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Exhibition Review

Annabeth Rosen: Broken, Fired, Gathered, Heaped

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Houston, TX. August 18, 2017–November 26, 2017. Cranbrook Art Museum. Bloomfield Hills, MI. November 17, 2018–March 10, 2019. Curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver

Reviewed by John-Duane Kingsley

John-Duane Kingsley is a design history writer and curator whose work focuses on gender, historic interiors, and contemporary craft. He currently works as a Furnishings Specialist for the restoration of Fair Lane: The Home of Clara and Henry Ford.

The topic of process is endemic to craft scholarship and exhibitions, yet few artists so passionately and transparently convey process through their works as Annabeth Rosen. Conceptually linked with Lynda Benglis, Mary Heilmann, and Peter Voukos, Rosen's works create a unique intersection between feminist labor, transmedia connections between painting and ceramics, while also rupturing the materiality of ceramics and its history as a precious object.¹ The creative breadth and energetic intensity created by this intersection propelled Rosen's success and recognition as she received two Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Pew Fellowship, and her current position as the Robert Ameson Endowed Chair of the UC Davis Department of Art and Art History.² A graduate of Cranbrook Academy of Art (MFA Ceramics, 1981), Rosen returns to Cranbrook for the first substantive retrospective of her career, *Annabeth Rosen: Broken, Fired, Gathered, Heaped*. Debuting at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, the show originated under the direction of Senior Curator Valerie Cassel Oliver.³ The twenty-year scope of the show, its interpretive focus on process, and diverse evolution of Rosen's



Fig 1 Installation view of *Annabeth Rosen: Fired, Broken, Gathered, Heaped*, 2018 at Cranbrook Art Museum. Photo by P.D. Rearick.

biomorphic forms in drawing and ceramics remain faithful to Oliver's superbly executed vision.

Much like Rosen's works themselves, the strength of the show rests in its aggregated mass. The retrospective's contents divide into stylistically grouped clusters of "mashups," "mounds," and "bundles" whose names relate to the intensely physical nature of Rosen's process and the physical composition of the works.⁴ Despite their different stylistic groupings, the unifying compositional element is interlocking biomorphic forms. In the early stages of Rosen's career, these forms emerge as sedimentary layers of interlocking coral and sponges densely compacted to form sizeable tiles that recall the elemental nature

of clay as earthen material comprised of decayed vegetation (Figure 1). This cluster of tiles is juxtaposed against a grouping of "Mashups" (Figure 2), where Rosen's process subtly evolves the horizontal interlocking seen in the coral and sponge forms to build structural support for vertical compositions. At first glance, the composition of the works appear precarious, but an extended reading of the pieces reveals a carefully composed vertebra that supports a seemingly precarious mass. At the core of each piece is a wheeled metal laboratory cart that provides a geometric substrate for Rosen to insert vibrantly hued, interlocking amoebic forms that burst forth from the confines of the cart's metal grid. This provides a sense of impending



Fig 2 Installation view of Annabeth Rosen: *Fired, Broken, Gathered, Heaped*, 2018 at Cranbrook Art Museum. Photo by P.D. Rearick.

catastrophe and suspended animation as the glossy amoebic forms strain against their metal wire lashing securing them to the cart. A prolonged gaze reveals Rosen carefully alternates the swells and tapers like interlocking vertebrae to form a solid structural mass. As a foil to the ebullient “Mashups,” the show includes Rosen’s current body of work, “Mounds” (Figure 3), created for a 2017 show at P.P.O.W. Gallery in New York City.⁵ It’s in these pieces that Rosen’s embrace of failure as part of the artistic process emerges most saliently. Composed of discards from other works, Rosen begins by compressing fragments, wrapping them in an armature, then recovering the form with clay and slip throughout multiple firings that threaten to

fracture the densely packed mass.⁶ In the same manner as the vegetal tiles from Rosen’s early career capture the cyclical earthen properties of ceramics formed by sediments of organic growth and decay, these “mounds” relate the cyclical nature of Rosen’s creative process within ceramics that naturally engenders failure by way of broken and discarded fragments then repurposed for new works. Rosen’s ceramic works accompany large-scale, preparatory drawings that mirror her sculptures. The expansive layering of brushstrokes that characterizes Rosen’s drawings serves a dual function of preparing her body for the physically taxing process of constructing her sculptures, while also showing her



Fig 3 Installation view of Annabeth Rosen: *Fired, Broken, Gathered, Heaped*, 2018 at Cranbrook Art Museum. Photo by P.D. Rearick.

continued ruminations on form in another medium.⁷

As Rosen's first retrospective, *Heaped's* theme of process was well selected as the twenty-year scope of the exhibit provided an opportunity to cumulatively review the evolution of Rosen's work and her exploration of varying forms and sculptural constructions. This aspect of the show's unique contribution is offset by essays authored by Valerie Cassel Oliver, Nancy Princenthal, and Jenni Sorkin that provide multiple interpretations of Rosen's work ranging from the likeness to eighteenth-century ceramic table decorations and Delftware (Sorkin), discussing the influence of female mentors in her artistic development (Oliver), and describing the intensity of her studio practice (Princenthal). Cumulatively, these essays provide context for Rosen's personality and influences without cluttering the gallery with an excess of didactic panels or voluminous gallery guides. This allows the intensity of her work to be fully present without distraction. The only interpretive element not fully realized within the gallery space or text was Rosen's experience at Cranbrook. The introductory panel and exhibition book discuss her tutelage under

Jun Kaneko, and credit Cranbrook's dissolving the distinction between studio craft and fine art as the impetus for Rosen's experimentation with sculptural ceramics. Given the rich significance of Rosen's work returning to the foundation of her creative practice, these biographic details warranted greater attention, and provide excellent fodder for future scholarship.

Notes

- 1 Valerie Cassel Oliver et al., *Annabeth Rosen: Fired, Broken, Gathered, Heaped* (Houston, TX: Contemporary Arts Museum, 2017), 13.
- 2 "Annabeth Rosen," *UC Davis Arts*, <https://arts.ucdavis.edu/faculty-profile/annabeth-rosen> (accessed March 2, 2019).
- 3 "Annabeth Rosen: Fired, Broken, Gathered, Heaped," Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, <https://camh.org/event/annabeth-rosen-fired-broken-gathered-heaped/#foobox-1/2/GaryZvonkovic16.jpg> (accessed March 2, 2019).
- 4 Cranbrook Art Museum, *Gallery Guide for Annabeth Rosen: Fired, Broken, Gathered, Heaped* (Bloomfield Hills, MI: Cranbrook Art Museum, 2018), 1.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*