

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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REBECCA WARREN *Why Do Birds Suddenly Appear?*

by Kara L. Rooney

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Time has vindicated the art world's longworn prejudice against clay as craft. These days, one sees it everywhere—throughout Chelsea, the LES, and Brooklyn galleries; center stage at the profusion of art fairs and biennials; as the subject of major retrospectives and museum exhibitions; and especially entrenched within the studio practices of emerging and mid-career artists. To put it bluntly, clay is hot. Few are as adept, however, at working with the material's libidinous qualities as British artist Rebecca Warren. Featuring two of her wall vitrine sculptures as well as a fresh cadre of free-standing forms, *Why do Birds Suddenly Appear?* is Warren's first solo show in the U.S. in over four years, and arguably also one of her best.

The loci of the show are eight slender, totemic sculptures whose lumpen surfaces have been hand-fashioned in clay, cast in bronze, then painted and modified by Warren. Their implied reference to bodies in space—part Giacometti, part Bourgeois—is undeniable, registered in the work's attenuated “limbs,” bulbous protrusions, and various misshapen silhouettes that reach, at times, as high as 9 feet into the air. Ranging in hue from fleshy pinks to deep lavenders and a variety of indigo tints, and including painterly references such as grid formations and wet-into-wet brushwork, Warren reveals each piece's individual characteristics, sometimes humorous, at others art historical, as a means of lightening the burden of material solemnity. “Basquiat” (2014), is painted almost completely



Rebecca Warren, “Ooo,” 2014. Hand-painted bronze on painted MDF pedestal. Sculpture: 93 × 21 5/8 × 19 3/4”; Overall: 115 1/2 × 21 5/8 × 19 3/4”. ©Rebecca Warren, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

green, a thin white line running down the center seam of the sculpture. About half way down, a large rounded breast abruptly protrudes from the otherwise phallic shape, its voluptuous fullness a sexually charged antagonist to the heroism ascribed to Neo-expressionist painting. “Ooo” (2014), takes a slightly different position, its contiguous blend of free-flowing painterly drips and plush blue pom-pom content to exist as they stand—free from art historical reference and basking in sheer, unmediated materiality.

While these recent standing works maintain specific references to the artist’s well-known earlier figurations (earning her a Turner Prize nomination in 2006), the new pieces embrace a more sophisticated and refined quality without sacrificing that same air of whimsy and humor. As always, Warren is not afraid to get her hands messy and her material handling of the psychically charged spaces of the id and the ego, the feminine and the masculine, *imagos* and *logos*, maintains the improvisatory, even rebellious nature of clay while couching the medium within the larger traditions of painting, sculpture, and space.

These same interests appear in other works on view, particularly the diptych wall relief, “You are Quiet, I Will Be Too” (2014). Here, Warren turns her attention away from overt material concerns to wrestle with issues of identification and spatial relationships. Not dissimilar to Carol Bove’s investigations into the conditional arrangement of objects and their attendant readings or Rachel Harrison’s cryptically charged assemblages, Warren juxtaposes quotidian materials such as pom-poms and paper on two bifurcated, narrow steel shelves. Slender vertical strips with pom-poms attached offset the extreme horizontality of the relief, and inject a level of intimacy and private speculation alluded to in the title of the work. “Autumn Winter” (2014), on the other hand, exudes the stark aura of minimalist concerns, its only tell the tiny white pom-pom that interrupts the 2.75-inches-wide plank of wood that hovers, ghostly, over an even thinner plinth of vertically leaning steel. Also a diptych, and positioned almost directly opposite “You are Quiet,” the piece acts as a counterbalance to the aforementioned’s sensitivity and grace.

Two final objects, “The Glasses I” and “The Glasses II” (both 2014), round out the language of opposition that underscores the thematic content of the show. The two hulking boulders, both painted bronze, act as mobile interlopers in the otherwise ethereal setting of the space. Each object is displayed on an untreated wooden platform with wheels, their implied weight offset by the mobility of the base support. Herein resides the balletic encounter between form and structure, figure/ground, object and idea: one can only know the former through the presence of the latter, Warren seems to say. A philosophical stance this show proves seductively difficult to deny.