

ART ISSUES

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By Carmine Iannaccone



Ross Rudel

at ANGLES, 5 November–4 December

Ross Rudel's sculpture is like gourmet cuisine, in that an exquisitely presented meal doesn't preclude finding a ghastly head still attached to one's trout meunière. Though severely composed, his art plays upon questions of composure, just as it aligns the sculptural issues of form with the social ones of formality.

An untitled sculpture (all works, 1993) that at first looks like a simple oval on the wall, for example, upon examination acquires the sickening proportions and qualities of a sliced human skull. Skeins of hair are delicately interwoven into a perfect cross-hatch pattern over this surface, which has been sealed with a thick coating of gluey resin. Like an emblem for human vanity, the sculpture cites that ever-present compulsion to intervene and redesign the often less than cooperative body. The result involves a kind of embalming; which is appropriate, as most cosmetic preoccupations are motivated by the fear of impending age and its effects.

It is also quite fitting that these works are self-absorbed and overly conscious of their presence as art. By attenuating the point at which form becomes recognizable as representation, Rudel's cool and dispassionate abstractions engage in a kind of brinkmanship between propriety and what propriety would deem vulgar. The show's

most engaging pieces trap the viewer in an awkward position somewhere between the rawness of allusions and the elegance of presentation.

In one work, an innocuous gourd-like form hung just above eye level is punctured by a central navel that suggests a straining sphincter. A second piece, hung symmetrically in the back gallery, confirms the impression with a pristine black sphere being extruded through a similar orifice. With the mimetic factor reduced to its most minimal calibration, the artist makes it as hard to be abashed by the process being depicted as it is difficult to be seduced by its translation into pure form. If these pieces compromise the viewer, though, it is because they play into other expectations—as tasteful objects with a sober pedigree stretching back through the history of modern abstraction. Nevertheless, Rudel thwarts this lineage as he leans upon it. Like the ritualized treatment of hair and our elaborate taboos regarding the anus and its activities, Rudel's work does not formalize reality so much as it draws upon what is already most abstract in our culture.

Two floor pieces take a set of identically lathed wooden shapes and link them in various configurations like oversized beads. Such carefully wrought forms suggest a classical geometric stability, except for one glitch: the duplicitousness of its uninflected repetition. Sedated by their own symmetry, there remains something sinister lurking behind the principle of replication that they employ. Rudel taps into the uneasy side of rational thought, where the measure of the world is at least as threatening as it is reassuring. Rather than make nature and reality more contained, these works unveil a bleak inexorability. As though they were enlarged models of some malignant virus, the passive code of infinite reproducibility casts a pall over the sculptures' immaculate sense of design and precise fabrication.

The reference to an invisible agent of disease bespeaks the way all of these objects deal with a kind of contaminated purity. While apparently always on their best behavior in an art gallery, Rudel's works twist and turn in an aloof dance with the macabre. Each object's complacency with its formal beauty only serves to give its niggling subtext all the more nervy an edge.

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Ross Rudel
No. 133, 1993
Wood, fabric, resin, stained wood
16" x 16" x 14"