

'In the Round' at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art

The Pacific Rim Sculptors Group may be something of a misnomer—most of the member artists hail from the pinky finger of the Pacific that is the San Francisco Bay, rather than covering the entire sprawling body of water—but it does appear to be flourishing in a distinct West Coast creative climate conducive to finely wrought sculpture. In a place where the passing of time is not marked by seasons, there seems to be all the time in the world to create, contemplate and refine an object. As the profusion of West Coast material culture ever since the arts and crafts movement indicates, this sense that time stands still while objects are made does not lead to laziness or casual disengagement; on the contrary, it often results in a work ethic so obsessive and dreamy that it can only be understood as an extreme form of play.

At their best, the sculptures that emerge from this intense, open-ended engagement can be beguiling in their detail and sublime in their overall impact. Witness the works of Nancy Ziegler Nodelman, who channels Eva Hesse as well as both Louises (Nevelson and Bourgeois), stacking and packing unlikely materials into totemic sculptures. She also appears to have a flair for alchemy and architecture in *Retrogression*, making use of metallic pigments to reincarnate flattened cardboard tubes from paper towel rolls as dramatic bronzed constructions that appear to have fallen off a Shinto shrine. Ziegler Nodelman is at her most inventive and resourceful in *Found and Lost VII*, where she has collected those paper covers hotels put on water glasses for the benefit of their more paranoid, germaphobic guests, then unfurled and stacked them into an elegant, many-tiered sculptural necklace that a mummy might proudly sport on a sarcophagus.

Sara Gordon's *The Meeting* is another striking metamorphosis of materials, transforming gut into two shimmering, floating female forms. The women seem mysteriously elevated and illuminated by their conversation, but upon further inspection, the effect is structural: They are raised above their dais by metal bars, and the light hits the translucent gut at just the right angle to endow them with an otherworldly glow. Their shapes appear solid and womanly yet they are filled with air, capturing both the buoyancy and gravitas of many a memorable conversation. This fine balance between the evanescent and the earthly becomes a testament to the agility not only of the sculptor, but the best conversationalists.

The Meeting is situated at the door to the show, and after due inspection, this seems only fitting. Like no other show this year, this show was a powerful tribute to women as viewers, participants and sculptors. Of the fifteen artists shown, thirteen were women—a demographic detail that gives this show bragging rights as one of perhaps ten group shows out of thousands seen by this reviewer in five years to feature even 50 percent women artists (excluding a paltry few all-women shows). Yet, what is emphasized here, quite rightly, is the independent strength of the sculptures rather than the gender of their makers. This is not to say that the sculptors are taking their cue from Hesse, who famously disdained any identification of female influences in her work. On the contrary, Jane Johnson's tragicomic *A Moment* is a pregnant belly and breasts caught on the lower rungs of a ladder, entirely carved from wood and polished to a high shine. This piece could be described as surrealism—though any of the many women artists routinely shut out of group shows might be more inclined to describe it as hyperrealism. But no matter how it's categorized, this engaging sculpture holds its ground conceptually and aesthetically, and merits pride of place here.

Much of the best work in this show draws upon a West Coast tradition of sculpture crafted into organic forms from found materials that came into vogue with the beatniks and came of age internationally with *arte povera*. Unfortunately, some pieces suggest that when artists luxuriate too long in their process and materials, they lose the conceptual underpinnings that gave beatnik assemblage and *arte povera* their lasting cultural resonance. Pamela Merory Dernham's *Give and Take* wall piece of bent wire figures is an impressive feat of balance and careful wirework, but it's too literal a take on Alexander Calder without giving additional meaning. The linear figures resemble

Egyptian hieroglyphs with their large feet and archaic smiles, but the point of hieroglyphs is their semiotic sense; when taken out of all literary context, they seem to wander aimlessly. Peter Hiers's *Quiet Figure* is a formally pleasing oval inside a notched rectangle, with a rusted patina and minimalist balance that brings to mind the sculptures of *arte povera*-inspired Richard Serra—but it also evokes the excessive, mannered formalism of futurism that made *arte povera* seem so vital and necessary in contrast. Of course, Hiers is not alone in this aesthetic bind—ever since *arte povera* revealed its shortcomings, it's hard to reference futurism without getting political, or going commercial. Too often, Brancusi-besotted sculptors wind up inadvertently referencing the fascism that imposed the futurist design vocabulary by state fiat, or the endless Alessi citrus squeezers spawned by *Bird in Flight*.

Gina Telcocci admirably avoids these twin traps with *Trap*, a hanging cage with a deliberately sinister sensibility and an organic shape carved from wood. The cage is just large enough for a person to crawl into but not out of, and it's curved to accommodate an hourglass figure. The sculpture looms overhead like a strange fruit, ripe with political meaning in this era of double-binding security measures and culture wars over female nudity and abortion rights. Here, Telcocci has realized the hidden potential of both wood and art history, and carved meaning and form from them.

The curators have provided a poignant counterpoint to Telcocci's work with *Revive*, an installation by Paulette Peterson, to whose memory this show is dedicated. Affixed

to the wall are rows of small, clear medicine bottles, with text in white on the front that requires close inspection to read. As it turns out, each bottle offers a brief biography of a Scandinavian woman whom Peterson counts as part of her cultural ancestry, from scientists and artists to legal advocates for women. Some of these bottles contain blue fluid, others merely dry pigment—a mystery explained by a shelf on the adjoining wall containing three bottles and eyedroppers. Viewers are invited to drop fluid into bottles of their choosing. The bottle of Astrid the Viking, whose mother described her on a rune as "the handiest maiden in Hadeland" seemed to be close to brimming over, as was Isak Dinesen's. This presented a temptation to take some fluid out of the bottle responsible for *Out of Africa* and insert it into the bottle of, say, Nina Bang, the first Socialist minister in Denmark—but the overall impression of reverence this piece inspired outweighed the impulse for critique. Not at all incidentally, the same can be said for this show as a whole. If there had been bottles on the wall for each of the pieces in the show, this reviewer might still be standing at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, putting that eyedropper to good use.

—Alison Bing

In the Round: Selections from the Pacific Rim Sculptors Group closes March 12 at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, 451 South First St., San Jose. Other artists in the exhibition include Ed Clapp, Teresa Cunniff, Mary V. King, Laurie Polster, Susan Leibovitz Steinman, Marta Thoma, Ellen Vogel and Ann Weber.

Alison Bing is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.



From top: Nancy Ziegler Nodelman, *Found and Lost VII*, 2004, hotel glass covers, pigments, 19" x 18" x 1"; Gina Telcocci, *The Trap*, 2004, wood, reed; Sara Gordon, *The Meeting*, 2004, gut, 68" x 52" x 36"; left: Jane Johnson, *A Moment*, 2001, wood, 96" x 16" x 5", at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art.

