

MILLICENT YOUNG'S TRANSFORMATIVE GIFT

I was introduced to Millicent Young's work in 2012 as I was curating a group show of works by artists in the mid-Atlantic region and I was immediately drawn to it. My first reaction in looking at her work was to think of a multitude of questions: "What are these? Where do they come from? How do these strange, enigmatic objects fit into the way we understand contemporary art?" Her work stood apart for me from what I am used to seeing – work that is overly conscious of recent trends in art-making, trying to find its place amongst current trends. I am completely beguiled by these sculptures, mainly because of their deep curiosity – curiosity as objects. They are surreal and exhibit a proto-futurist grace which emanates a kind of ancient, talismanic presence, relics from a time long since gone... They are mysterious and protective, power figures.

They are also sophisticated abstractions: a vine bends around itself and then rests against a vertical wall, a line hanging in midair, a shadowy structure emerging from beneath a translucent veil. The fact that the works offer so many possibilities for interpretation gives them their strength. Young's art asks us big questions – and the questions that these works ask gain us entry into the complex gift of Young's vision and practice. Even the unanswerability of the questions in this work is an interesting factor: there is greater conceptual permanence and purpose.

Anchored in communion with the earth and informed by an acute sense of space and a quest for spiritual health, Young's ultimate artistic prerogative is to gain access to a place she refers to as the "Not Knowing" of things. Her processes and materials provide a pathway to this elusive mental place. Transformation occurs, where we can be reminded of our minute place in the larger world; also that if we so choose, we have all we would require for existence, around us in the natural world. In this way, these works are deeply political, even if this is a secondary intention. The sculptures are emblematic of the artist's solace and contemplation. Young purposefully lives apart and away from what she considers to be the "bling of what is considered to be contemporary art."

She lives alone on a farm in rural Virginia, and adjacent to her artistic practice, is an expert gardener. She has a great understanding of plant materials and properties, which is absolutely evident in her work. Her surroundings are an idyllic place to meditate and converse with the natural world – where the processes of life and death are close and as equally beautiful and sensory. She has chosen to distance herself from a commodity-based kind of art-making, from work that she considers to be merely superficial meanderings. She rejects the idea of making art that mirrors or is informed by the pace, social structures, or ironic trappings of contemporary culture. Instead, she prefers to find the roots of her language in the quiet, the simple, and the often overlooked: a scant sweep of snow across a field grazed by the morning sun, a gust that suddenly arrives out of the trees and then is gone, an ambient sound that lies just behind the sounds of ordinary life.

She chooses her materials carefully and specifically to saturate her work not with grandiosity or pointed societal commentary but instead with innately understood natural and human truths. The material informs her hand. Like single breaths in motion, she repetitively weaves, wraps, binds and threads, finding and adding elements from her own everyday surroundings – horsehair, decayed wood, stones, vine. The process of this repetition may seem practical in methodology to the viewer, but for Young, the actions are a means for removing herself from overt awareness in the process and according to Young

“do not amount to anything” until weight and space are realized in open-ended form. After all, “a breath taken after a breath after a breath is life”.

Young envisions her artistic self not as an anarchist working against popular, material cultural standards. Her practice is not to be viewed as political – at least not overtly, but as an intimate conversation about what is essential. Young considers herself “an artist who is first a citizen and has social responsibility”. She feels that it is very important that artists are leaders and participants in society, not just reflective or passive commentators.

Young believes that personal transformation happens through being physically and mindfully present, still; that transformation occurs through spiritual means, through the basic practices that all spiritual traditions cultivate: silence, contemplation, and a willingness to be static...to pause even at a place of discomfort. Young’s sculptures are these cultivation tools for deepening consciousness. They imply or suggest an opportunity for change: from a world that is frenetic or chaotic to a world not steeped in psychic clutter, violence, or waste, a world filled with the mysteries of the “not knowing.”

And then, as Millicent Young says, “from here it is all ripples.”

Gerald Ross
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Gerald Ross lives in Baltimore, Maryland and is a painter, writer, and curator. He is the Director of Exhibitions at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore and on the faculty of MICA's MFA in Curatorial Practice Program. He received a degree in Painting from Kansas City Art Institute in 1989 where he was also a Yale scholar. In the 1990's, he collaborated on six public mural projects, receiving numerous awards. Ross shows his paintings regularly throughout the region. He has served as a juror for many fine arts awards, including the Trawick Prize and the National Sculpture Residency Prize at Evergreen Museum & Library in Baltimore, MD.