

Mapping Experience

Kathy Battista

My work is about and made within moments of embodiment. These pieces act as maps that chart the relationship between the body and its environment. Through this group of works you have an intimate view into the body's both quotidian and mythic relationship to the natural world. -Brie Ruais

Artists for centuries have been preoccupied with documenting our experience in the world. From cave paintings to large-scale history paintings to video and performance art, the history of mankind is evidenced through material and ephemeral visual culture. When we look back at ancient civilizations, our conception of them is often best understood through the artifacts left behind: architectural and funereal objects, even a shard of pottery can speak volumes about an entire culture. The history of Western art had for too long been dominated by male artists telling these stories when, in the 1970s, feminist art historians began to challenge this model by retrieving female artists whose work had been overlooked: Angelika Kaufman, Artemisia Gentileschi, Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot were a few examples of forgotten figures brought back into our awareness. These artists relayed a different narrative, one based on female subjectivity, which for centuries had been largely confined to the domestic sphere.

Brie Ruais is an artist whose practice melds both the process and grappling with material of pioneering conceptual artists such as Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham or Richard Serra, with the ideology of eco-feminists including Aviva Rahmani, Betsy Damon and Helène Aylon. She creates work that subtly pays witness to the subjugation and domination of marginalized bodies and the parallel treatment of our planet. Ruais' sculptures document a personal, tangible, finite experience through physical traces of performative actions; the resulting pieces speak to a universal human experience rather than to a specific individual moving through the world. They also allow, through the materials and processes that she employs, for an

openness that is subject to the elements and the site in which she creates the works: the passing of time and the nature in which they are seen in the marks from raindrops, leaves and other organic material.

Ruais typically uses clay as a medium, albeit in an innovative and nontraditional manner. She starts with the equivalent of her body weight (a convenient and persistent parameter) in raw clay and manipulates it physically into a sculptural form through actions that she intuitively devises. She has also created works in raw paper pulp, a material that in consistency can feel like food or wet earth. Ruais remarked in an interview with artists Martha Tuttle and Mariana Garibay Raeke that, "paper and clay are such common materials that we touch constantly and both have an important and ubiquitous place in our everyday lives".¹ Indeed, we take for granted the countless times each day that we employ both paper and stoneware: from the cups that contain our coffees to the junk mail that we mindlessly toss. One might mistakenly read Ruais' sculptures as abstract self-portraits or embodiments of herself. Rather, they are records of a haptic experience in the physical world, often made outdoors in landscapes that inspire her, from the desert in her native Southwest US to her urban back garden in Brooklyn. While Ruais follows in the footsteps of feminist artists, she avoids the inherent conceit of making herself the subject of the work. She is instead the conduit of the work, the medium that transforms the material into a finished piece.

¹ *Asteroids and Asterisms: conversations with artists on the changing nature of matter*, Online Journal, 2019. Courtesy of Martha Tuttle and Mariana Garibay Raeke.



Broken Ground Red, (130 lbs of clay spread out from center), 2017
 Fired clay, glaze, hardware
 77 x 77 x 3 inches
 195.6 x 195.6 x 7.6 cm
 Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas Art Fair Foundation Acquisition Fund

Earlier works such as *Broken Ground Red (130 pounds of clay spread out from center)* (2017) and *Spread Out, 132lbs* (2014) may be seen as progenitors to the new body of work shown at albertz benda in 2019. Created on the ground using the weight of her body in clay and a predetermined shape, the artist works from the center of a clump of the material, pushing, kneading and pulling the clay; the record of these actions is witnessed in the finger, hand and even footprints on the surface of the work. The clay is then collected as is, fired in a kiln, and eventually hung on the wall with small screws. The similarity to Abstract Expressionist practice, both in its relationship to the ground and its basis in action, is acknowledged by Ruais. In addition to her debt to AbEx predecessors, her process also recalls the early studio experimentation of Bruce Nauman, for example *Slow Angle Walk* 1968. Nauman performed actions for a set amount of time that tested both the artist's endurance as well as the contemporary viewer's, who witnesses these works only in documentation.



Spread Out, 132 lbs, 2014
 Glazed ceramic, hardware
 61 ½ x 60 x 2 inches
 156.2 x 152.4 x 5 cm
 Private Collection

Ruais moves beyond these precedents: where Nauman's material was his body, time, and the videotape used to record, Ruais reverts to one of the most ancient and ubiquitous natural materials, clay. She goes back to the earth, the ground that we walk on, the landscape that we dominate as humans inhabiting it. She also creates objects that take the form of sculptures, which reveal a palpable human engagement with the material. Moving beyond the clinical and detached process of Nauman, the clay embodies the human experience in all of its emotional range: from trauma and pain to ecstasy and back to defeat.

Torn Up From Center, 130 Pounds (Dusk), *Desiccated From Center, 130lbs (Dusk)*, and *Parceled Out From Center, 130 Pounds (Dusk)*, are new works made in 2018. These grow out of the earlier pieces in that the format and processes are similar and their titles signal their production. The artist handles—or rather struggles with—the material, the evidence of which is again born in the pockmarks,



130lbs Proximal Frontage (installation view), Feuer/Mesler, New York, 2015



Photograph by artist, 2018

tears, and imperfections of their surfaces. The approach to the segmentation of the nearly six-foot diameter raw clay works adds another conceptual layer: *Torn Up...* was done so by hand, and *Desiccated...* let to dry and shrink on its own, like a desert playa. The dividing process that she returns to again and again, in works such as *Parceled Out From Center, 130lbs (Dusk)* (2018) is done with a kitchen knife and takes the form of a grid. The pigmented clay is then fired in pieces and reassembled on the wall. The tension between genres—action painting, sculpture, printmaking, ceramics—is key to the success of the work. The grid that she creates in these works recalls the human parceling of the landscape that is witnessed in almost every culture known to mankind. A consistent semaphore of civilization is man’s domination over the landscape, which is divided, fenced and regulated in cultures throughout the world. Who controls the parcels controls the earth as well its inhabitants. Like a map with boundaries of countries, each section of a Ruais sculpture is its own dominion, yet together it forms a holistic composition.

All Wound Up (two times 135 pounds) (2018) is an important transitional work in the exhibition. Here the clay is extended in two large ovular shapes that intersect. That each oblong form is the weight of the artist’s body reads as a dialogue between two shapes, a conversation between two entities: the relationship of one human to another, a human to the earth, the earth to

the soul. That they are inextricably linked and wouldn’t exist on their own is an important element of the piece and of significance for the artist. Several works in the exhibition take a similar mindset. In *Intertwining (two times 135 pounds)* (2018) two forms create a helix shape on the wall. One form is dark while the other is lighter, suggesting a Manichean relationship. Are these respectively Day and Night? Are they Ego and Id? Are they Oppressor and the Oppressed? It is humbling to consider how two lumps of clay can suggest so many connotations. *Rolling Crashing Washing In (two times 127 lbs)* (2018) takes a similar theme but here the two entities are seen in an even tighter interlocation. Placed on the floor, the work conjures images of lovers entangled in each other’s arms or the protective embrace of mother and child. Again, the tension between ground and wall is an embodiment of the pull between genres. *Interweaving the Landscape (four times 130 pounds)* (2018) is the most structurally complex of this family of work, with two almost linear clay forms intersected by two horseshoe shapes, creating a warp and weft effect. The sheer scale of this group of works and the deftness with which they are created and sustained, reveals a sophisticated practice. Ruais says that these “pieces reveal strategies for re-mapping human and non-human relationships within what is typically a hierarchical structure”.² This may be interpreted as a new way to envision the hierarchy between genders, or between humanity and our planet.

² Brie Ruais, email to the author, 2019.

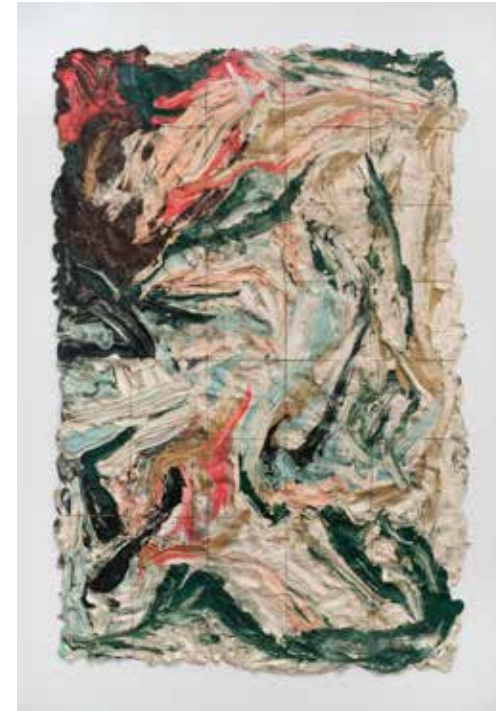


Aerial image of farmland



Intertwining (two times 135 lbs), 2018
Glazed stoneware, hardware
103 x 52 x 6 inches
261.5 x 132 x 15 cm

Topology of a Garden is a new large-scale body of work that Ruais created in the back garden of her building in Brooklyn. The work was made by mapping with clay the areas around the planters and flower beds of her garden, winding around existing infrastructure and trees. While it is a departure from earlier work, it also reveals her consistency: where in the works mentioned above, the shapes of the final pieces were determined by the artist’s relationship to the physical, psychological, and spiritual space in which the works were created, in this new series she responds directly to a site, allowing this to determine the physical parameters. As a whole it reads like a floorplan of the garden, the negative space conjuring images of concrete or terracotta beds. Unusually for Brie’s work, right angles and sharper corners take residence in the final incarnation; these corners may have been attractive to the artist as alternative or partial grid formulations.



Untitled (Area Rug 5 x 8), 2014
Pigmented and glazed ceramic, hardware
89 x 60 x 1 inches
226 x 152.4 x 2.5 cm

Topology of a Garden is divided into seven sections, each with the corresponding weight of the artist at the time it was produced, which fluctuated between 127 to 135 pounds. The color of this work is Ruais at her most baroque: pinks, greens, grey, white, and blue combine to suggest both the exuberance of a garden in bloom as well as the myriad palette of a city. Ruais has discussed how the palette of the clay evolves according to location: the desert-like colors of parts of her native California seen in earlier works have developed here into a kaleidoscope that references the northeastern trees and buds of New York. Like the ghostly presence of Anna Atkins’s cyanotypes or fossils that trace back centuries, the outline of small plants and pebbles, as well as the leaves themselves, are found on the sculptures’ surface.

While Ruais uses her body and its weight, a loaded topic in society, to execute the work,



LA Aqueduct Washed in Clay, 2016, Videostill



Big Push, 2011, Videostill

she resists the self-focused impulse of many feminist and conceptual artists—think Eleanor Antin’s *Carving*, Ana Mendieta’s *Siluetas*, or Dan Graham’s *Performance/Body/Mirror*—removing her body from the work. Ruais forces us to consider the work itself, its connection to the material, and implicitly, its connection to nature. How do we as humans grapple with the world we inhabit? Do we protect and cherish it? Do we offer an equal share of that earth for all regardless of their status, color or gender? The beauty and delicacy of these sculptures belie their importance as beacons of a communal subjectivity: we live in an increasingly polarized world where the commonalities between us as well as between humans and earth, are being tested more each day. As we grow further apart from each other—through our devices, through

divisive politics, through the anonymity of social media—as well as from our planet—through corporate malfeasance and personal irresponsibility—how can we return to a place of balance? How can we recalibrate our own desires with what is best for mankind or our earth? Ruais tackles these topics through her nuanced and intelligent practice. She is emblematic of a new generation of feminist artists who internalize their politics and create an open dialogue where these issues can be contemplated, discussed, even tackled.