

Celeste Roberge

by Tom Collins

Celeste Roberge turns her odd notions about time into curious little objects, prints, and sizeable construction projects, leaving us to ponder the subject. Consider, for instance, her "Raum/Room," an outdoor living room of antique furniture and sixteen tons of stacked sandstone which remains on long term loan at the Schaumburger Quarry in Steinbergen, Germany. While Ms. Roberge has noted that her works often emerge from her reflections upon the intersection of geologic time and human time, certainly "Raum/Room" resonates with the many Germans who can still recall WWII when it was not uncommon to see furniture and rubble combined, but not so neatly.

A few summers ago Ms. Roberge spotted an old 19th century leather psychiatrist's couch in an antique store in Maine near her summer studio. She promptly began a series of "Stacks," as she recalls, "inspired by the absurd desire to embed antique sofas in thousands of pounds of dry-stacked stone in such a way that the furniture would seem like a fossil within a stone road-cut or like an archaic funerary monument extruded from the earth."

Time, as it turns out, and its relative nature are of the essence in this work, and nothing so wittily illustrates the artist's conceit as this most civilized of domestic furnishings, the chaise lounge, encased in a high, thick wall of stacked rock, like some archeological curiosity at Chaco Canyon, say. Time brings the accumulation of experience and memory, and when confronted with these couches trapped under layers of stone there is no getting around Ms. Roberge's wink at Dr. Freud and his theories on repression.

Conceptual strategies and quirky object-making such as these place Ms. Roberge in a direct line of diverse post-modernist masters from Meret Oppenheim and Alberto Giacometti to Donald Judd, Joseph Bueys, Nancy Graves, Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois. (Even the "stacks" from Richard Serra's 1969 "Skullcracker" series come to mind.) Born in Maine, educated there and in Nova Scotia, and now an Associate Professor of Sculpture at the School of Art and Art History, University of Florida, Gainesville, it is somewhat surprising that Ms. Roberge's sculptural meditations have always revealed themselves in stone, and not in water. Her investigations of man's relationship to earth have centered in the rocky geology of Maine and led the artist on numerous trips to Iceland, studying its volcanic landscape of basalt formations and inversely relating them to the abandoned slate quarries of her native state. Meanwhile, her "Stacks" series has continued and devolved into poetic density. The "stacks" have been reduced to miniature, and atop a thin, two to four-foot column, made of anything from ceramic, plaster, bits of rock, wood, even wax and fur, sits a chair. This most varied and familiar of domestic furnishings, an emblem of great authority, an appanage of state and dignity, precariously perched at the tip of these absurd towers, looks treacherous and uninviting as if overlooking an abyss. We may have raised ourselves up off the earth, but no matter the achievements of culture, we are still bound to it and subject to the laws of gravity.

In an entirely different mode, though still at play in the junction of geology and humanity, are Ms. Roberge's recent outdoor sculptural furnishings in steel and rock. "Chaise Gabion," for example, offers 1,350 lbs. of smooth, rounded, black Mexican beach pebbles incarcerated within a life-sized, computer designed chaise of waterjet cut stainless steel. The cold, reflective, elongated grid of polished steel is right out of Sol LeWitt and, stuffed with the warm, absorbent, jet black rocks right off the beach, Culture and Nature never looked so good together.

Ms. Roberge answers her ephemeral questions about time, the earth and our brief, intrusive visit here with powerful physical presences, regardless of scale or medium. The subtle, subversive humor of these contemporary relics points to the transitory yet open-ended nature of existence and the earth itself. As the artist has noted, "Although we like to imagine that cultural artifacts, such as furniture and art, exist free of time and decay, the material conditions of the world recoup them."



231 Delgado Street
Santa Fe, NM 87501
(505) 995 0231 PHONE
(505) 986 0233 FAX

eightmodern.net