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## Rocksbreath II by Susan Low-Beer

June 25 to August 31, 2002

This project marks a reworking of one designed specifically for display in the courtyard of the Burlington Art Centre. There, Low-Beer's stone-like ceramic units appeared in a multi-levelled installation amid foliage and water, dappled with light, even showered with plum blossoms. The ensemble conveyed aspects of human presence within an Edenic modernist environment.



Regarding that earlier installation, Burlington's Curator, Jonathan Smith, noted that these figures held the balance of androgyny. Gender is not featured. Smith pointed to the connotations of religious engagement suggested through attitudes of prayer and humility, while sentinel figures inferred alert concern.

In this suite of figures, Low-Beer is investigating the capacity of one basic, sculptural ideogram to convey multiple nuances. Her forms are pressed from the same mold in a variety of clay bodies, including paper clay. Produced between 1999 and 2001, the individual units have been fired to cone 3 and finished with stains and *terra sigillata*. Seams between slabs have been accentuated to delineated somatic zones.

Rock is a beatitude that falls from the sky. This belief, instigated by the phenomenon of meteors, reinforced by rain, snow, and hail, is recorded as common in ethnographic studies of pre-industrial societies. The logic of mythic symbols, irreverent of and irrelevant to rational scientism, upholds the concept that the earth is a sacred and fertile place, seeded with life force that animates all matter.

The calculated placement of rocks is an immemorial practice. Rocks were deployed to sacralize space, to make it special, to signal human endeavor and mark the natural world with inimitable human presence. Rocks were integral to the designation of meeting places and the intersection of pathways. Rocks aided astrological observation and calendar notation. Even in contemporary gardens, rocks are used to signal the permutations of geological time as opposed to historical time.

In the orient, art collectors with a Taoist focus covet rocks infused with the unifying rhythm of Yin and

Yang, and see them as highly plastic entities riddled with the breath of the universe.

We memorialize the souls of our dead much as our ancestors did, less through figurative monuments now than through the dedication of stone markers. Whether simple cairn or full cenotaph, we use stone and rocks as much to witness our grief as to mark the return of the deceased to the sacred continuum of substance. Ashes to ashes. In some customs, the bereaved leave pebbles rather than flowers at the grave to mark their observances. Rock becomes a means of integrating experience out of life's aberrant multiplicity and disparateness.



Our postmodern sense of space evolves. For many of us, the experience of social space, once a seamlessly interconnected monocultural field, suffers fragmentation, deconstruction, and reformulation. The Jewish experience of space as differential and discontinuous is now an existential reality shared by all. We see ourselves in cell groups or moieties always idiosyncratic in comparison to others in proximity and separated by a gulf or void from any similar space. We now hold that we are all subject to spaces of distinction in which language, race, colour, gender or creed are but a few of the defining factors. We are all Babel's progeny, all wandering in diaspora, all looking for a place to mark as our own. Ironically, communication technology reinforces separation while confirming linkage. Corporal being remains our single commonality, and increasingly, we see ourselves in a universe charged with a propensity for transformation.



While these points are germane to Low-Beer's strategy, it must also be noted that any inferences perceived to be in this work depend on the viewer's own facility with the lineage of figurative sculpture within the history of art. The form of the human figure has been used for millennia as an armature for expressive meaning. This phenomenon arises from our innate sense of reading "body language", of interpreting postures and intuiting the communicative condition of others in relation to our own. Low-Beer exploits that insight, fostering our ability to understand figures based on their position, their location in the landscape, and their relation.

The artist's material heritage derived through ceramic practice is recalled through association with European Neolithic terra cotta "figurines" that represented the female principle, particularly in the aspect of *Guardian of the Hearth*. Regardless of scale, Low-Beer's units bear a talismanic quality, reminiscent of the Cycladic violin-shaped marble amulets. Both of these early sculptural exemplars are hieratic. Both are presentational in intent. They, too, are symmetrical, simplified, stylized and often truncated.

Also, Low-Beers figures, neatly poised in tuck position, resonate with some of the canonical positions of Yogic breathing exercises, the aim of which is union of self with the ultimate principle.

Here, field rocks maintain the relation to nature. The figures are now attuned to the reality of concrete in a severe architectural context. They seem extruded onto a plane of existence characterized by an arid, riverine quality. An atmosphere of dusk in the desert is induced by the surface complexion of the figures themselves.

A greater depth of feeling and interiority are evinced in this improvisation, pointing to the protean power of the ensemble as it is adjusted to each venue.

Degrees of solace, empathy and compassion seem brought to the fore. Gestation, witness, rest, dream, growth, pain, subjection, responsibility, burden, grief, prayer, protection, care, and death all pertain, but precise interpretation inheres to the inclination of each viewer. Two wall units exploit only half of the mold, expanding connotations of carnality while intimating skeletal structure.

On the floor, snuggling couples insinuate a conjugal life, while isolated, self-absorbed figures, as natural as island outcroppings, carry a different valence. With this ensemble in this room, Low-Beer seems to sport along a creative edge where inspiration and rock-solid inertia co-exist, where substance and being interrogate each other.



Susan Low-Beer was the 1999 recipient of the Canada Council administered *Saidye Bronfman Award*, one of the world's most prestigious acknowledgements in the craft field. She lives and works in Toronto.

Glenn Allison, Director, Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery

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