

LAGUNA BEACH
COASTLINE PILOT

In her revolutionary essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa," French feminist writer Helene Cixous wrote, "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard." She was speaking to women writers, charging them to stop suppressing the feminine in their work, to not only write about women, but to write like women -- in other words, to use the female body as a metaphor for style. I thought of this immediately the first time I saw the work of Cybele Rowe. It was a large ceramic piece, a canoe in clay, and I never forgot its provocative female shape, as well as the metaphor for feminine power, both container and contained.

So I was very pleased to hear William Merrill Gallery, 611 S. Coast Highway, will have a month-long retrospective of Rowe's work, beginning March 11.

Rowe's pieces are fascinating, arresting. She does monumental ceramic pieces, some as large as 82 inches high. The mind boggles at what is required to make these sculptures so stable. They also are glazed. Glaze is a notoriously unpredictable and fickle material, even on small pieces under the best conditions. Most remarkably, even if you don't register this on a conscious level, you sense their hollowness, their status as containers. This gives each piece, in spite of size, a sense of lightness without the burden of fragility.

Let me illustrate this complexity using a piece titled "Joy" Rowe has produced a series of figures representing abstract emotional states she calls "Female Suite."

"Joy" is a larger-than-life woman done in pale, circular glazing. She is covered with tattoo-like dots of deep aqua. Deeply engraved eyes gaze out and up, toward her uplifted arms, expressing a dream-like grace and organicism. Her legs curl impossibly upward, suggesting a mermaid's tail, and as such, also suggesting surfacing.

Rowe fearlessly speaks the feminine in "Joy."

I thought, when I saw it, of Michelangelo's "Delphic Sybil," who is so masculine because it was difficult for Renaissance painters to get around Roman Catholic church prohibitions of nude female models. "Joy" has a hole to represent both her sex and her sexuality [a hole which makes her whole]. It also suggests a vessel [this is, after all, a ceramic piece], and a passage, our way into the world. Such richness of metaphor gives Rowe's work a mythological quality, archetypal. The figure "Enlighten" reaches upward in a similar manner. But the back of the figure reveals a crimson line that stretches from the crown of her head to her sacrum, a map of our primitive selves, from the base to the intellectual. The figure's firm seat on the ground emphasizes this: She is enlightened, but grounded in experience.

What about this, other than its subject matter, is particularly "feminine?" Why is this allowing the female body to be heard? The very medium should suggest the answer. Rowe creates women out of clay. Each one re-tells what it means to fashion a new being in one's own image. In this self-referential gesture, Rowe pushes the subject of the body to the fore.

But it is also the ability of each piece to suggest these things to the viewer without intellectually possessing her. Each figure tells its own story.

To understand what I mean, you might look at the work of painter Paul Ecke, also featured in the show. Ecke's canvases contrast so neatly with Rowe's rounded "vessels" that the show itself can provide a lesson in contrasts, in feminine/masculine.



'Trust'- Cybele Rowe 2005 Ceramic 61" X 28" X 28"

I was impressed by Ecker's series, "Aboriginal Sticks." Each is 72 inches high, 6 inches wide, and purely masculine. Their long, thin shapes are accented by stripes of red and waxy white, some horizontal, some vertical, some diagonal: lines on lines.

The line segment is a masculine way of ordering experience, straight, pure, and neat. Its repetitions of many points hold a kind of beauty and comfort, priapic and strong. Even the feminine circle is represented by metal washers set in the canvases' surface, fixed and heavy, as if they were really a just

a line segment turned back on itself. They make a brilliant comment on the deep, black holes found in Rowe's sculptures.



'Longerboat'- Cybele Rowe 2005 Ceramic. 68" X 10" X 11"

ness that marks the feminine. Cixous said that writing gave her, "the joys of parturition, the joys of both the mother and the child."

"Life summons life," she added. It is the sheer "joy" of creation and in creation found in Rowe's work that marks her as a truly original artistic voice, speaking the body.

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