

FULL CIRCLE: The Work of Michele Feder-Nadoff

It is always a pleasure to watch an artist's work mature over a sustained period of time. I have been privileged to watch Michele Feder-Nadoff's body of work grow, permutate and, to some degree, come back full circle to some of the same issues I found engaging in it from my first notice of her work in the early 1980s. What is most engaging for me is her relationship to objects and beauty. She has always been one of those artists who seem to be getting rarer, a maker of beautiful, thoughtfully crafted objects. This requires some clarification in that even though she may well be one who fetishizes objects, it is not for their superficial allure, but for a spiritual power with which they can be imbued. And her interest in healing, shamanic, kabbalistic and other mystical issues is always front and center in her artistic creation. In fact I came to know her via the first exhibition I curated in Chicago at N.A.M.E. Gallery, *Magic: Artist as Alchemist*, (1986), in which I included her work.

Michele's earlier work employed pod-like forms with obsessive stitching and painted marks that resulted in what might have seemed like shamanist ritual objects, but from our contemporary culture. In one such work she encased her brother's childhood toy soldier, a strategy that embedded memory within the possible transformative power of objects. Over the years, she has most often employed this layered accretion of stitching or mark-making and thus makes her process as ritualistic as the seeming result, wherein she creates a kind of mandala, whose creation, one guesses, might be as much about centering as the resultant effect. Her recent work such as the *Ein Sof* series of paintings thus recalls earlier works, albeit without the earlier work's sculptural elements, though the formal structures of these paintings do resemble the three dimensional lotus forms of the copper vessels she created in her long-term relationship with the artisans of Santa Clara del Cobre.

The rich ongoing relationship the artist has formed with these artisans articulates another of her formal strengths. Over the years she has also created several installations, often with minimalist elements of abstracted forms. In these installations the artist functioned much like a curator or shaman, concerned with precise relationships and places of power. Again, it isn't the objects merely as conveyors of beauty, but as sources that by rigorous placement can help to activate spiritual forces as well as engage the viewer. These recent copper vessels made in Santa Clara relate to that engagement with a precision of form and potentially with similar spatial relationships. This minimalist mode is influenced by Asian as well as Latin American aesthetics, and, oddly enough, runs parallel to the intensity of her surface accretions which reflect an equal interest in "ugly beauty" (also reflected in Asian aesthetics as *wabi sabi*). Earlier installations actually encompassed a concomitant sense of the beauty of decay and the impermanence of the world (I still remember the dripping ooze as an active natural "chance" element in the Tough Gallery basement installation). And as always, the formal beauty is drawn from and abstracted from observation of the natural world, whether in organic accumulations of patterning, or

in bolder structural forms such as the lotus. Pattern and grid in this context are also an expression of mental constructs, mandalas and kabbalist diagrams, that in turn are reflections of both the natural world and the inner workings of our spiritual selves, often in relation to each other.

Michele's work has often had performative elements in keeping with her interest in empowered objects, and in healing and ritual as expressed by many cultures. Recently her engagement with "the other" was quite literally in evidence in her collaborative stitching piece in which Palestinian artist Kanaan and she worked from opposite sides of a free standing piece of cloth to create a performance and ultimately a two-sided textile piece at the Portland Art Center, a literal and metaphoric representation of two sides coming together.

This artist's intense engagement with art, music, literature and ideas from around the world informs the breadth and depth of her work. She's as likely to find inspiration from Proust as from the Kaballah, and her intellectual curiosity led her to a decade of commitment and involvement with the community in Santa Clara. This association has been complex, consisting of cultural preservation, as well as of inspiration and learning, which has led to new directions in her own work, and hopefully reciprocally in that of the artists of Santa Clara. Though the artist has engaged a wide variety of mediums and modes of exploration, her body of work does seem to have come full circle in many regards, and one can only guess at what the next leg of her remarkable journey might be.

Lanny Silverman
Curator of Exhibitions
Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs