



An interview between Toni Ross + Alejandra Russi, Ricco Maresca Gallery on **Artsy.net**, August 30, 2016

In the Studio: Toni Ross on the Presence of Absence



As one wanders around Toni Ross's studio space in Wainscott, NY—silently inhabited by her austere and powerful stoneware sculptures—it's clear that the artist is at a creative highpoint in her career. Ross's latest body of sculptural work, as well as her recent foray into large-scale installation, reflects a gradual yet assured coalition of the various visual inquiries that she has formulated and explored over the years.

As a whole, Ross's oeuvre oscillates between a certain figurative integrity (hinting at the practical and symbolic aspects of a given shape) and a curiosity for the expressive potential of deconstruction and reconfiguration. The artist's "Cube," "Stele," and "Strata" series place an emphasis on process that is formally akin to the parameters of architecture—and a fundamental urge to build structures, whether real or imagined. Yet, they simultaneously allude to the possibility of the functional becoming "dysfunctional;" a relationship between the fragment and the whole that is non-literal in the way only art is.

We may think of Ross's works as mysterious totems—implicating notions of time, memory, transience, and commemoration—or as conceptual embodiments of materiality and gravity heightened by the ductile possibilities of the artist's practice. All approaches, however dissimilar, seem to reflect quintessential aspects of the human experience. Perhaps also the irreducible quality of the Japanese proposition "mono no aware," meaning the joy and the pathos of things condensed; simultaneously celebratory and mourning, inconspicuous yet persuasive.

Alejandra Russi: In a nutshell, could you tell me about your personal history with sculpture?

Toni Ross: I've been sculpting on and off all my life, but it's really just in the last 20 years that I've focused on it and stayed very vigilant with my practice. When I was growing up in New York City, my bedroom window looked out into the Sculpture Center. My grandfather signed me up for some classes there; it was all people in

their fifties and I was in high school. I made some wax sculptures there and had them cast; they were figures, basically self-portraits. In college, I didn't love the sculpture department, but I took a lot of ceramics classes. After that I did drawing and painting, but it was a while before I got back to clay. I also had a bit of a hiatus due to life circumstances, so when my kids could be a little more on their own, I took another ceramics class (around the mid-90s) and I just couldn't stop doing it. This was what eventually brought me back to sculptural practice. I did pottery for a little while and then moved on to doing sculpture and singular pieces. Once I built my studio the work changed and developed.



AR: How has your choice of materials evolved?

TR: I've always been enamored of clay. I love having my hands in it, the malleability and the earthiness of it. So that hasn't really changed all that much. I think it's mostly what I'm doing with it that has changed: it's become more and more focused on form and slightly less on color. There's of course plenty of color within the work, but it's a more muted palette; because I'm looking for the form to speak. I have come to understand that I'm fascinated with the effects of time. The making of every single piece is a reflection of that—with the layering of texture, the different slips, and finally the firing—it all adds up to a story of process that's really interesting to me.

AR: The surface of your works is always very nuanced. How much of this is planned and how much fortuitous?

TR: Surface is almost a collaborative process with the materials and the elements. I set things up to happen in a certain way, but the results always vary—the piece might be a little darker or a little lighter because of the way the firing happens, the level of humidity on a particular day, or the smoke content in the kiln. This, plus the variations of thickness in what I'm applying, all come into play. I tend to not be extremely scientific about it... I don't measure things; I just go for it. So invariably there's an element of surprise in the end product. I've had to come to terms with that over the years and find excitement in seeing the piece for what it is, even accepting that it can, in fact, be better than what I had planned. Of course it can also be a complete failure, and I've taken plenty of hammers in my hand... However, I take my time doing that, because when you open the door of the kiln and the work doesn't meet your expectations, it's better—at least for me—to give it time. I have to sit with it and try to understand it. Sometimes, after sitting with a piece for months, I realize one day that it works, or that it could serve as the basis for something else.

AR: You have pointed to Cycladic sculpture as a source of inspiration in your work...

TR: I saw my first Cycladic sculptures in my early twenties at the Getty Museum. I was just stunned by their spare beauty, and the pared down elegance of these forms that were made thousands of years ago always stuck with me. When I go to The Met now, the first place I visit is the Cycladic room—and I always find something new and inspiring. I think that although I've never consciously emulated anything, or aspired for a specific "look," it's the

essence of form that I find really appealing, because I'm constantly pursuing the idea of "less is more." My practice has many influences though—whether it's Egyptian art, Rothko or Morandi—and I might have seen something five or ten years ago that will rest for quite a while in my head before suddenly making its way into my work. It also happens that I will make things completely unaware of certain other connections and then go travelling to Egypt or Myanmar, and find that somebody is "copying" me 40,000 years ago. That's always interesting to me... I tend to not be terribly new-agey, but I do at this point believe that there's some intriguing interconnectedness between past and present and that there's not a whole lot that's new.



Toni Ross
Stele #4, 2016
Ricco/Maresca Gallery



Toni Ross
Stele #16, 2016
Ricco/Maresca Gallery

AR: In your earlier work, there seems to be a tendency to play with figurative forms (vessels, towers, and shapes that allude to stylized human shapes). In your recent work (the cubes, the Stele, and Strata pieces) you tend to be veering toward a more abstract quality, or a more marked open-endedness...

TR: I'd say I can shift back and forth between the two bodies of work—the vessel and anatomical forms and the more architectural pieces—because they feed different parts of my brain. When I was going to go to college, I was either going to become a math major at Johns Hopkins or an art major at Wesleyan. So I have an intrinsic interest in math, and things like cutting templates, building, and joining are very satisfying to me.

When I took the cube form and started pushing it—playing with it and turning it on its side or its edge—I was slicing lots of edges pieces off. I have a kind of obsession with remnants and detritus, so I would save all these pieces, and at the end of doing a body of work I had stacks and stacks of boards with these pieces. So I just started working with those to create the Stele and also these other sculptures that felt like 3D collages to me. I couldn't stop doing that; it was totally fascinating and exciting because I was in the process with each piece and not really sure where I was going. So the newer work started with the remnant pieces, but now it's less so because I have a clearer formal purpose in mind—especially with the Strata series.

AR: Your moon tablets are an interesting conjunction of materials used in sculpture, but with a painterly presentation... What led you to making these?



TR: Last summer a bunch of my friends and I got together. We had dinner and then went down to the beach at midnight. We just lay in the sand for a couple of hours and during that time I saw about forty shooting stars: the Perseids. Around that time last year, there was an extraordinary super blood moon eclipse. So those two things just lodged in my mind. When I was between projects, I noticed some pieces of clay lying around, so I just cut them up and made them into small paintings.

AR: Your cubes are often asymmetrical and placed in unstable positions. Many of them make me think of fallen pieces that have incorporated themselves into the ground in a “counter-intuitive” way ... How did you come to thinking about cubes in this manner?

TR: My way of working is really very intuitive. On one level, I was simply curious about how the shape and volume would look if I turned it over. With the cubes, I might start out thinking of a particular orientation, but the process that it goes through—the drying and the way it shrinks or warps—could change the initial idea; the piece might just “want” a different orientation.

I also turn them over to give them a little bit of lift, the first one I did just felt dramatically different from the ones that sit squarely on the ground. Not that one is better than the other, but when you’re working with diagonals, the scale and the sense of balance feels different. The dualities of tension/ease and strength/fragility are always at play in my work; the awareness that something could tip over at any moment but at the same time it’s really firm and strong—which in a way is a reflection of my own life.

AR: Your use of string in some of your works must surely be connected to that...

TR: The use of string was at first slightly accidental and then became extremely purposeful. I had been using it as a kind of resist—when I was still using glazes in my work. I would take string and wrap it around a piece, then glaze it. If the string didn’t burn during the firing, I would just take it off and it would leave interesting marks, but there was one day when I had a bunch of pieces wrapped up in string—sitting outside to dry before I fired them—and I just loved the way they looked. So I started experimenting with wrapping some finished pieces with string and found that I was completely drawn to these thread-like patterns in relationship to the very solid forms. It definitely has to do with strength vs. fragility and something that appears to be delicate but at the same time is very strong and can hold things together. Maybe it’s an expression of the constant struggle that I experience as a woman; wanting to break free of certain definitions and boundaries, while at the same time feeling that I need to stay within them.



Toni Ross
Untitled, 2016
Rico/Maresca Gallery



Toni Ross
Strata #2, 2016
Rico/Maresca Gallery

AR: Can you tell me about your work’s relationship with the viewer, particularly the pieces that are more explicitly personal?

TR: People tend to ask a lot of questions about the work, about the materials and the process. My recent body of work in particular has evoked a lot of emotional response. This has been really very touching to me, because when

I make art I never think about the viewer. I'm just making work because I love it. So when someone has that emotional response to a piece I've invested so much of myself in, it's really extraordinary. Some pieces have writing on them—personal memories of mine—but by the time I'm done with them and all the layering of slips that come into the process, the words are hardly readable. I'm not so interested in having people decipher the words as much as I am in the feeling of there being memories inscribed; the patterns and the purely abstract facets of writing.

AR: The idea of the possible unintelligibility of words—of things simultaneously being and not being—reminds me of “The Presence of Absence,” the title of your upcoming exhibition at Ricco/Maresca Gallery...

TR: When I decided on the name of the show, I went online and Googled it to see if it had been used for something else out there—even though it absolutely felt like the right title and I wasn't giving it up! As I found out, there's a book of poetry by Mahmoud Darwish (one of the better known Palestinian authors) that's called “In the Presence of Absence.” There's a poem there that's very beautiful... It's about words and the stringing together of letters and language; their literal and poetic facets.

AR: Finally, tell me about your recent project for the Parrish Art Museum (“Permanent Transience”) and how you came about the concept.

TR: The Parrish Museum asked me to do a site specific installation as art part of their “Roadshow” project. The invitation was completely open-ended, no parameters whatsoever; I could've chosen anywhere on the Eastern end of Long Island and done something really tiny if I wanted to. I've never worked on a large scale before, but I have always loved the straw wall at Marders—it's in the tonalities that interest me and has an elegance and an aging quality that I really love.



So I initially thought I wanted to create a kind of mural on that wall, stitching textured patterns of thread into it—but physically it was too grueling and the idea didn't pan out. At that point I really had to re-think the project, so I went back to the property and the current idea came like thunderbolt. My attention went to the giant boulders that are sitting in front of the straw wall, and immediately I knew that I wanted to do something that incorporated the two elements. I was making a lot of cube pieces at the time, so I decided I was going to envelop the boulders with my cubes and make the cubes out of straw.

I worked with a team that helped me create these steel infrastructures made with rebar. We then lashed each bail of straw with rope onto them in such a way that the rope is invisible. That solution gave us this very angular base to work from, because one of my goals was to challenge the nature of the materials; to juxtapose the organic hay material with these solid rocks and kind of change the nature of the two elements—so that the straw became rigid and the boulders fluid.

AR: If you were to do another site-specific project on this scale, do you think it will relate to your body of work as directly as the Parrish installation does?

TR: I think that my work can't help but be. It's like my singing voice, recognizable no matter how many songs I might sing. The way that I work is very incremental, while this might seem like a leap in many ways, it's really just a leap in scale. While that's really stimulating and exciting, there's something fantastic about working small and the intimacy of it. I love being in the studio and having my hands in the work, so there's some balance achieved there.

—Alejandra Russi