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NOVEMBER 16, 2011

Handymen at Vessel Gallery

Sculptors Gordon Glasgow and John Ruszel fuse materials and ideas.

By DeWitt Cheng

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Traditional sculpture before modernism was commemorative, figurative, and subtractive: Artists carved blocks of stone, wood, or clay into semblances of people or animals. With cubism came the additive revolution, eschewing illusionism and examining instead the properties of new materials. The works of Gordon Glasgow and John Ruszel illustrate these differing but equally valid aesthetic philosophies; trained in a variety of media and techniques, the artists transform basic materials — wood, metal, and string — into elegant, provocative, witty structures.

Glasgow's wooden sculptures are reminiscent of the anatomical models that doctors and dentists keep in their waiting rooms, or the plaster casts from ancient statuary that young artists used to cut their teeth on. Beautifully carved, they balance surrealist metamorphosis with sculptural narrative, making even the contemplation of one's creepy innards cheerful and bright. (Art-collecting medicos, take note.) "Leg," "Belly" and "Ribs" appear to be straightforward renderings of various body parts, but walk behind the plaques and you're seemingly beneath the skin, perusing, respectively, musculature, the womb's occupant, or acupuncture needles. "Hand I," "Hand II," and "Toes" combine normal and skeletal views in the same specimens. Other pieces employ analogues for anatomical functioning: In "Ear," a burst of metal rods "inside" the head symbolizes noise; in "Brain," an antler-like spray of roots represents the whole neural network. "Tongue" and "Finger" play with the idea of sex in a slightly disguised form, while "Wet" and "Nesting" joke about male plumbing; "Sausages" takes humor about institutional mystery meat to new heights of unsavoriness.

Ruszel's intricate sculptures and prints derive from the interaction of materials with process. The artist: "My work emerges from the application of a set of rules to a set of materials. As the ruleset shifts to accommodate the materials and materials are shuffled to fit the rules, the form is born. With each adjustment there is both refinement and mutation. Structures emerge without function, aesthetics manifest from physical necessity These structures are not abstractions, nor are they representations. These structures are not illusory, for they exist only and purely as themselves."

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Crafted from string, wood, and metal hardware held in balanced tension, like Kenneth Snelson's large, cable-stayed steel-tube sculptures, Ruszel's centrifugal "Bevel," sprawling "Untitled (Weave)," and enigmatic "Broken Ring" suggest futuristic architectural/engineering systems — infrastructure of unknown purpose from a brave new world (if one may indulge in metaphors). Don't miss Ruszel's mandala-like prints, made from un-jammed typewriter keys. Structure, Object, and Truth Discerned runs through November 29 at Vessel Gallery (471 25th St., Oakland). 510-893-8800 or Vessel-Gallery.com

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