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Toni Ross: Inside/Out

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Some years ago, Toni Ross left behind her potter's wheel and moved from function to sculpture in the ceramic art she has been devoted to for much of her adult life. She began to examine the organic simplicity of the vessel form and its myriad associations to the figure and to femininity, containment, fullness and emptiness. The vessel as an entity became a departure point for Ross, whose recent works are on now view at [Ricco/Maresca Gallery](#) in the artist's first one person show in New York City.



Ricco/Marcesa Gallery

The installation is breathtaking, celebrating the stately presence of each vessel. Some stand like sentinels, others hug the surface beneath them in cube or box form. They exude Ross's anima, yet each one seems to possess an interior life all its own.

Entering the artist's Wainscott studio last week, the first thing that struck me was the huge mirror that straddles her worktable.

"I use a mirror so I can see the sculpture in the round while I'm working," she said.

This is an absolute revelation to me. Seeing both sides of any one thing at one time is a pretty big idea -- self/other, presence/absence, this life/after life -- the sort of philosophical concept that could keep us talking well into the night. If I've known of another artist working with a mirror to do anything other than paint their own portrait, I don't remember. The presence of the figure is profound in this work, and I wonder to Ross if she is influenced by her own reflection as form emerges in her sculpture.

"I don't see myself," she said.

Another revelation. "You mean," I inquire, "you turn the mirror so you can't be seen?"

"No," she answered, "I just don't see myself -- I'm invisible when I'm working."



detail: currently on view at The Drawing Room, East Hampton

I suddenly realize -- this is going to be an interesting conversation. Ross's "invisibility" is one of those wonderful visual and intellectual conundrums that dovetails with the concept of artistic presence/absence.

The vessel is ripe for these kinds of extrapolations -- it's rich in metaphors that conjure the human soul or the collective psyche. As such, the form easily slips between function and abstraction, or it can serve as a conduit between the two. In Ross's studio the larger concepts are all around me: closed ceramic cubes in which something -- or nothing -- is trapped. Ross is intrigued by these big concepts, but she's down to earth, driven more by process than ideology. The rough edges, abraded surfaces and molten glazes that help define her stoneware are evidence of this. Tall vases peel into earthen, *El Greco-like* necks and broad pocks and fissures stretch out over belly shapes, mouths and hollows.



She builds via the coil method, a gradual process that suits her temperament. "Throwing clay is a very fast process," she said. "I'm not fast -- in my methodology."

Because Ross's connection to the vessel is pragmatic more than it is theoretical, it can serve as a jumping off place that allows her to move toward pure form. The surfaces, achieved through a combination of Shino glazing technique and the electric grinder Ross uses "like a paintbrush" are expressive and spirited, ranging in effect from fields of milky ferment to coatings of blistering, orange magma. Sometimes she glazes only the vessel interior, allowing the salts and sodas to leach through the clay walls during the firing. The results are always surprising in one way or another -- where the glaze will seep through is totally unpredictable.

"I've had to let go of my absolute expectations," she said.

The concept of addressing only the interior of a thing -- the un-seeable part -- with the anticipation that it may or may not have an impact on the seeable world is a concept that handily converts into another one of those big ideas. The interior life of an object -- a building, a mountain, a person and, of course, motherhood -- these are some of the things embodied in the vessel form.



Ross finds inspiration in a broad spectrum that ranges from the female form to ancient history. After her last major show (at The Drawing Room, East Hampton), she felt compelled to go to Egypt. She traveled there with friends shortly thereafter.

"You think you know what to expect -- you see so many images of the Pyramids, the Sphinx, the landscape," she said. "But you can't imagine the scale -- the vastness -- it's beyond description."

It seems the ancients are whispering in Ross's ear. During our visit, she pulled out a book on the Danube Valley, recalling an exhibit she saw last year at New York University's Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, located on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The exhibition catalog, focused on works from old Europe circa 4500 BC, explores a level of figuration that high Modernism might have dreamed about -- long bendy arms that crisscross over folded knees, elongated torsos that morph into tapered heads and feet, vessels with bellies and legs, complex architectural models and elegant depictions of animal and human in gold amulets and figurines. Ross's kid-in-a-candy-store *joie de vivre* -- a result of opening this book -- is infectious. Within seconds we are pouring over the images, one more fascinating than the next.



Ricco/Maresca Gallery

The images in the book reveal a culture that seemed driven to stake claim to its own structure -- its homes, villages and families -- and the artifacts are rendered with candor and few embellishments. Ross's vessels exude a kindred spirit, galvanized by a calm simplicity that fuels the life inside.



Two hand built gas ovens sit astride the artist's Wainscott studio

The exhibition at Ricco/Maresca is on view through December 30th.

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