

Ruth Hardinger at Philippe Staib

From its beginnings, modern sculpture has drawn much of its imagery and energy from the art of what used to be called "primitive peoples"—African, pre-Columbian, Oceanic. There's little inherent shock value, then, in the fact that ex-performance artist Hardinger's new work is similarly inspired. The Iowa-born Hardinger is a (self-taught) pre-Columbian specialist who has spent years of her life among the ruins in Mexico, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela.

This experience she brings to the studio, so that, for instance, a floor piece like *A Ball Game (Acts of Justice)* is invested with more complex meanings than might be readily apparent to the uninitiated viewer. Materially, the work consists of seven black plaster-on-wire-mesh "doughnuts" spread across the floor, with four sub-soccer-sized balls in red, yellow and white scattered about, along with a multicolor die. The "doughnut" shapes, Cynthia Nadelman tells us in her neatly articulate catalogue essay, echo ceremonial stone disks found throughout Central America, while the balls may very well symbolize those used in ritual Central American athletic events.

Again according to the essay, other of Hardinger's new sculptures are meant to suggest an-

cient Mexican totems: *Long Count* featured 15 "doughnuts" in motley tans, blues and yellows piled one atop the other, vertebraelike, while *Red Long Count* comprised 21 clay-red disks disposed in similar fashion.

At 48 by 45 lumpish inches, *Deseos Navigables* (Navigable Desires)—three particularly ungainly disks in silty browns and dull grays meekly leavened with slashes of yellow and red—best illustrates the problematic nature of Hardinger's transcultural esthetic. One could accept the piece on its own, as a surreal, biomorphic troglodyte, still falling recognizably within the playfully abstract spirit of much of the 20th-century sculptural canon—but Hardinger's intentions, as Nadelman's essay reveals, lie largely elsewhere. According to the latter's textual gloss, the piece is composed not only of plaster; its gritty substance also includes snake ribs and vertebrae, a coyote skull, shells and coral—none of which are discernible to the eye or mind of the observer. The fact that such shells and coral go to make up the earth of the island of the Dominican Republic was also noted in the catalogue; this subtext was fascinating, but its embodiment in the piece seemed

needlessly arcane in an age when even the most hermetic art is presumed to speak for itself.

In short: how interdisciplinary can contemporary postmodern art become before its effects become extra-esthetic—a product more of natural history than human imagination? Frankly, all extrinsic explanation aside, Hardinger's monumental vertebral totems seemed more off-putting than mysterious. Hardinger is an earnest and learned "technician of the sacred"—but not a very exciting one. —Gerrit Henry



Ruth Hardinger: *A Ball Game (Acts of Justice)*, 1991, variable dimensions; at Philippe Staib.

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