

Sculpture

INTERNATIONAL SCULPTURE CENTER

Reviews
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New York

Daniel Rothbart

The Space @ Media Triangle

A tightly focused exhibition called "Begging Bowls" establishes Daniel Rothbart as an artist worth following. He is after something deeper than form or entertainment and, for whatever reason, seems to be able to take art historical and anti-market risks. Although American born (Stanford, California) and educated (Rhode Island School of Design, Columbia), he has until now mostly shown in Italy. He had a Fulbright in 1990. His small book *Jewish Metaphysics as Generative Principle in American Art* (1994, Naples) was labeled by Jonathan Napack in the *New York Observer* as the "Most Obscure Yet Weirdly Fascinating Art Book." I did not find it weird or for that matter obscure; it merely stakes out a Kabbalistic influence on a number of American artists, throwing in the Biblical stricture against image-making. It is not really such a surprise that Barnett Newman was influenced by his readings of the work of the great Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem.

Rothbart, as a result of his search for his own Jewish cultural roots, began making references to the inverted tree of the Kabbalah (and the tree of Genesis) in his sculptures made of bronze and cast aluminum. Alchemical imagery has also played a part. In the early '90s, he began making ad hoc installations in Italian streets but also at one point, by invitation, in the courtyard of the U.S.I.A. office in Milan. Bronze bowls became an important component and in some cases the only form used. The bowls must refer to the 10 "vessels" of the tree of the Kabbalah. Energy poured down from En-Sof (The Endless and Unknowable) broke these vessels; in Luria/Safedic Kabbalah the pieces contain sparks of the divine that must now be gathered up from exile. The mending must take place before the return.

Although he is now a Buddhist, Rothbart's current tea-bowl-shaped



cast aluminum begging bowls do not entirely escape rich Kabbalistic symbolism. A belief in reincarnation is not the only thing shared by Buddhism and mystical Judaism. Be that as it may, during a residency in Cannes this year Rothbart placed and photographed 12 bowls in various situations and street environments. Most contained bright yellow apples, possibly from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Or are they the Golden Apples of the Hesperides or of Asgard?

In the gallery exhibition, the bowls were deployed *sans* apples on small Lucite shelves. The begging bowls are nicely cast, but with walls much thicker than would be customary in ceramics. They come in three sizes: five-, six-, and 10-inch diameters. The narrow base/foot typical of the tea bowl lifts and balances the inverted demi-sphere. In his youth, Rothbart dabbled in clay and made similar bowls. Also shown,

but apparently not part of the "Street Situation" set, were three larger begging bowls that could be struck with a cast aluminum instrument to produce a splendid ringing sound.

In and around Cannes and Nice, Rothbart carried the surprisingly heavy set of begging bowls in a large canvas duffel bag until he found the right place to create what he calls "semiotic street situations." A traveling carnival was one such situation: a hand, possibly the artist's, in the photograph holds up the bowl to an elephant. But other "situations" include an illegal immigrant lifting up one of the larger bowls to hide his face, a re-creation of Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, a beach with fishing nets. There were 31 photographed "situations" in the exhibition. The bowls are not just markers or excuses for photographs: because of the kinds of arrangements and relationships established among them and with

Daniel Rothbart, *Benediction 1*, 2002. C-print, 11 x 14 inches, documentation of *Begging Bowls* street situation.

the street environment, they are sculptural units. The sculpture is variable, ephemeral, situational. The photographs themselves, following the tradition of early conceptual art and streetworks, are plain and straightforward, with little to recommend them as photo art *qua* photo art. Photography collectors might not understand them at all.

Rothbart's "situations" are much more benign than many of the streetworks now remembered from the late '60s. No one follows a stranger (Vito Acconci) or stops people to ask embarrassing questions or chalks scene-of-the-crime corpse outlines on the street. Some of Rothbart's situations mimic street vendor blanket displays. If there is a narrative, it is as artfully concealed as the spiritual symbolism.



Left: Daniel Rothbart, *Begging Bowls*, 2002. Aluminum bowls and striker, dimensions variable.

Rothbart is not photographing his begging bowls as they march into the Museum of Modern Art. I am referring to Eleanor Antin's signature *100 Boots* postcard work. Rothbart's *Begging Bowls* are disarmingly humble, which is only the surface of their strength. I do not think he is saying that artists should be beggars now, although in some way they always are beggars at the tables of power and wealth; instead his call is for art-making as spiritual quest.

—John Perreault



ROTHBART: CHRIS CARONE, COURTESY THE SPACE @ MEDIA TRIANGLE