

## DAISY YOUNGBLOOD

MCKEE GALLERY

Among the different streams of American art in the '80s—the glamorous resurgence of painting, the media- and society-related photo work, the post-Pop, the post-Concept, the neo-geo, the Parisian or Frankfurtian or Benjaminian theorizing—Daisy Youngblood's sculpture filled a peculiarly quiet niche. Made of low-fired clay, sometimes combined with found objects—sticks, teeth, hair—these small heads and torsos of people and animals worked their obvious fragility and hollowness to strong effect: The clay was all too clearly a brittle skin around a void. That empty interior was blackly visible in openings at the eye sockets and at the sites of missing limbs, for Youngblood seemed to have an aversion to shaping arms and legs; she might supply one in the form of a desiccated stick or seamlessly seal the gap, but she might also just leave a hole. Small wonder that the writing on her work often turned on morbidity and mortality. By her own account, Youngblood has had a conflicted relationship with the New York art world, and does not exhibit here often. (She now lives in New Mexico.) This show of a dozen-odd works made over twenty years, including several newer pieces in silver and bronze, was a chance for New Yorkers to catch up.

Thin clay, so easily breakable, gives Youngblood's work a precarious psychic tension. It also looks ageless—ambiguously old and new—and its millennia-long association with pots and other vessels contributes to the metaphorical suggestiveness of her hollow torsos that, deprived of limbs, instead become bio-

morphic containers. (The works in metal lose some of these qualities and get more ordinary.) Representational and figurative, Youngblood's sculpture benefits from the pluralism of post-'70s art, but even among those anything-goes modes it seems deliberately atavistic. None of her animals—not gorilla or hawk, certainly, nor even donkey or horse—are commonplace in the lives of today's urban art audience, and she seems to see in them an innate melancholia, so that her sculpture suggests a requiem for the natural world. The shapes she finds for the animal forms, too, smoothed and clarified yet modeled with great subtlety, recall prehistoric cave art in their mysterious fusion of simplicity and sophistication. It is as if Youngblood were trying to translate the paintings of Lascaux into three dimensions, using a low-tech method and the most ancient of materials. This impression is reinforced by her human figures and heads: Some are highly individuated portraits (the most remarkable one here, her 1982 study of the art dealer Richard Bellamy, is highly stylized, yet anyone who knew Bellamy would instantly recognize him); others, however, such as *Roberta*, 1987, may or may not resemble a model but are in any case made distinctly troglodytic.

These traits would seem to link Youngblood's sculpture to a "primitivism" that dates back a full century in modern art, although as far as I know, she has never acknowledged such a connection in her occasional statements. Her own references are to her studies of Jung and of Buddhism—



Daisy Youngblood, *Quiet*, 1998, bronze, edition of four, 23 x 21 x 18".

in fact she speaks of "correlating worldwide religions and esoteric practices with the individual psyche." Perhaps her work falls into a similar register as the attempts at mythic archetype in the wolves and birds of another self-professed Jungian, Jackson Pollock, in his paintings of the early '40s. Youngblood's writing does tend to sweeping statements—"Horses," she says, "have to do with Mars energy, creativity in its physical work aspect"—and she has called her work process "cooking down to essence," a vocabulary somewhat discredited these days, when no one believes in essences or the idea that any animal species should be associated with a particular spiritual quality. Look at the work itself, though, and you may think again: the tiny clay *Hawk Head* of 1999, only two inches high, is a mournful distillation of ferocity.

—David Frankel

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