

Sculpture Magazine

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—Stephen Leucking

Frances Whitehead Dart Gallery, Chicago

Practitioners of the ancient art of alchemy, a complex mix of cosmology and fledgling science often lacked substantive knowledge of matter in chemical reactions. Consequently, they would ascribe magical and symbolic explanations to the surprising colors and textures they affected on matter. Frances Whitehead's sculpture, shown this past fall at Dart Gallery, offers a tension between the scientific, magical and symbolic similar to that generated by ancient alchemists.

Ion transfers can explain the changes in substance created by Whitehead's use of chemical baths, and simple physics can tell what goes on in her composite materials, but the magical and the symbolic are needed to account for her visual and aesthetic transformations of matter.

Such transformations occur in a series of linear constructions that comprised three of her eight human-scaled and larger sculptures display. Whitehead had wound steel wire tightly around structural copper rods and then, by chemically accelerating corrosion, fused the metals into an amalgam of ferric and cupric salts. Red-browns and soft greens, articulated by the wire's minute



Frances Whitehead, *alembic II*, 1988-89 Copper and steel 8 x 5 x 9ft Photo courtesy Dart Gallery.

spiraling ridges, turn the rods conduits for earthy, primal energies. Whitehead's linear forms suggest fragments of ancient instruments and are receivers resonating transmissions from the past.

The show's most massive piece, *alembic II*, is half of an eight-foot inverted cone of steel that is poised against the wall. The piece provided ample surface to show off her patinas. Details, like the rows of short pipes extending from its top surface or its arm-sized spout thrusting out into the room, hint at the internal workings of what seems a pressure chamber from some arcane still. Successive dousings with nitric acid and water have covered the steel surface with crusty, variegated rivulets of iron oxides as if from years of boilings over. With imposing physicality and direct reference to an occult yet tangible function, *alembic II* was a standout; it was less reliant on a cachet or on esoteric symbolism than many of the show's other works

Whitehead's unique material composites create much of the magic of her patinas. In constructing *Untitled (Battery)* she affixed copper leafing to black rubber sheeting and stretched it over a scimitar-shaped, six-foot

armature. The black lesions that appeared in the leafing interlaced into an obscure calligraphy. The impact was apparitional like seeing a mystical codex.

Her forms and subject matter work best when they, too, are composites. Her sources, frequently the tools and diagrams of proto-scientific disciplines, are rife with specific meanings and associations. When Whitehead appropriates too directly, as with her sculpture *Cucubite*, she fails to reinterpret that object's symbolic and functional associations in a contemporary re-statement. But when she combines and distills these forms through her rigorous process of drawing and re-drawing, she extracts a more personal and potent elixir.

Whitehead's works are not revelatory: she does not dwell on meanings and concepts. She concentrates instead on creating a sense of the intangible in physical matter. She taps the energies that leap from the physical and the substantive to the abstract and the mysterious. And that alone is exhilarating.

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