

CAUSE & EFFECT

The public benefits when seasoned professionals

work together. That's certainly true in the collaborative efforts of artist Nora Naranjo Morse in her latest exhibition, *Cause & Effect*, curated by Chiaroscuro's gallery director John Addison. These two old pros brought their A-game, and the results are splendid. Naranjo Morse works with a freedom that only an artist with years of sure-handed practice behind her can do. Addison brought out the art's elegant and otherworldly characteristics through his judicious utilization of placement and lighting. Together, they produced an exhibition that is well-grounded and airy.

The exhibition announces itself to the visitor before he enters the gallery: The show's largest piece, *Gatherings*, a monumental wire-and-hoop concoction, hangs in front of the wall

outside Chiaroscuro on Gypsy Alley, where it beckons discerning viewers from Canyon Road. The play of shadow, line, and color presents the thesis of *Cause & Effect*—that clay as a medium is not limited to its functionality, nor are found objects necessarily limited to the garbage bin. The exhibition subtext lies within the artist's roots as an indigenous woman. Naranjo Morse has, for years, dug clay from a sacred site near Santa Clara Pueblo. In a real juxtaposition of the sacred with the profane, she found herself fascinated by a trash heap next to the clay, and began mining both for their rich, earthy resources.

Naranjo Morse shares her lineage with generations of highly regarded Pueblo ceramists. Her work is, however, highly conceptual for

an artist whose foundations are built upon an art that is primarily functional and often figurative. Known as an artist who investigates "the changing social landscape of Native life," according to gallery press, she is a sculptor who also uses poetry and film. In the entry gallery at Chiaroscuro, three micaceous-clay pieces, *Squash Pods I, II, and III*, are good examples of a sensibility that emerged out of its native roots. Hand-dug clay lends an organic weight and tactility to the vessels—they beg to be picked up so that their heft can be experienced. As such, they suggest a relational aesthetic that is very much a defining quality of Naranjo Morse's art. Outer-space discs, like something straight out of Jane Jetson's jewelry box, perch on the necks of the pods, lending a cool, retro-modern look

to what might otherwise be simple autumnal gourds. A clay tip inserted into the rim of the largest squash pod, fired black, insinuates the naughtiness of bare genitals. Near the squash vessels, *Moon Orchids* wave their thin stalks in shades of yellow, chartreuse, and purple, as delicately animated as underwater sea creatures. The artist has developed in her ceramics a droll take layered onto serious overtones; the contrast is quite pleasing. In the same room, and above the *Orchids*, floats the wire armature of *Swimmer*, narrow and long as a gar fish. Its abstracted needle-like effect was spoiled, I felt, by the too-literal figure of an outstretched swimmer poised inside the armature. Naranjo Morse is at her most effective when she allows generalized forms to stand in for ideas of the mysterious mundane. Uncovering the tiny swimmer within the piece spoiled the effect of its overall swooping lyricism.

In the next gallery, the artist's imagination is fully exposed to, and supported by, the elements of recycled trash. Her *County Road* series tends toward smaller, open-ended pieces that strive to become architectural structures, like tiny geodesic domes for birds. Fine as gems, the directness of their wirework renders them approachable. The bright yellow doll-sized hut, *My African Neighbor*, made of clay with mixed media, is a fine example of this type. Still, on their own, the preceding pieces would be nice, but hardly outstanding as a body of work. It is the series of four tall, slim totemic forms, *From the Bottom Up*, which affords the exhibition its outstanding qualities. Satisfyingly tall and slender, these painted wire and mixed-media works are hung very effectively. Addison's lighting prompts a dialogue between each piece and its own shadow, adding substance to the elusiveness of art made from the flotsam of rubble. The four sculptures are spiny and evanescent as the dried husks of cholla in the arid, high desert. And they are as solidly present as the clay pieces, seeming like animated stills that depict the frozen gyrations of a hoop dancer.

The last piece in the exhibition, *Untitled*, began as a totem in the above series. As the artist had become freer with her medium, the long, thin shape folded into itself like a doughnut. Here, we witness the artist's confidence in herself and in the artworks, with the happy results translated into an uncamouflaged generosity of spirit. This artist knows who she is and where she comes from, and her art moves out unshakably from this center.

—KATHRYN M DAVIS



Nora Morse, *From the Bottom Up 4* (detail), mixed media and clay, 100" x 17" x 17", 2012