

New Ceramic Horizons at Paradise Wood Sculpturegrove

Siting sculpture in any environment makes demands that can be both mutually exclusive and integral. The relationship of a sculpture's particular characteristics—size, material, color, texture, meaning—with similar physical and metaphysical attributes of a setting has a bearing upon whether the piece “works” or not. Putting sculpture in a large outdoor space—in this case the Paradise Wood Sculpturegrove—can evoke a sense of Darwin's theory of survival: those that fit, do; those that don't, don't. Curated by Harley, the sculptors in *New Ceramic Horizons* include Hedi-Katharina Ernst, Sarah Kotzamani, Clara Lanyi, Inya Laskowski, Penny Michel, Scott Parady, Dharma Strasser, John Toki, Re-Cheng Tsang and Christiane Vincent.

Universally, their work is about how an ancient medium (clay) pushes its traditional role and expectations into contemporary dimensions. They say nothing about clay's utilitarian heritage and undertake purely aesthetic considerations. As an exhibition, the work attempts to answer the challenge of how these objects relate, as aesthetic entities, to the environment they find themselves in. When successful, the exhibition presents a thoughtful confluence between the objects and spatial-environmental elements. Unfortunately, these successes make up less than half of the exhibition.



From above: Hedi-Katharina Ernst, *11 Soul Heads*, 2002, ceramic on metal stands; Penny Michel, *The Tribe*, 2002, detail, ceramic; Clara Lanyi, *Feast of the Spores*, 1999, ceramic, at the Paradise Wood Sculpturegrove, Santa Rosa.

Parady's five bulky slab pieces, though exuding an elephantine gracefulness, are haphazard gestalts—a poor man's Peter Voulkos—more experimental process than destination. Lanyi's *Feast of the Spores* (a “fun”gi if ever there was one) is the exhibition's playful piece, but it's all surface pizzazz and biomorphic pretension. Laskowski's *Implements of Cultural Decay* are sword-shaped adornments (like giant earrings) hanging from tree-limbs, the title more promise than delivery. Kotzamani's beast-as-ancient-deity pieces come across as kitschy garden art; Ernst's pedestalled masks and grounded heads appear like Easter Island meets Smith & Hawken; and Toki's *Blue Stance* is an unfortunately placed piece that comes off as plop-art.

Yet four works find themselves with well considered integration in their respective surroundings. Set amongst the moss covered rocks of a previous installation at Sculpturegrove [*Eocene* by John Roloff, from the exhibition *Arborescence*, 1999] is Strasser's *Migration*. Nestled securely in the crevices of rocks long inhabiting this place, these several pale white stone forms (small boulder, big rock) say less about expanding the medium than about the subtle surprise and integrity of placement within its environment.

Vincent's *Breaking the Rules* is made from found materials. Set in a triangular configuration, twenty-one large, oval, clay pipe sections, placed on end with an “X” of metal strips set on top, give it a sense of Stonehenge 2001. Minimal and intellectual, it's the exhibition's most timeless

piece.

From Michel comes the most demanding use of medium and emotion. *The Tribe* is a collective stand of tall (102 feet), proud, biomorphic (though borderline anorexic), Giacometti-esque figures of several earth-tone colors. The work makes the connection between expanding the structural and expressive possibilities of clay, and the work's environmental symbiosis, singularly and as a body.

Though two separate pieces, Tsang's *Home Environment* and *Wanderlust* don't give the distinction away. This quasi-set of installations, a colony of small, thin-blue balls and odd milking stool-shaped objects, invite the viewer into the piece, guide them—Alice in Wonderland like—along a path through the strategically scattered objects, then reluctantly deposit them on the other side of the woods. As an installation, the intentions of the whole are both deliberate and magical. Leaves and twigs have settled without human intervention on top of or next to many of the pieces, giving the installation a sense of complete acceptance.

—Sandy Thompson

New Ceramic Horizons is on view through January at the Paradise Wood Sculpturegrove, Santa Rosa.

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