

INTERVIEW: BETTY WOODMAN

James Barron: It's interesting that you decided not to glaze all of the sculptures.

Betty Woodman: The clay is so beautiful.

JB: And so raw. I'm intrigued by how nothing's disguised.

BW: It's not hiding anything. It's also about – as all the work is, really – about this shape, which is a vase, and then this shape, the negative space, which is also a vase. It's about taking something and changing the way you read it.

JB: This piece [pointing] would be amazing next to a Sol LeWitt Wall Drawing. Interestingly, you're both Americans who have spent decades in Italy and have been nurtured by the Italian culture. Sometimes if you look at a Fra Angelico and you take the figures away, there's a LeWitt Wall Drawing.

BW: Fra Angelico is such a colorist. I've done pieces based on his color.

JB: Look at that [pointing]. How Baroque is that shape!

BW: They're all about Baroque.

JB: It's interesting how you think about facades. What's the front, and what's the back? It relates to Robert Venturi's idea of decorated shed. It's a very Italian idea to me, making a lot out of less. You've got a shed, then you put on the decoration. You make it fancy. And before, you mentioned Renaissance windows.

BW: When you look around Florence, you see the articulation of a window. Half of them are triangles at the top, and the other half are rounded.

JB: I'm always intrigued with American artists who work in Italy, especially for a long time, because it gets in the work. Sometimes it takes a little while to figure out how, but it is there.

BW: Certainly. I've lived here more than half my life. I came to Italy the first time in 1951 and spent a year here. Then we came in 1960, George and the two kids. We came back to Florence, because that's what I knew. And then in '65/'66, I had a Fulbright to Florence and George had a fellowship from the University of Colorado. Richard Serra and I had Fulbrights together.

JB: Do you think of George Ohr much?

BW: You know, nobody knew about George Ohr when I was working. Then when he was discovered, I thought it was amazing because it was like, *Wait a minute, he's copying me!* [laughs]

JB: Looking at this Gauguin [points at poster], it's interesting to see that in relation to your work.

BW: Every time I wedge clay, I stare at that Gauguin. He's had a big influence on me as a colorist. I was looking at it the other day and thinking, *Look at the way the pink goes on them, and then that red... becoming orange...* It's just amazing.

JB: You're not afraid to be playful?

BW: No, I'm not. But *there's* a word I hate. I don't mind "decorative." But, there is a word people use for my work: "whimsy!" I hate it! I think, "Hey, these are really complicated works of art." It's not about *whimsy*!

JB: The term I like is "classical whimsy," because then it's the intelligence of looking at historical work and riffing on it, but in a whimsical way. I think that's a very sophisticated thing to do.

BW: I don't know – you'll have to convince me, James!

James D. Barron
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