

## Celeste Roberge

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AUDIENCE/ Bob Keyes

### Celeste Roberge's Funny Little Tall Tale

Bent at the knees and waist, with both hands resting on thighs, the stone figure appears ready to unwind, stand erect and march right out of the courtyard at the Portland Museum of Art and into the flowing traffic on High Street. That is the beauty of Maine sculptor Celeste Roberge's work: Even though "Rising Cairn" is made of wire and stone and is very much rooted in the earth, it feels kinetic and alive.

Situated among the birth trees in the museum's sculpture garden, "Rising Cairn" stands as one of city's signature art pieces, a true landmark that enchants passers-by on the street and those viewing the piece from the museum. And for many, it also is what they know best about the sculptor, the Biddeford-born Roberge. A new exhibition at the revamped Aucocisco Gallery in Portland gives people a different perspective of Roberge, and offers a deeper level of appreciation for her work.

She's still exploring themes of man's relationship with the earth, but doing so with whimsy, humor and a sense of playfulness. In "Mountains & Miniatures," on display this month at Aucocisco, Roberge displays intimate sculptures of dollhouse-style chairs that sit atop 2-, 3-, 4- and 5-foot thin towers constructed from disparate materials ranging from cherry wood and stainless steel to wax and fur.

Gone for now are the massive structures for which she made her name and built her reputation. This new direction started with a trip to an antiques store. Roberge came across a 19th-century psychiatrist's couch while poking around Portland. She became obsessed with the sofa's weight and what it symbolized, because of its use by psychiatrists. Inspired by her find, she began imbedding antique sofas in stacked stones to make the furniture feel like fossils or a funerary monument.

Roberge, who teaches sculpture at the University of Florida, began making furniture stacks four years ago. Her stack project still is going strong, although the current show at Aucocisco illustrates that Roberge's vision is getting smaller. A dozen tiny chairs rise from the gallery floor and from shelves built on the gallery walls.

Roberge conceived "Mountains & Miniatures" as an homage to the sculptors who have influenced her and who helped define 20th-century sculpture. Among those she honors with her work are Meret Oppenheim, Eva Hesse, Donald Judd, Yayoi Kusama, Joseph Beuys and Alberto Giacometti, using materials and themes they espoused in their work.

At least on the surface, the idea of making miniatures would appear to be a grand departure for Roberge, who is best known for her stone cairns. In truth, the chairs are merely the latest in a long line of Roberge sculpture that stems from her relationship with the land, said Suzette McAvoy, adjunct curator at the Farnsworth Art Museum in Rockland.



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"There is a continuous thread that runs through all of Celeste's work," said McAvoy, who has worked with the artist on several exhibitions over the years. "They all deal with natural material and the figure." "In the miniature stacks that she is doing now, the chair is the stand-in for the human figure, if you think about the chair being the container of the body, a place for us to sit. They take on personalities, of different eras and designs. They all reflect different human interaction and different ages."

In an interview, Roberge agreed that the miniatures continue a theme she has pursued much of her artistic life, which remains the pursuit of landscape, its materials and the psychological state associated with the landscape. She sees her stacks as core samples, lifted from the earth in perfect columns. They are a metaphor for time and place.

She started working smaller four years ago "mainly because my back was killing me," she said. She describes her new work as "toy-like. They're not meant to be serious or heavy-duty. They're playful and humorous. When I began making them, I was working with doll house furniture, and I am sure kids would love to get their hands on them. Which is why they are placed way up high."

Roberge has always identified with the landscape of the North Atlantic coast, and references it often in her work. Especially in her early pieces, she used stones from the area to build her sculptures. Lately, the material she chooses to build her columns often is basic, earthy matter, such as lead, basalt and slate.

Aucocisco Gallery director Virginia Sassman calls Roberge's use of material part of her "genetic memory. ... She is very connected to the landscape of the North Atlantic, and it shows in her work through her choice of materials. Her work is very much of the landscape. She identifies with landscape in an intuitive sense."

Roberge lives most of the year in Florida, where she has taught at the University of Florida in Gainesville for 14 years. But she maintains a strong presence in Maine, with a house and studio in South Portland. Before taking the job in Florida, she taught high school art at Cape Elizabeth. She loves Florida, much to her surprise.

"I didn't think I would like it. I can't say I like the heat, but I can't say enough about the students," she said, adding that many of her former students have gone on to have productive careers as artists. She returns to Maine each summer, and comes home often during the school year for family visits. There is no separating Maine from her work, she said.

"I've never stopped showing in Maine, because this is my community. Portland is my community. It's very important being in Maine, when it comes to work. I tend to get my ideas in Maine, and I execute them in Florida."

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