

MEETING GROUND: BASKETRY TRADITIONS AND SCULPTURAL FORMS

Frances Whitehead's "Quadrel" (catalogue #44) and "Cigale" (plate 13, catalogue #43) are not only totally removed from a basket sensibility, but are anti-vessels. If any literal interpretation can be placed on these paired, minimalist forms of circles within squares, it is that of the funnel, a vessel used for transfer not retention. These sculptures are as cool and distant as the forms of Look, Elliott, or McQueen are inviting and immediate. Whitehead's play of opposites engenders intrigue and delight, the indifferent zinc of "Quadrel" is refuted by the lustrous shellac of "Cigale." The materials oppose each other visually and tactilely.

But there is more to Whitehead's choice of materials than visual intrigue. First, she explores the physical and chemical properties of materials. Whitehead has used zinc in several sculptures because she is interested in its electric conductivity. She is attracted to copper for the same reason. Perhaps her most unusual materials are obsolete organic materials, such as shellac, celluloid, and gutta percha, that were used in industry prior to the invention of plastic. She reclaims these outmoded materials and literally recycles them, giving them a new and different meaning by attaching them to forms unrelated to prior use.

Second, she constructs or surfaces an object that has definite cultural associations with a material with no cultural association. For example, in "Gnomen" (figure 7) Whitehead retains the form of a ceremonial jade knife. However, she deletes its cultural reference by substituting slate woodgrained with brass leaf for jade. Because the brass leaved slate is as sumptuous as jade, the object retains a connotation of precious. In "Quadrel" and "Cigale" Whitehead selects materials that carry meaning simply in the material statement. As forms these sculptures are simple, purposeless funnels, in which everyday function is magnified to allude to ceremonial function.

In *Meeting Ground* objects are material statements; they are artifacts of culture that carry meaning through the familiar. The majority of the works connect with the viewer through their small scale, with its accompanying allusions to comfort and the domestic. These works are not confrontational. Modest aims, simple but purposeful forms, dependence on archaic modes of construction—all basket attributes—are integrated in the forms.

It would be satisfying to invent a term or terminology that juggled all the implications of basket and recombined basket with a word or phrase that indicates the present enlarged sphere of these contemporary objects. "New basketry forms" and "contemporary basketry" have been tried. These descriptive terms do suggest the marriage of basketry traditions with contemporary concepts. The problem with these definitions, however, is that retaining basket in the title alludes to container above all else. An alternative might be to downplay the reference to baskets by coining a term such as "new archaic forms" or "process controlled sculpture." Many of these sculptures are not containers and are not concerned with the idea of a vessel. While somewhat ambiguous, "new archaic forms" suggests that these works derive from and

encompass numerous ethnographic and historical forms. It extends the idea of basket, vessel, container, receptacle without limiting form to this visual standard.

Containment is one theoretical ground investigated in some of these sculptures, but many other issues are also raised. The fragmentary and fragile human body, process as product, the unveiling of commonplace cultural allusion, and waste in advanced material cultures, are also inherent in *Meeting Ground*. Ultimately, it is the ideas in the work that present the challenge to the viewer, not the label.

Margo Shermeta



Figure 7 Frances Whitehead,
"Gnomen," 1987, 48" x 48" x 1/4",
Woodgrained brass leaved slate,
Collection of the artist (Not in exhibition)