

## The Imprints of Visual Data on Sculpture at The Drawing Room

*These new works include abstracted textural elements that hint at an undisclosed meaning*

By [Jennifer Landes](#) | June 9, 2016



Toni Ross's simple compositions of rudimentary shapes evoke universal truth and deep emotional associations. *Photos by Jenny Gorman*

Toni Ross's sculptures sometimes seem like they are everywhere, and often it is because they are. With regular shows here and in New York, a recent show in Paris, and a coming installation at Marders in Bridgehampton in conjunction with the Parrish Road Show in August, she is currently showing at the Drawing Room in East Hampton.

She has said her work is autobiographical, but not literal. At a talk at the Parrish Art Museum a few years ago, she juxtaposed her ceramic sculptures with photographs of places she'd visited, landscapes both local and global in scope, and a photograph of her standing with her son, taken from behind to show how visual data imprints on her even when she is not aware of it.

The pieces she is showing at the Drawing Room are small but memorable. Several are bound in cotton thread, like something you might bring home from a butcher or a chic gift shop. In fact, they often look like small and precious gifts. The combination of stoneware and slip ceramic materials and techniques is not unusual in her practice, but it seems even more thoughtful and realized here, perhaps because these new works include abstracted textural elements that hint at an undisclosed meaning.



The "Stele" series of sculptures are flat and angular. They might stand on their own or prop themselves against each other to make three-dimensional box shapes. These pieces are where the allusions to language are most evident, often cuneiform in style and rhythmic abstraction.

Consisting of a series of forms and shapes applied to each other to make a whole, the sculptures in her “Compositions” series are mindful juxtapositions of ceramic forms, sometimes with thread. These can look like an old washboard, an interpretive yin and yang, or a saw table or chopping block. Their specificity is incongruous with their elemental forms.

Each piece has an inevitability about it, deriving from the conjuring-up of both past and present associations. This is what makes them seem as timeless as the Cycladic carved statuettes that she often cites as influences. These are not the more literal interpretations, but more global in reach. It is as if she has synthesized all of art history, Eastern and Western, into a universal language we all inherently understand.

The pieces that incorporate thread are particularly appealing in their delicacy and strength. The thin fibers seem to buttress the more durable but still fragile ceramic forms. In “Stele #7,” she incorporates paper, hinting once again at writing, text, or language. In “Stele #2,” she uses bookbinding tape to make the sculpture appear to be an old book, shorn of its cover, which the cotton thread attaches as a remnant. It’s a bit ghostly and forlorn, but it has a presence and stability that lends it nobility.

It is surprising how much emotion and meaning can be wrung from these simple compositions of rudimentary shapes. Mostly, it comes from the brushed surface that plays with light and shadow in varying intensities of grays, browns, and rusts. They dance across the etched surfaces, adding depth and highlights to the incisions, so that even the tiniest keepsake becomes a raft of associations. The eroded and worn edges make them appear to be recovered artifacts, and there is a general sense of vanitas about them. Once beheld, they endure in the memory, casting a spell that requires repeated viewing.

The Drawing Room show will close on June 20. The Parrish installation of her work “Permanent Transience” will be on view at Marders on Aug. 20. It will consist of a juxtaposition of sculpted bales of straw with three massive boulders that the garden supply and design store keeps on site.