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noelle allen

by caroline picard

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As yet titled (from the series Trellis)

2012

Plaster, concrete, resin, wax and wood

11" x 7" x 7"

Photos: courtesy the artist and Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago

Curiously, the oldest building on the Dominican University campus is a modernist cube of an art department. The building used to house Dominican's Biology Program; since then, artist Noelle Allen (the Founding Head of the Sculpture Department) has converted the former specimen room into her studio. It seems an appropriate site to work, given her show at Carrie Secrist Gallery features a series of biologically inspired forms. Allen's abstract sculptures and drawings take after cells glommed together by mounds of interstitial tissue. "A lot of the circular repetitive forms allude to the body and organs and cell formation," Allen notes. This work recalls skin and organic structures; it is about the interplay between representation and abstraction and the mimicry of mediums, which congeal on the surface with intricate detail. Yet what is striking about the work is its interiority--something inaccessible that's pressing from the inside out.

Despite the cellular quality of Allen's work, it nevertheless resists corresponding completely with a concrete world. Each piece flips back and forth between the micro and macro scale; through a tension between constituent materials the sculptures remain unsettled. One work of clay is comprised of tennis-ball joints that connect to one another by thin bridges, like covalent bonds. A flesh-colored strap of leather winds around the piece, interrupting an otherwise cohesive scale. In another instance, Allen created a waxy, ivory sculpture from clear clay and resin, a little larger than a fist. The un-fired surface of smooth folds hangs like drapery or transparent skin. From the forms seemingly cloaked within, the ghostly mass of "fabric" looks like it might hang over a female reproductive system, though one can't be sure.

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Using layers of plaster, clay, wax, and resin, Allen builds up the surface of each sculpture to create a congealed skein like leather, rubber, bone or even thin tissue-like membranes. "I wanted to play with the viewer's sense of material. That's why there are these multiple layers." Inside one long glass tube--a vintage fixture used in chemistry and biology classrooms--Allen inserted a single pipeline of kneaded, clear clay. It looks like a distended albino intestine with an infinite array of tiny, fissures and folds. It shines in the light, as though still wet. On closer inspection, small black thorns protrude from the white limb.ÉPassive unless handled, the work is built to defend itself. This occurs again and again in Allen's work: the juxtaposition between vulnerable tissueÉand harsh, hard points that keep the viewer at a distance. "I like this idea that the seedpod has protective thorns and a hard outer shell but contains an incredibly delicate, central form."

In the past, Allen has primarily shown drawings--large graphite-on-Mylar abstractions of striking contrast. There is a definite correlation between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional vocabulary she employs. In her drawings, the Mylar reads like a slide-view on a microscope. The forms lack the body of their 3-D counterparts, but come from the same world as thin cross-sections of a shared organic material. "The three-dimensional work used a lot of the drawing in its conceptual underpinning," she says, of the sculptures. "It's like the drawings leapt into space, incorporating different materials."

When observing Allen's sculpture, it is impossible to escape the sense that something underneath the opaque surface is growing--there is an emergent and unpredictable energy contained therein. What the viewer apprehends is simply a protective casing, a surface beneath which lies a greater, and unknown potential. "I like imagining what is pushing and pulling inside the work," Allen explains. "I want people to ask why these details would start to emerge from the form." There is something threatening about these formal bodies, looking as they do at once familiar and strange. "A lot of the work has a darker underpinning with the thorns and metal," Allen agrees. When so much of our cultural experience is about surface accessibility, the withholding nature of these forms, and their seeming self-reliance, articulates something potent and provocative, which eludes perception.

Noelle Allen's solo show, "Trellis," will be on view at Carrie Secrist Gallery, in Chicago, from June 16 -- July 28, 2012. www.secrisgallery.com

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