

NANCY SELVIN

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Within the close-knit circle of San Francisco Bay Area ceramists, Nancy Selvin occupies a unique niche. She produces large-scale, outdoor installations that recall the nature-based work of Andy Goldsworthy and highly introspective still lifes that read like Morandi in 3-D. Over the past several years, she has concentrated on the smaller form in what appears to be a conscious attempt to simplify.

Working out of a light-drenched studio in north Berkeley—the world epicenter of ceramic production—certainly enables that endeavor. But what differentiates Selvin from her neighbors, as well as her contemporaries in ceramic sculpture, is that she eschews realism and functionality. In fact, Selvin goes to considerable lengths to ensure that her work is decidedly *non-functional*. The distinction is important, because it indicates a level of intellectual engagement not always found among ceramists who concentrate on function and decoration.

In the exhibition “Object as Subject” Selvin took that most quotidian form—the bottle—and transformed it into a contemplative experience, one in which willing viewers could savor the nuances of theme and variation through the exercise of repetition, which in itself is not news. Warhol, Oldenburg and many postmodernists have used it to great effect. But I’m thinking in particular of the painter Deborah Oropallo, whose recent photorealist depictions of industrial objects impart an unexpected elegance.

Selvin’s bottles, even though they are everything but realistic, produce something of an Oropallo-like effect: they disarm with their point-blank simplicity and make you stare. What you see are minimally glazed terra-cotta vessels arrayed in a variety of settings. They stand (like *Notation # 3*) in solitude before ceramic books that carry lithographed text, some of it legible, some not. Most of it is culled from discussions about Norman Mailer in *Paris Review*, and its intent, other than to reveal the artist’s philosophical musings, is unclear. Other pieces—*3 x 3* and *Collection*—feature bottles arranged en masse on low-slung tables so as to make them viewable from on high. There’s also an installation of 12 such bottles—*Is Less More?*—that stretches for 20 feet, as well as several wonderful (untitled) gouache-on-paper drawings rendered in luminous colors.

The presentation of the 3-D pieces made it easy, if not unavoidable, to see anthropomorphic qualities in these inanimate objects. And therein lies the pull. An exposed seam, a sloped shoulder, a foreshortened, flattened or diagonally sliced neck, a bulge here, a curve there—they all add up to certain intrigue. The smaller installations, where, in a glance, you can register these differences, were the most effective. Unfortunately, that didn’t hold for the exhibition’s largest piece, *Is Less More?*, because of the room’s narrow width. In the end, though, I found myself longing for a little more roughness, a little more funk than Selvin seems willing to give.

By contrast, her drawings deliver plenty of that and more than compensate for their spartan tendencies. In these abstract works she gives color free reign, washing the paper in pale earthen tones and texturing it with scratches, smears and blotches—all of which speak of process in a way that the clay bottles do not. Another attractive feature of these drawings is their zoom-lens perspective. The tops are truncated, and their sides run smack up against the side of the paper, lending them an intensity they might otherwise not have.

Selvin’s position in the top rank of ceramic artists has come about through a process of rigorous self-examination in which her roots (in abstract expressionism and California funk) have been tempered by the experience of living on three continents, including both coasts of the United States. That may in part explain why she has no problem entertaining the possibility of being the only female artist to have ever included a quote from Mailer in her work.

The one she likes best is: “Craft protects against evil and from facing those ever-expanding realities of deterioration and responsibility.” And in that Nancy Selvin may have found an article of faith that’s truly functional. —DAVID M. ROTH

David M. Roth is a Sacramento-based journalist and critic.

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP AND BOTTOM: *Notes and Notebooks*, 2001, terra-cotta with screened and fired text, wood, mixed media, 18 by 18 by 8 inches; *Still Life: Intention to Realization*, 2001, terra-cotta, wood, mixed media, 24 by 48 by 6 inches. Photos/Charles Frizzell.

