

rachel uffner

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Hilary Harnischfeger and a Host of Forms at Rachel Uffner

By ROBERTA SMITH | DEC. 10, 2015



"Sadie" (2015), a ceramic, paper, pigment, hydrostone and quartz work by Hilary Harnischfeger. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery

Hilary Harnischfeger's mongrel objects continue to strengthen, looking more alien than ever. Elaborately handmade, they sidestep traditional painting and sculpture to conjure (and sometimes use) a host of applied art forms: ceramics, mosaics, textiles, jewelry and architectural decoration. The usual notions of skill and finish are deferred; scale is confusing, as these things are too dense for their size.

The 11 pieces here challenge us to decipher how, with what and in which sequence they were made. While the works are rough-edged, they are rarely fully forthcoming. Never more than a foot or two high, they occupy pedestals or hang from walls, typically incorporating the clunky stands or mounts of recycled wood that offer them up for viewing. The two-pronged

mount jutting through a relief-like chunk titled "Bovine" turns it into a mask resembling a cow's head.

The materials, including multicolored strata of paper, clay and hydrostone, have been variously pigmented, glazed, baked, carved and cast before being wedged and mortared together. Oil-stick transfer drawings that evoke improvisational frescoes are among the rare hints of fine art. And nature intrudes in the form of pieces of glimmering quartz or pyrite (fool's gold) embedded in the surfaces of most works. "Chandigarh" has a sizable Herkimer diamond (a form of quartz). "Sadie" is basically a cabochon setting, in patchwork ceramic, for an extraordinary double-humped quartz.

The gems offer natural — but ultra-refined — versions of Ms. Harnischfeger's additive, repetitive building processes. These, in turn, progress from delicate to crude: from the tightly layered paper to the more casually striped clay and then the big sections of hydrostone.

Ms. Harnischfeger also makes compressed assemblages, evoking calligraphic texts spliced together from different languages of material and technique. Reading their aggregate forms and surfaces can give the eye a new invigorating fluency in the age-old ways of the hand.

Hilary Harnischfeger
Rachel Uffner
170 Suffolk Street, near Houston Street, Lower East Side
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