

Ceramics

Art + Perception

July 2018

#109



USD	\$20
EUR	€18
CAD	\$27
AUD	\$27
GBP	£15





April 13, 2016, stoneware,
slip and gold leaf, 24 x 252
x 6 in, 60 x 640 x 15 cm.
Image credit: Jenny
Gorman Photography.

Toni Ross:

A Woman's Way of Contemporary Minimalism

Written by **Andrew Buck**



The piece reads a bit like a life line; a time line with highs and lows, beauty and parts torn asunder.

Those who know Toni Ross as an artist are aware of her attention to detail. Through this article I intend to provide a close-up view of Toni Ross's ceramic work referred to as *Strata*, and provide an opportunity for us to see the work and artist in a new perspective. *Strata* are made of joined pieces of cut ceramic slabs which began as cast-offs from other projects. I tend to think of this technique as Ross's way of channeling her early experience as a pastry chef. There is a frugality in her studio where nothing goes to waste. Ceramic slab remnants are reincorporated into new work the way excess rolled-out pie dough is reclaimed for the next pie shell. Discussions about clay and food seem natural enough, especially since meals, in general, are served and eaten out of pottery of one type or another. Notions of warmth and sustenance are attached to both. However, the individual sculptural pieces which comprise Ross's *Strata* serve an entirely different purpose, they serve the soul.

Strata represent one of Ross's unique contributions to the art world. The pieces can be contextualized in relationship to other works in her *oeuvre* and as well as to ancient, modern, and contemporary art forms. From a chronological point of view, *Strata* came into being in 2016. Her previous and concurrent ceramic works include hand-formed sculptural vessels, archetypal cubes, and archaic stela which have been exhibited selectively at Ricco/Maresca Gallery in New York City and The Drawing Room in East Hampton, NY. While Ross's artistic development is more organic than linear, and more open to accident and change than to premeditated moves, her work evolves incrementally over time. This results in inter-connectedness among all her pieces. This thread of visual continuity in her work forms the basis of a distinctive artistic language, which is simultaneously visceral and intuitive. As such, it was not surprising to learn that in 2016 Cindy Sherman selected Ross's *April 13* for the *Artists Choose Artists* exhibition at the Parrish Museum, based on a "gut reaction to the work".



Strata #3 detail, 2016
stoneware and slip,
27.75 x 20.25 x 2.25 in,
70.5 x 51.5 x 6 cm.
Image credit: Jenny
Gorman Photography.



ART



The emergence of *Strata* appears as a pivotal, watershed point in Ross's artistic growth between singular or grouped objects, and that of site-specific sculptural installations. It is not so much that Ross leaves the small and intimate for the large scale, rather her interests continually find expression in new forms. Her process involves material exploration while creating variations in formal composition involving scale, arrangement, and placement relationships. However, these developments emerge from within familiar parameters of her extant visual vocabulary. Consistently throughout her *oeuvre*, Ross draws attention to formal considerations by means of minutia. She puts a high degree of thought and care into each visual element of her sculptural compositions. This is why her large-scale sculptural installation work, such as *Permanent Transience* and *Sanctuary Entwined*, as well as her works within the *Strata* series, retain their nuanced intimacy.

However, her work stands worlds apart. Serra and other minimalist artists sought to eradicate the presence of the human hand or draw attention to dehumanization brought about by standardized manufacture as seen in Donald Judd's *Untitled (Stack)*, 1967 (wall mounted, uniformly-spaced, factory produced lacquered steel boxes). Ross, in contrast, provides an opportunity to personalize life experience through her work. This comes from the material pliability of clay interacting with the touch of a human hand. However, the *Strata* series remains universal and unprescribed, providing opportunities to elicit valid subjective responses from each viewer. From this point of view, the work is both enigmatic and democratic. From an evocative standpoint, Ross's work runs somewhat parallel to that of her contemporary, Maya Lin who is known for the *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* and *Pin River* series. For both, it is about what the viewer brings to the rawness, directness, and simplicity of the work.

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Strata, which includes *Strata #1-#5*, *April 13*, and *Justified*, are minimalist in nature. They exhibit a stark bareness. Adjoined clay scraps, marked, textured, covered with various slips using stiff brushes, and arranged ever so deliberately, but not quite, provide a simple canvas for form and surface to interact. *Strata #1-#5* are arranged vertically on the wall. The vertically stacked horizontal slabs reveal the physical pressure of the making process; segments arc and curve among the straight and narrow. It is intriguing how they are, in some ways, similar to work by Richard Serra. For example, Ross's act of erasure which creates a central line that cuts through *Strata #4* eerily echoes Richard Serra's *Two Cuts*, 1971, (unadorned cut steel).

April 13 and *Justified* provide further evidence of Ross's incremental, creative development as an artist. In *April 13*, Ross crosses an invisible boundary by turning her *Strata* compositions in a horizontal direction and by bridging a gap in the space of the exhibit walls formed by a passageway. Her signature square holes, nested throughout the slab composition, appear intermittently among the larger scraps of clay that stand, twist, bend, and straighten. The assembled ceramic slabs are cut by a long void which bisects the piece horizontally. This void may represent a tear in the universe, a space into which one can journey. Alternately, it may function as a silent metaphorical re-enactment of Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Repetition and variety are pronounced features of the assembled clay fragments whose subdued textures, colors, and shapes are touched intermittently with gold leaf. As an enactment *April 13* becomes a composite visual statement that spans architecture, as well as the past and present. According to Ross, "The piece reads a bit like a life line; a time line with highs and lows, beauty and parts torn asunder".

April 13 detail, 2016, stoneware, slip and gold leaf, 24 x 252 x 6 in, 60 x 640 x 15 cm. Image credit: Jenny Gorman Photography.



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Created in 2018, *Justified* retains the horizontal format akin to *April 13*, yet Ross changed the work in two vital ways. She reduced the size of the individual clay slab pieces out of which each segment is composed. Additionally, she altered the layout or composition on the wall to incorporate multiple rows of arranged slab tile *text blocks*. The term *text block* is used loosely. I do not wish to superimpose an interpretation on the clay segments, rather suggest that the mesmerizing intricacy of each segment holds an undecipherable meaning. They seem to act as place-holders of significance. Perhaps the piece may be understood best when looked at as a whole. *Justified* presents numerous interpretations and invites viewers to take an active stance on how it could be read. Should it be read vertically, like a geological or archeological time scale? Should it be read horizontally as a text, justified to the left so to speak? Or alternatively, could it be interpreted from a birds-eye or aerial drone view, implying markers and rows of events or incidents that have taken place over time?

The remarkable openness yet stoicism of Ross's work rests in her simplified aesthetic and unpretentious use of clay and other natural materials. They are one of the keys to her artistic success. Like Giorgio Morandi's repetitive

still-life paintings of exquisitely simplified bottles rendered with a hushed palette, Ross continues to investigate permutations and variations within a visual lexicon that she may definitely call her own. Starting with a set of knowns provides her with a stable foundation for expansion and innovation that constitutes a dynamic and compelling new visual language in three-dimensional form. Individually and collectively, Ross's non-discursive forms are charged with powerful emotional resonance. This work seems to embody the thinking of philosopher Susanne K. Langer who posited in the 1950s, that art and music are forms for symbolic expression of intuitive, felt knowledge. As Langer states, art is "a symbolic expression of the forms of sentience as (the artist) understands them". Today, Ross has achieved a synthesis of thought, form, and feeling in her minimalistic sculpture. It appears that her symbolism is wrought in a visual language that is profoundly unique and novel in this world. In that sense she has achieved what many artists aspire to do, she has created a new form. I would suggest that while this is just one woman's touch in the landscape of contemporary art, it is significant in reshaping the image of minimalism where the personal and imaginative are as relevant as the social and political. ■

Justified detail, 2018
stoneware, 7" 6" x 4"
6", 228 x 137 cm.

Image credit: Jenny
Gorman Photography.

About the author

Andrew Buck has a life-long interest in the visual arts. He was an apprentice intaglio master printer in New York City before discovering the joys of pottery. He was inspired through workshops with M C Richards and Toshiko Takaezu. He worked in a variety of ceramic studios for a number of years while working full time as an art teacher and later district arts administrator. Since completing his doctor of education degree (Ed.D.) at Columbia University researching the experience of adult students in ceramic MFA programs, he finds joy in writing informative and engaging articles for the ceramic arts community. His diverse creative work can be seen at: <http://andrew-buck.net/> and <https://www.andrewbuck.nyc/>