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Origin Stories

Cheryl Ann Thomas, *New Work*, Frank Lloyd Gallery, January 8-February 5, 2011

by Michelle Plochere

The suite of porcelain and bronze pieces by Cheryl Ann Thomas that comprise her latest show at the Frank Lloyd Gallery seem to find their locus as “objects” neither in the art world proper – the province of museums, educators and critics, nor in the decorative arts – where we find the beyond-functionality of material beauty. The interest of these works exists in the space between these often mutually exclusive domains – worlds with their own historical lineages and arbiters of taste. These objects seem to exist independently of any progenitors, their origin story elusive and mysterious.



Thomas terms these works “artifacts” and “relics,” and there is a reference here to both their broken nature, but also to the manual coiling process that formed them, that has an ancient, trans-continental precedent in the history of pottery making. Meticulously layering thin, serpentine strands of clay, Thomas creates precarious columns that are, in a sense, engineered for failure, as they collapse when met with the heat of the kiln. The resultant “ruins” are then conjoined and fired once again, creating and recreating, by design and chance, a paradoxical syntax of temporal consumption and destruction, meticulous order and arbitrary chaos. A time lapse video in a gallery anteroom reveals her process, as she slowly builds a hollow 5 foot tower that relents with a small amount of pressure at its most vulnerable point. In Thomas’ own words, “[the] work is an intimate and experiential inquiry into fragility and loss. I construct, I sabotage, I reconcile.” It is ritual in the guise of craft.

The pieces are imposing in scale, proportionally equivalent to a human torso, and it is disquieting to see genteel porcelain compressed and hewed as though it were a John Chamberlain industrial sculpture. (Indeed, there are also a few, more recent, cast bronze and steel pieces in the show with similar processual origins). An immediate perceptual and cognitive dissonance arises: the work is organic in its curves, yet rigid in its hardened form; it is porous, yet opaque; it is sensual, but unyielding.

As another paradox, it is work that both rewards and frustrates contemplation. While maintaining an elegiac palette of whites, grays and blacks, Thomas has woven strands of bright blue into the Grecian pleats of the work – and one effect of these shards is that they appear as diaphanous

folds and rents of fabric – flags flowing in an imperceptible breeze. **Artifact 4**, a bronze, is made up of gentle curls that are kelp-like in their form, and seem to waft in a current of their own devising.

In the end, it is a closed system that these objects represent: more containers than vessels in terms of their relationship to the void, they are subjects and objects of an inward collapse. They are more formless — in the sense of Bataille’s destabilizing concept of base materialism, his “informe—” than form. The “reconciliation” that has taken place between the artist and the material has left them vexingly out of reach to the present time, defying categorization: hence their status as relics and artifacts. They hold themselves in reserve as puzzles, formed by hand and material, strategy and chance, presenting a temporal unraveling, undoing and unknowing.