Rebecca Warren

October 3, 2010 – December 12, 2010

The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago

October 2, 2010 – April 3, 2011

The Art Institute of Chicago
PolyChrome Knead

Granted, it’s a polemical question, but what isn’t sculpture these days? In the wake of sculpture’s transition from pedestal to plane, “to be or not to be” is indeed the question as sculpture can be any and everything, including nothing. Its paradigms—from readymade to social practices, from institutional critique to earthworks, from assemblage to minimalism—are historically and ideologically overlapping, simultaneously complementary and contradictory, making sculpture a hopelessly unwieldy category. The once-upon-a-time discrete object has been dissolved into site-specific/installation practices and sculpture’s historical paradigms offer no solace.

What does breathing life into inert materials mean in an era of mannequins? Likewise, the class of materials dubbed “noble”—bronze, marble and wood—has been reduced to flotsam and jetsam in a Euclidean space/time in which language, performance, video and photography are as dense as any palpable form of matter. In this ever-expanding universe of artistic ways and means, all media potentially fall prey to the rubric of sculpture.

But being an artist who makes working sculpture is one thing and being a sculptor proper is arguably another. Rebecca Warren is the latter. Her work is marked by the appropriation (a polite way of saying chewing up and spitting out) of a squarishly object-based tradition. Here is first and foremost a discipline-specific language whose object-centeredness trumps the paradigms of abstraction and figuration. The work operates within and partsake of the ecstasy of limits only to come again as sculpture for sculpture’s sake. In the face of her woman-handled hunks of polychromal joy, the vague figurative element—buttons, breasts, limb—emerging on occasion from a pedestal-based work, is neither here nor there relative to the clay’s registration of an unbound and urgent energy. Between these unfired clay works and her geometric abstractions, Warren’s Renaissance Society exhibition will be a very calculated ratio, some part funk-based ebullience to some part formal clay works and her geometric abstractions, Warren’s Renaissance Society exhibition will be a very calculated ratio, some part funk-based ebullience to some part formal constructivist elegance.

Although the work has morphed stylistically, Warren is still guided by her initial impulse to work steadfastly within a tradition and yet do so in an exploratory, intuitional fashion. Accordingly, her current body of work is an extension of concerns stretching back several years to the two concurrent bodies of work for which she garnered international attention: the outbound playfully, unfired clay female figures, and the unfired works sparingly comprised of mundane studio debris. In tandem, they are remiscent of a mind/body disparity in which the vitrine represents a disembodied, hermetic and impoverished consciousness in the vein of Samuel Beckett, while the clay figures, whose breasts, buttocks, hips and thighs heed their own separate appetites, flaunt a carnivalesque excess worthy of Balzac. In their vulgarity and aggressiveness, the female figures pegged Warren as a latter-day bad girl of sorts. Yet, in their hyperbole, Warren’s unfired clay figures could be read as a loving parody of a 1970s iteration of feminism she was in fact trying to escape. As a result, the figur sculptures speak less to feminism than to the appropriation of a tradition in wholesale need of a woman’s deconstructive touch. This includes its legacy of abstraction as well as figuration.

A year ago, in what appeared to be an about-face, Warren produced a body of unembellished geometric abstracts that, in all its rectilinear glory, was exhibited under the title Deformities. Thankfully opposed to the unfired clay figures, this more recent body of precision-scoured, yet genetic steel work fulfilled the ideological parameters of an abstraction seeking to achieve universal, i.e. rational, expression. Historically, abstraction’s prohibition against representations of the body doubled as a means of silencing culturally-specific voices, including those of women. Warren, however, challenges this aspect of abstraction through its whorl-embellished ornaments, constructing bona fide specimens whose discrete objecthood, rendered at conspicuously human scale, bring them hopefully within the sphere of the body, casting it in a figurative, and by default potentially feminine, light. To say nothing of the power it wields.

From this perspective, Warren did not appropriate a singular tradition, but two historically over-determined sculptural paradigms between which she continues to negotiate. Comprised of unfired new clay works and several steel geometric abstractions, Warren’s Renaissance Society exhibition is an extension of what has proven to be an increasingly deft narration. The tension between abstraction and figuration has been reinserted into a dialogue between form and anarchy. Working through and within tradition, as opposed to against it, Warren continues to keep her options open for the sake of singing the body eclectic.