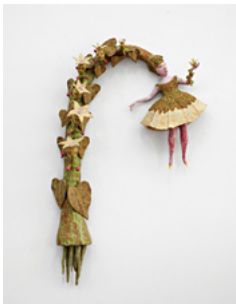


Kathy Ruttenberg
**IN THE FEMALE
 UNCONSCIOUS**
 by Donald Kuspit



Kathy Ruttenberg, "The Earth Exhales: New Ceramic Sculptures," installation view, 2012, Stux Gallery, New York

The material medium is sort of the unconscious of the consciously conceived image, informing even the most refined art with its raw properties, and no medium is more unconsciously significant than clay, for it bespeaks the earth that we unconsciously take for granted, the earth to which we are unconsciously attached, the mothering earth from which we are born and to which we will return when we die, as the *Pieta* tells us. The earth is female, as the goddess Demeter (Ceres) reminds us, and, as Swiss anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen points out, women founded agriculture, intimately cultivating the earth for the benefit of everyone, while men hunted animals to the death, despoiling nature for their own personal glory. Women cared for the earth, and identified with it, while men attacked and ruined it, in a dubiously heroic assertion of power -- symbolically power over women.



Kathy Ruttenberg
Wildflower
 Stux Gallery, New York

Kathy Ruttenberg's ceramic figures seem to have sprung directly from her down-to-earth unconscious, as the flowers that flourish on them strongly suggest. With a sort of casual brilliance, she gives the heart-shaped leaves that cover the dress of her female *Wildflower* (2010), and that grow from its long-stemmed hair, the raw brownness of rough earth, giving them an autumnal presence that suggests they are dying -- dying for love, waiting for the lover who might climb the Rapunzel-like hair. She is a fairytale figure, a fabulous fantasy of female desire and fertility, of frenzied female passion. Her vaginal cup runneth over, as it were, or, if one wants, she has sex on the brain. It is a frustrated, forlorn, unhappy sexuality, as the barren branches, with their token leaves, that sprout from her head in *Overgrown* (2010) make clear. Again earth brown, now dark as death, crowns the figure. The bluebird of happiness perches on one branch, but it's small and insignificant -- the sky-blue bird is a drop in the bucket of the earth-brown branches. Sky blue counts for less in Ruttenberg's sculptures than earth brown, as the faded blue of the breast area of the overgrown dress shows. Ruttenberg's female -- young but peculiarly weary, as her stoic expression suggests -- holds a daisy in her right hand, as though to pluck its petals -- does he love me, does he not love, to be decided by chance, more subtly, by nature itself. She holds an owl in her left hand, suggesting that she has found patient wisdom (the owl is the symbol of the goddess Athena, the reason that sprang from the god's Zeus' forehead) -- chance hasn't decided in her favor, or perhaps won't decide either way. Ruttenberg's females belong to the earth not the sky -- they don't soar, they're grounded, as the naked *Crab Girl* (2009) makes clear. Face down and bent over a lump of gray stone, as though at once praying to the earth and humiliated, her buttocks sprout a spiraling earth brown -- dare one say shit-colored? -- shell. It is a brilliant invention, all the more so because of the unresolved tension between the shit-brown shell, the nude's long blonde hair and her pinkish white skin, oddly blemished by Ruttenberg's handling. The clay is molded into haptic flesh, giving it a gritty presence and earthiness.



Kathy Ruttenberg
Overgrown 2010
 Stux Gallery, New York

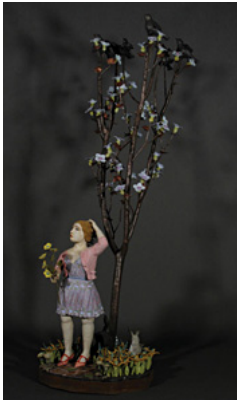
Barrenness is a not very hidden subtext of Ruttenberg's female figures. Thus, in *Grounded* (2009), the breasts of the female figure are dead trees, sprouting a few forlorn leaves, red-veined as though to suggest that the blood still runs in the gray-skinned, seemingly dead -- her eyes are closed -- female figure. It is a brilliant invention; the closest thing to it is the image of Daphne turning



Kathy Ruttenberg
Crab Girl
 Stux Gallery, New York



Kathy Ruttenberg
Grounded
2009
Stux Gallery, New York



Kathy Ruttenberg
The Moment Before
2008
Stux Gallery, New York



Kathy Ruttenberg
The Moment After
2008
Stux Gallery, New York



Kathy Ruttenberg
Submission
2007
Stux Gallery, New York

into a tree as she flees from Apollo in Antonio del Pollaiuolo's small panel painting (undated, in London's National Gallery). But Pollaiuolo's female figure is much less ingenious and imaginative than Ruttenberg's grounded female: Pollaiuolo sees woman from the point of view of frustrated male desire -- Daphne resists Apollo, and refuses to embrace him, signaled by the fact that her arms have become branches (among other meanings, the myth suggests that woman belongs to nature, not man; more pointedly, that she's an unmanageable force of nature rather than a particular person with an identity of her own) -- while Ruttenberg sees women from the point of view of frustrated female desire.

But it's not necessarily for a man; it's for a child, as *The Moment Before* and *The Moment After* (both 2008) suggest. It's the virginal moment before impregnation, and the ecstatic moment after impregnation. The innocent puzzled little girl becomes the knowing self-absorbed, not to say self-satisfied mature woman. A tree of life, rich with pink petals, symbolizing the labia of the vagina, grows from a red hole in her belly, the lush red the color of the ripe and ready blood-engorged vagina. "Our bodies, ourselves," as the feminists say, and particularly our vaginas, ourselves, because they belong to us alone. The tree is no doubt phallic, suggesting that the figure is a highly unusual and imaginative -- radical, in the basic sense of that word, that is, having roots (derived from the Latin *radicalis*), "of or going to the origins," as the dictionary says -- version of the so-called phallic woman, that is, Magna Mater.

Men were sacrificed to her, which is part of the point of the myth of the virginal goddess Diana and the male hunter Acheron -- she turned him into a deer and hunted him to death, in punishment for seeing her naked and desiring to sexually "despoil" her --but, strangely, Ruttenberg reverses the myth, as *Submission* (2007) shows. The male Acheron, with his antlered deer's head and striped pants holds the open-eyed Diana, in sexy slip and red shoes, in his arms, suggesting that he has triumphantly raped her, and that she was his willing victim. The brilliantly conceived work, with the tattooed scenes on the male body, and the cunning crevices in his body, containing images of the female figure -- an internalized object, as it were -- is an ingenious allegory of the ironical, difficult, dangerous relations between men and women. The work is fraught with violence as well as sexuality -- predatory sexuality, one might say. Mounted on a sort of high table, made of cunningly shaped wrought iron with female heads on the lower scrolls that link the legs, the work has an idolatrous presence, inviting worship of the male monster, reminiscent of the minotaur. The female heads have Medusa-like hair, suggesting that the woman has turned to stone while sexually submitting to the animal. *Tree Hugger* (2010) combines the Apollo / Daphne and Diana / Acheron myths, resulting in a magical dialectic of desire and frustration, male sexual advance and passion and female resistance and aversion -- between, if one wants, male beastliness and female purity.

Ruttenberg's works are primal tour de forces, as *Primal* (2007) announces. On the dress -- again with a faded blue bodice -- we see a male beast raping a female beauty, her wide open eyes suggesting that she's fully conscious of the event, ambivalently welcome and unwelcome. The male animal is naked, she's in a red dress, suggesting her passionate desire, even as her eyes suggests her dispassionate intelligence -- and all of Ruttenberg's females seem intelligent, knowing, conscious, as their open eyes suggest, while her male animals are dumb, driven creatures.

"Dogman loved Ms. Rabbit Lady so much he wanted to run deep into the woods with her so he could eat her in privacy," Ruttenberg writes in one of her morbidly lovely little books, but it seems that Rabbit Lady willingly goes along with him because she wants to be eaten by him. She too is consumed with wild desire -- eaten up by intense desire, not to say lust. She desires him as much as he desires her, but she has to play hard to get -- difficult to digest let alone consume. When we eat we literally incorporate food -- hopefully nourishing -- into our bodies, and when we have sexual intercourse we emotionally incorporate our partner -- hopefully also nourishing -- into our psyches, and, for an orgasmic moment, seemingly into our bodies. It's a bit of an ordeal to be mounted by Dogman, all the more so because he and Rabbit Lady belong to different species -- a strange, not to say perverse mating indeed -- but Rabbit Lady wants to be fucked by Dogman (she's infatuated with him), and unconsciously loves it, however consciously she



Kathy Ruttenberg
Tree Hugger
2010
Stux Gallery, New York



Kathy Ruttenberg
Primal
2007
Stux Gallery, New York



Kathy Ruttenberg
She's a Natural Beauty
2011
Stux Gallery, New York



Kathy Ruttenberg
The Messenger
2010
Stux Gallery, New York



Kathy Ruttenberg
Venom
2010
Stux Gallery, New York

dislikes it, that is, resists giving herself up to her instinctive, natural desire, suggesting that she's self-preservative, perhaps even self-sufficient (as Mother Nature seems to be), or perhaps a bit frigid, however obviously warm-blooded. They're both creatures of nature, but she's much more human than he is capable of becoming.

Ruttenberg gives us an imaginative rendering of the familiar beauty and beast fairytale, with an important difference: the focus is on the beauty and her frustration. *She's a Natural Beauty* (2011), but her own nature seems unnatural to her when she meets an ugly male animal. She is afraid of her own desire -- her own beastly side, as well as the beast that symbolizes it -- the beast into which she projects it. She is unconsciously the beast even as she is self-consciously beautiful. Her frustration and fear -- her ambivalence about her own desire and uncertainty about her own sexuality -- are epitomized by *The Messenger* (2010). One can't help but ask who the third female leg that emerges from under the barren tree trunk belongs to? All three -- two legs are close together, suggesting they belong to one woman, the other leg rests apart and on the side, suggesting they belong to another woman -- have green leaves sprouting from their high-heeled shoes, in contrast to the sere if red-veined leaves on the branches of the tree. An alien black bird, large and ominous, stands on one branch, looking over the legs, threatening their intimacy. The figures are undercover, the bird is a sort of black-robed judge, condemning and threatening their intimacy. Or, if it's one hidden woman with two sides -- who is split in two, as though in a magician's coffin -- suggesting that they better come together.

Ruttenberg's sculptures are rich with metaphoric implications. They have many layers of ambiguous meaning, suggesting unresolved emotional conflicts. Her women of clay are molded by their feelings, reminding us that clay is easily molded, into whatever shape is necessary to express feeling. Again and again Ruttenberg uses the shapes of the young female body and of flowers and leaves. Her colors vividly contrast, adding to the intensity of her figures. Impassioned red, green in varying shades, abrupt intrusive gray, and above all earth-brown --the color of clay -- recur, in cunningly textured surfaces, alive with ever-changing curves, and give her works esthetic presence, uncanny esthetic power.

Ruttenberg's innovative, imaginative, narrative feminist sculpture -- materially as well as conceptually innovative -- are perhaps the most creative, certainly unusual, ceramic art being made today.

Kathy Ruttenberg, "The Earth Exhales: New Ceramic Sculptures," Mar. 22-May 5, 2012, at Stefan Stux Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001.

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