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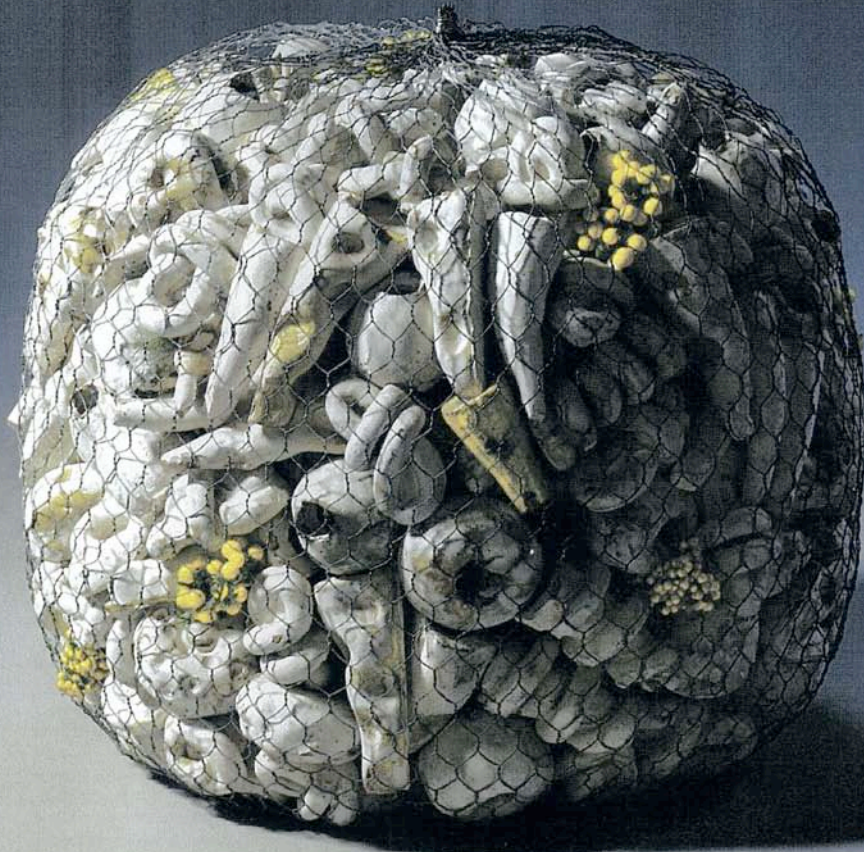
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Bundle. 2006-2007. Low-fire ceramic and steel wire mesh. 36 cm/h.

Annabeth Rosen
**Between Drawing
and Sculpture**

Article by Glen R. Brown

IN REFERENCE TO WORKS OF art, the word 'scale' can simply indicate the proportional relationship between an object and its representation. It can also describe something quite different: an effect of intimacy or monumentality that may have nothing to do with representation or even the actual size of an art object relative to the viewer. This 'scale effect' involves a degree of disruption or even displacement of ordinary perception. It can account for much of the influence that an art object exerts over the viewer's emotional experience, and consequently it is crucial for the artist to consider as a work evolves. For sculptor Annabeth Rosen, the scale effect has recently been a special point of focus as she has sought to reduce the physical size of her sculptures while preserving their impression of massiveness and strength. These qualities had previously resulted from an additive process in which her works grew to whatever size necessary to achieve the desired effect. By setting size restrictions in advance, Rosen situated herself on unfamiliar and initially challenging terrain. The results of meeting the challenge – small pedestal-sized nonobjective sculptures with densely energetic presence – formed the nucleus of a recent solo exhibition at the Fleisher / Ollman Gallery in Philadelphia.

Despite the reduced scale of her sculptures, Rosen's exhibition was perhaps most noteworthy because of her decision to display alongside of her newest bichromatic, accretive tubular ceramic sculptures a series of drawings, some of them as small as 10 sq cm and others as large as 2 m high.

Rendered with a brush in black ink or blue paint on paper, the vigorous drawings form a cohesiveness with the sculptures that was not surprising given the circumstances under which they were made. Though not preliminary drawings *per se* – nor, exactly, the equivalent of the 'free writing' in which authors often



Squill. 2006-2007. Low-fire ceramic and steel wire. 71 cm/h.

engage as an entrée to a more substantial text – Rosen's two-dimensional compositions are intimately tied to her better-known work as a sculptor. The two-dimensional pieces seem to engage a process of exploring formal and conceptual problems that parallels the process of working in clay yet is capable of unfolding at an accelerated rate.

Rosen, in fact, speaks of her drawings in precisely this way. "I draw continually," she explains, "often years ahead of the ideas that I'm actually building in clay because of the speed and the quantity that I can achieve in the drawings. Working in ceramics is labour intensive and time consuming, and drawing is far more immediate."



White Bundle. 2006-2007. Low-fire ceramic and steel wire mesh. 41cm/h.

Rosen, however, is anything but methodical in her approach to the medium of clay. Slipcasting, or any other minutely controlled technique that would lead to more precise contours, greater uniformity of surface and, consequently, an increased sense of anonymity, holds little attraction for her. The malleability of clay, its responsiveness to the "hot hand," is what incites Rosen's passion about the material. Although her signature clusters of bristling vein or rootlike tubular segments are generally composed in part from previously fired elements that she presses into the wet clay with a force characterised as "muscling," her work expresses an overall correspondence between touch and material that can be quite sensitive. The fidelity of clay's response to the hand – its capacity to accurately bear the marks of the maker – is a source of perpetual challenge for Rosen and, ultimately, the cause of her respect for the medium. Clay, she argues, is a meticulous chronicler that demands integrity of the artist by readily exposing any irresolution. Working with clay, Rosen observes, is "like talking to an 18-year-old: you can't lie."

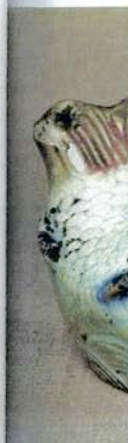
This is no doubt why the process of drawing has proved so essential to Rosen even when she does not use it to create the equivalent of blueprints for structures in clay. Her work in both drawing and modelling depends upon the crucial impression of authentic gesture: not simply a trace of the movement of the hand and arm that seems natural rather than contrived but also, and more importantly, the appearance of an

attempt to grasp a fleeting succession of ideas in the moment when it arises. "When you're working in the studio, thoughts can be elusive," Rosen observes, "They can evaporate almost instantaneously as they occur to you, but mark-making gives you a way to preserve those thoughts." Not simply drawing in the conventional sense, this mark-making reflects an ongoing conceptual process traversing many works in clay as well as on paper. Rosen has developed an effective reciprocity between her drawings and her sculptures in clay.

This reciprocity proved especially valuable as Rosen contemplated ways of preserving the scale effect of her monumental sculptures while reducing them physically. In drawing, she has long been accustomed to exploring ideas in different sizes and formats. Some of her two-dimensional works are, for example, initially confined to the parameters of a sketchpad, but often she has combined these smaller pieces to construct more extensive collages. On other occasions, she has conceived of the drawings on a much larger scale right from the start. She may, for example, join five or six blank sheets of paper to form a more expansive preliminary ground. She has also unrolled six-foot sections of paper, tacked them to the studio wall, and drawn on them for periods of a month or more, collecting and developing ideas that may or may not find their way into her sculptures in an obvious fashion. The compositions that evolve from this ongoing activity develop something of a life of their own, and in that regard can be considered the equivalents of and not just the precursors to Rosen's works in clay.

On the other hand, some of Rosen's drawings might, at least in retrospect, be described as functionally equivalent to preliminary sketches. In the Fleisher/Ollman exhibition, a dozen of these small works, formally framed and mounted in a row along the wall, accompanied their counterparts among the ceramic sculptures. In contrast, the 2 m drawings, tacked informally to the opposite wall, could only have been called potential preliminary drawings, since they have yet to give rise to any sculptures. If such sculptures do materialise, the drawings suggest that they will result from a concentration of parts that generates the impression of intense energy regardless of the actual size the sculptures may assume. In the end, this energy may be the only aspect of the drawings to carry over into the sculptures. "I could never actually build any of these compositions," Rosen explains, "but I don't have to in order to learn something. Sometimes you just understand and then take a leap forward. Ideally, that's the result from working back and forth between drawing and sculpture."

Glen R. Brown is Professor of Art History at Kansas State University and a regular contributor to *Ceramics: Art and Perception*. Photography: Lee Fatherree.



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