

Masters of ceramic sculpture in 2 distinctive exhibitions

Challenging visions, disregard of traditions highlight works at S.F., UC Davis museums

By Charles Desmarais

It's not often that we get the opportunity to compare, virtually side by side, comprehensive exhibitions of recognized masters of their artistic media. For those willing to think of Davis as close to San Francisco (with traffic, of course, that can depend on the time of day), we have that chance through year-end, with shows of ceramic sculpture and related drawings by Kathy Butterly and Annabeth Rosen.

Both artists have strong ties

"Distraction," right, is one of many objects marked by their off-balance structure and involuted form at Kathy Butterly's exhibition at UC Davis' Manetti Shrem Museum of Art.

to UC Davis, long a hotbed of fired clay. Rosen, whose work is on view at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in "Annabeth Rosen: Fired, Broken, Gathered, Heaped," holds the Robert Arneson Endowed Chair at Davis, where she has led the ceramics program since 1997. Butterly trained there, earning a master of fine arts in 1990, and her exhibition, "Kathy Butterly: ColorForm," is presented at the university's Manetti Shrem Museum of Art.

Art continues on E2



Kathy Butterly /
Manetti Shrem Museum

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Wasson Collection / James Cohan Gallery



Shoshana and Wayne Blank



Kathy Butterly / Manetti Shrem Museum

"Solid Stand," Kathy Butterly (2016)**"Frill Seeker," Kathy Butterly (2015)****"Color Safe," Kathy Butterly (2018)**

Masters of ceramic sculpture showcased

Art from page E1

Further to that connection, though not at all unrelated to it, both artists display a virtuoso disregard for the traditions of ceramic sculpture, forming excellence from what would be error in the hands of a less masterful potter.

If the sculptors share threads of heritage and an impulse for the iconoclastic, however, their exhibitions are vastly, visibly different. Butterly's work would appear, at first, to fit nicely into a classic decorative arts context. On closer look, though, her fancy cups and vases would frustrate any host who tried to use them for their classic purpose, with their off-balance structure and involuted form. Their fleshy insides, often in pinks and reds, would likely scandalize a tea party guest peering into their depths.

Rosen's sculpture might be called more "muscular" than Butterly's — though fine detail requires its own training and coordination of the smaller muscles. The walls of Rosen's forms are heavy and chunky, where Butterly's look feather-light. While both artists make works that conjure images of body parts, Rosen's tend to the vascular and the intestinal, where Butterly suggests moist orifices.

Disappointingly, neither exhibition displays to best advantage the multiple surprises offered by the works included. In each case, the decision was made to put numerous small objects in groups on large tables. That's a good way to get a lot of similar-scaled work into a gallery of limited size, and it does encourage comparisons, but it standardizes the sculptures in a way that detracts. Better to have used exhibition design to pace the viewer's experience.

This is a particular problem with the Rosen show at CJM. The museum's largest gallery is often broken up into smaller rooms, and the space certainly looks elegant with all but one short, free-standing wall removed. But the choice to plop three nearly indistinguishable "sections" of the exhibition on one enormous table, delineated only by arrows drawn on a page bound into a gallery guide, emphasizes the sameness of objects that aren't all that different in the first place.

For much of her work, Ro-



Annabeth Rosen



Anglim Gilbert Gallery, P.P.O.W.

sen's technique is to make enormous numbers of similar forms, then to bind them, whether in the kiln or after firing, into stacks and bundles. One salutary effect of that is to

temper the preciousness that often undercuts expression in ceramic art (a misstep Butterly deftly skirts). By including malformed and broken elements in these assemblages,

she extends the social metaphor of diverse and impaired individuals joining together in strength.

These can be impressive, at 6 feet high and comprising many hundreds of separate objects she has made by hand. All the same, her biggest work is not her best. Gangly and vaguely figurative, the tall sculptures suggest nature desperately out of whack. Her table-top works — hardly diminutive — are generally more carefully considered compositions.

Some are built up, in what look like sedimentary layers. Others are small miracles of reclamation — shards assembled, rebuilt and refired, a damaged world repaired.

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"Rool and Plu," above, and "Boogaloo," left, are among Annabeth Rosen's eclectic collection of sculptures displayed at the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco.

"Kathy Butterly: Color-Form": Noon-6 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday; noon-9 p.m. Thursday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Through Dec. 29. Free. Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, UC Davis, 254 Old Davis Road, Davis. (530) 752-8500. <https://manettishremmuseum.ucdavis.edu>

"Annabeth Rosen: Fired, Broken, Gathered, Heaped": 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursdays-Tuesdays; closed Wednesdays. Through Jan. 19. \$14-\$16; free 18 and younger. Contemporary Jewish Museum, 736 Mission St., S.F. 415-655-7800. <https://thecjm.org>