

ARTFORUM

Review: Betty Woodman – David Kordansky Gallery

By Suzanne Hudson

LOS ANGELES

Betty Woodman

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

“Illusions of Domesticity,” Betty Woodman’s first solo show at David Kordansky Gallery, was also her first one-person exhibition on the West Coast in a decade—the latter landmark made all the more remarkable by the recent visibility of ceramics in the area, with shows featuring the work of Peter Voukos and Ken Price, among others. Yet while these efforts to showcase ceramics (and thus to retroactively rectify its omission from standard twentieth-century narratives, which privileged painting and sculpture) have primarily been retrospective in their purview, detailing the place of pottery in the art world of postwar California, Woodman’s installation was decidedly contemporary in chronology and reference. Unfussy but remarkably erudite, her pottery comfortably foregrounds ceramics’ conventions and place within (or outside of) this erstwhile art-historical canon. The rigor of Woodman’s engagement with the medium was here belied by the visceral convolutions of color and runny streaks of paint that turn the surface of her vessels into canvaslike grounds. Indeed, many of the artist’s recent pieces that were on view (all works exhibited were made between 2008 and 2014) incorporate unstretched canvas within their polychrome tableaux, and feature glazed earthenware and structures that extend out from the wall or rest upon vibrantly patterned canvas carpets. These are archetypal but also unremittingly intimate works, in their evocations of domestic spaces and of the bodies that might activate them (but that will never

sit at her makeshift tables and imbibe wine from her vessels—hence their status as “illusions”).

The human-scale structures paradoxically make plain Woodman’s assertion that their employ is hypothetical. *The Red Window*, 2014, a Matissean rendering of a salmon-hued room with a scarlet aperture, perhaps goes the farthest in countering Alberti’s oft-quoted description of painting as portal: Absent of any depiction of the outside world, the black-framed brushy red square stays resolutely on our side of the picture plane. Woodman’s wall work—showing a window that cannot be “seen through”—presents a destabilized representational device redoubled by the artist’s contrary thrown vase forms (one of which is incorporated within *The Red Window*), which similarly imply but ultimately withhold their usefulness. *The Red Window*—alongside other works that were mounted to the gallery’s walls, including the massive and exuberant *Paola’s Room (diptych)*, 2011, which spanned a full third of the back gallery’s wall—further suggested the possibility of the work’s serving as a scrim, an abstract theatrical backdrop for some imagined improvisatory activation.

The poster accompanying the exhibition showed Woodman standing, arms akimbo, behind one of her vases, so that the artist was occluded by her own work. Proposing a kind of physical engagement that is also a form of play, the photograph proved complementary to the sentiment expressed in the attendant press materials, namely that Woodman “conjures the trappings of a bourgeois home as splendidous perceptual experiences,” which are contingent on the phenomenological negotiation of objects and space. The discontinuity of the artist’s designs was revealed when one walked around the vase sculptures Woodman had installed around the gallery. *Vase Upon Vase: Orpheo*, 2013, a bubble-gum-pink pedestal supporting a kind of monochromatic cream-colored bivalve, becomes an orange-tipped fan atop a base of vertical ribbons when seen from the opposite side. *Aztec Vase and Carpet #6 Easter*, 2014, appears as a pinwheel plucked from its stick. Viewed from distinct vantages, the work’s central element utterly shifts from emerald and citrus lines on one plane to black calligraphy and cornflower-blue polka dots on another. Circumambulating these structures is an endless but endlessly satisfying labor. The painted colors, applied without regard for parity with the underlying form, show structure and surface to be engaged in a parallaxic play, revealing visual satisfaction to be independent of compositional coherence.

—Suzanne Hudson



Betty Woodman, *The Red Window*, 2014, glazed earthenware, epoxy resin, lacquer, and acrylic on canvas, 85 × 82 × 13".