Dennis Gill
- 73 Reykjavik, Iceland:** Robert Dell
- 73 Copenhagen:** William Anastasi
- 74 London:** Mona Hatoum
- 75 Antwerp, Belgium:** Wim Delvoye
- 76 France:** James Turrell
- 77 Books/Films/Video**
- 78 Dispatch:** InSITE



10



71



24



38

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**Sheboygan, WI**

**Annabeth Rosen**

John Michael Kohler Center for the Arts

Annabeth Rosen's work is both wild and austere, her surfaces packed with writhing detail and characterized by odd color juxtapositions. Although they bear a distant relationship to the large platters of the eccentric 16th-century French ceramic sculptor Bernard Palissy, her works are utterly original. Blending obsessively repeated detail with the concerns 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 flatness 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 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, an arena that continues to interest many ceramic sculptors. It reveals a closer kinship to buildings, particularly that genre known as fantastic 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 spaces. 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 builders such as Antonio Gaudi, Bruno Taut, and Simon Rodia, 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 penetrated shapes that allow light to pass through from behind, denying

the density and weightiness of their parent material. Her works forge a connection to the huge, organic, terra-cotta 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

faces, leaves the edges exposed, revealing their earthenware substrate. These glazes are also cracked, reiterating 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 buttons, stale

through careful, skilled handwork.

Clay is a deeply referential substance, a kind of prima materia that contains within its specific materiality an enormous range of cultural assumptions and references. Ceramics are the ur-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



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 works' meaning. Thickly layered and clearly weighty, her sculptures still imply fragility because they are so apparently constructed from clay. The acidic yellows, whites, and greens of her glazes accentuate rather than disguise their mineral origins. The layers of glaze are utterly evident as skin, as a glass-like, frail membrane that, while tinting the sur-

faces, 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

**Annabeth Rosen, view of the exhibition "A Luscious Symmetry" at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2000.**

a scorned and deracinated 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 plebeian origins such as steel and aluminum, is assigned higher value merely through the Romantic 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 ready-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 called us to scorn snakes 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 underdog. 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 Heat of the Moment There is no Reason* (1987), in which several steel snakes, identical 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 13 years later in this exhibition.

The first work one saw was *Snake and Rail*, set in a circular



patch 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 somehow sad.

Further on, in a larger patch of leaf-strewn lawn, one stumbled over three more works. *Snake and Bar*, 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 *Tilted Arc*, though without that work's monumental qualities. Like *Tilted Arc*, *Snake and Bar* diagonally intersected a pedestrian pathway, but it did so temporarily and modestly, forestalling any protest at its interjection 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 skin, the muteness 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 well casing 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 analogy as well as a confrontation weighted with poetic allusions to self-image, to 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 several rungs at the bottom, making it impossible to climb. At the ladder's foot was another snake. Was this "snake-in-the-grass" a guard, or was it also frustrated in its desire to rise? Gill left that up to the viewer. Desire lies at the root of these works, whether it be the physical desire so often symbolized by the

**Dennis Gill, *Snake and Rail*, 2000. 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 Heater* continued the shelter analogy 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 "sweat," making it clammy and wet, true to the clichés about snakes, if not to the reality.

The last piece was an atypical work, for the show if not for Gill. *Head of Medusa* was made from a sheet of Tyvek insulation printed with the snake image and then wadded up into a rough ball and held with Tyvek tape. At first it looked like garbage from a construction site. But the shadow cast by the Tyvek bundle formed the profile of a face. Thus Medusa appeared in the play of light.