

## DEPTH OF SURFACE: THE ARTWORKS OF JAMES SHROSBREE

We usually, and quite reasonably, expect visual art to involve us in an encounter with something that is seen. But James Shrosbree's art initiates an unexpected visual experience: we become aware of what we cannot see. His small, at times winsome, but always intensely focused artworks are an invitation for the viewer to enter the play between the seen and the unseen. The timelessness of the self-contained object and our transitory temporality intersect in this encounter.

With their strange and curious shapes, their small and handable size, each piece is alluring both visually and tactilely. Shrosbree clearly sizes his pieces, whether in ceramics or of wire and stretched nylon, to the touch. But his works involve more than the discrete object; they incorporate tensions the artist has noticed and amplified between the objects and the wall, or affinities based on their position with the floor. *UBLG* (2002), a bent tubular form in a deep blue ink, drips a thin line onto the wall, which becomes a virtual second shadow counterpointing the more diffuse one, cast by the piece's incandescent lighting. A small deep blue disc marks the junction of the tube and the wall, pinpointing the spot from which the painted line begins to trickle.

The objects do not resemble anything but themselves, and just as we think they might represent some known thing they quickly deflect that notion by unexpectedly widening out, or curving off, or tapering downward into a drawn line. Let's, for an instant, contrast them to familiar monumental commemorative sculpture. Such pieces are created for a resemblance; their success lies in their ability to evoke recognition. Generally, any emotional response derives from the viewer's response to the subject represented, at least as much as to the formal characteristics of the sculpture itself. Shrosbree's works call for an almost antithetical response.

This results not only from their pronounced contrast to the monuments' size, but even more from their deviation from representational figuration; Shrosbree's sculptures are radically non-mimetic. Not referencing a specific personage or existing thing, they rely only on their own qualities to attract attention: at once ungainly, at times almost comical, and yet always seductive. They hover at particular distances from the wall, placed in specific relation to the viewer and preening in bright colors, absorbed in play with light and cast shadow. A luminosity seems to radiate from and envelope each piece. While the sculptures seem indifferent or oblivious to our presence, they draw us to them like a magnet. Even as *O/O (django)*'s (2005) thin crimson arms at its head and foot seem to brandish a long thin red wire, a defiant but ineffective weapon for protecting its fragile ovoid body, the unexpected pale turquoise unavoidably invites us closer. *DBO/DBO's* (2003) protuberances and patterns prompt a more careful look, trying to see the face it has turned toward the wall.

In speaking of these pieces, we find ourselves at times using terms based on the human body. We are still emerging from Modernism and our vocabulary keeps dragging us back into obsolete responses generated by the Modernist paradigm that art is meant to embody human qualities and attributes. Despite its abstractions, Modernism was predicated on using the human form as the point of departure and projecting human desires into the object. Shrosbree's art diverges from Modernist aesthetics. While it, too, is directed toward the human body, nevertheless it resists embodied personification; it does not represent the body as an object. Instead, the surface and forms of each object anticipate the viewer's investigation. The pieces present themselves for tactile explorations, extending toward the human eye as if they were intended for a touch. If we tend, then, to personify his art objects it is not due to their surface.

characteristics but to their relational positioning, in space as well as their dynamic engagement with the viewer. *UBLG* (2002) curves toward me, *e9 (transx)* (2003) is turned away, *Untitled* (1997) faces downward. The pieces embody a visual language, which deliberately initiates and engages the viewer's response. They not only anticipate our act of vision but, once arresting it, they become forces influencing our physical interactions as we investigate and interpret. Each piece catalyzes a choreography of examination, which it stages, almost like a score, through its formal qualities, its overt surface markings, and its installation.

This interaction becomes a process of discovery. Because, as much as we try to stay fastened to the surface qualities, we find ourselves slipping seamlessly into observations and questions about what is not seen. We look at *r3 (hanza)* (2004), notice its taut surface skin of stretched nylon, react to the billowing yellow curves encircling the center, moving around and down. Our gaze passes across the wrinkles to the sharply defined edge, comes up next to the wall, and sees the shadow forming a similar shape. We wonder how does it connect? And, looking more carefully, we notice the space between the shadow and the stretched nylon opening, like that of a conch shell, spiraling inward as it departs entirely from our sight.

We discover that each piece alludes to more that remains hidden from a single viewpoint. Observing longer and more fully, sometimes positioning ourselves awkwardly to see the backside, reveals elements that are otherwise obscure. A frontal view of *UB Ocular* (2004) is dominated by a large high-chroma blue sphere protruding from a rectangle with three curved sides in the same vibrant blue, painted like a slab, flat on the wall. As we move to the side of the piece we see long, thin filaments arising from the rectangle and reaching outward, extending over and under the sphere. A silvery curved shape, similar to a shoe print, emerges when we look behind the sphere. And we begin to perceive qualities that are not

the direct substance of vision: in some pieces we become aware of weight - one piece seems impossibly heavy; others seem to float. *Untitled* (1997) appears reposed and insular, while *DSSD* (2004) is quietly alert, as if in anticipation.

Surfaces are all we see, and yet, increasingly we come to realize that, in Shrosbree's art, while the surface is attractive, it is the hollow space, the core that often seems to structure the form. Shrosbree's objects seem full, not a skin surrounding an empty void. They call attention to the privilege of holding and of occupying a particular, unique volume of space. Qualities that cannot be realized through direct visual expression seem to have driven and generated the visible form, thereby activating their own indirect manifestation.

Over the centuries, the elements of this dynamic relationship have been variously described through dualisms such as presence/absence; the inner/the outer; matter/form; body/soul; positive space/negative space; the empty/the full. Shrosbree's art works result from the duality found between the surface and the contained, unseen qualities. This dialogue leads and sustains our gaze.

But this is not a metaphysics; it is more an understanding of relational processes - an archeology of vision. Through our relationship with these curious and carefully orchestrated objects we gain a double vision: awareness of artforms that are fully present; and the understanding that we can only see a part, and even then, only slowly over time.

Lenore Metrick-Chen