

“Art does not reproduce what we see. It makes us see.” Paul Klee

Some artists generate a seemingly endless stream of ideas and images. Others are gifted designers or technical wizards. Still others are an amalgam, fusing ideas and designs in challenging formal constructs. In Francois Ruegg we find all of these attributes in one artist. For 25 years, Ruegg has translated ideas into sculpture, moving from his early abstract, formal content to the more conceptual and social commentary of his recent work, all with meticulous artisanship.

Ruegg has had many successes, winning prizes and honors throughout his career. He has not rested on his laurels, however. Rather than settling into a stylized signature production, he continues to pursue new ideas and to develop the means to convey them. He challenges himself to produce new bodies of work, keeping himself interested and surprising us time and time again. Whatever form his pieces take or whatever new content they express, the work is recognizably Ruegg. There is an evident artistic sensibility throughout, an attention to detail, an absence of touch, a general elegance imbued with an edge of quirkiness, an anxiety lightened with a sense of humor, consummate craftsmanship, and an underlying provocation to us to think and to look harder.

As he and his work have matured, content has deepened and broadened and become charged with emotion, commentary, challenge and consequence. Like much contemporary art, Ruegg's sculpture is not simply about beauty or representation and does not instantly reveal its meaning. We have to work at it, think about it, make sense of the forms and make connections to content, much of which is about life, socially, politically, sexually and artistically. We have to look actively and the resulting conversation has transformative power. Not just skillfully rendering clever constructions, Ruegg has something to say and the ability to say it, to engage us in a productive, transforming dialogue.

Part 2

In the early slabs and assemblages, geometrical, linear and abstracted forms and patterns played off one another in formal explorations of volume, dimension and surface structure and composition. With his move in 1997 to Caracas, Venezuela, where he worked and taught for about 5 years, Ruegg became more preoccupied with emotions and social problems. There he began to incorporate figurative imagery and text

into his work as it became more conceptually based. (Caracas, itself, with its economic disparity and very evident poverty, may have been the impetus for this transition). In the 2003 In and Out series, Ruegg experimented with composing and opposing geometric forms, “stretching” the expressive potential of porcelain to articulate suppression, conflict and urgency. The internal protrusions and bulges beneath the surface suggest all that is hidden, latent and repressed struggling to come out. No matter how we suppress desires and voices, he tells us, sexual, political and societal ideologies will emerge.

The newer Tensions, Extensions and Mutations from the past year grew out of the In and Out series. They are taller and more vertical, therefore imbued with more figurative and architectural reference. In the Tensions, the spherically topped pieces suggest figures while the square topped works refer to buildings. Although stretched upward, they are still very closed, contained, restricted – almost suffocatingly so. Only one surface is painted and that one is black. The only entrance or exit is through one or two holes and those are small and dark. Tension inflates each piece and gives each its concentric internal structure around a central axis. Through the purity of the material (porcelain) and the absence of the hand (no surface gesture or impression), Ruegg has created pieces which seem otherworldly, not specific buildings or figures but more allusions to a futuristic “Brave New World” of sorts. They suggest a kind of omen, a Huxleyan warning to pay attention in a new age of things, circumstances, people and politics we don’t understand but with which we must contend.

Ultimately, the Tensions explode into Extensions (from the square tops) and Mutations (from the round). Where the Tensions were still “covered up”, here everything is open and bared, gaping and torn, the desire to be free winning out over the repression but not without consequence. The deep inky blue interiors of the Extensions are open yet still dark. We can’t see in and don’t know yet where what has happened will lead us. The pieces have blown open but the forms remain fraught with tension not unlike our current political anxiety. Buildings, trains, people have been blown up but what is left and what can regenerate? Oppositely, the dry yet viscous interiors of the Mutations are a blood red that can only refer to human or animal bodies, gaping wounds, remains of battles either personal or political. Strangely enough, both the Extensions and Mutations remain sensuous in their smooth, porcelain exteriors and vibrant, mysterious interiors. This depth of color signifies vitality, that regeneration is possible even if we are scarred or

scared. We feel warned and yet enticed. Afraid but tempted. These are not just hopeless remnants or shards of the Tensions, however. They are potent symbols of the revelatory and transformative possibilities of self and society that can grow from tension and challenge. As Lewis Mumford asserted in The Conduct of Life, “only one road lies open to those who would remain human: the road of renewal.... It must first take place in the minds and hearts of individual men who have the courage to re-educate themselves to the realities of the present human situation, and, step by step, take command of it.” When we push toward the new and unknown, whether in relationships, technology or society, there are tensions and breakdowns. But ultimately we hope for growth and transformation.

Part Three

This is not fast art – it is not a quick one-liner. Rather it takes time to digest. The purity and intensity of the surfaces and forms draw us in, attract us sensually. Once in, we wade around slowly, realizing the depth and potency of Ruegg’s message. There are no simple answers here, merely evidence of struggle and warnings. These are visually appealing objects with implosive and explosive content. As we work to understand them within our own frames of reference, they reward us with relevance and depth of meaning. We look, we feel, we relate, we synthesize. We come away challenged, awakened, changed and recharged from the viewing interaction. Isn’t that why we still bother to look at art?