

Sonja Duò-Meyer in America

Larry Weinberg

I first encountered the work of Sonja Duò-Meyer in the winter of 2014 during a studio visit to a fellow dealer, one who split his time between New York and Switzerland. I was there to see the vintage furniture and lighting that had just arrived by container, but what caught my eye was a footed white ceramic bowl, off-round, unglazed, and with a step-down in the middle. It had a subtly modernist shape, and was obviously hand built with diversity in both form and texture. I immediately sensed that frisson of discovery that reminds us why we got involved in a design field in the first place. That I couldn't assign a maker or time frame only added to my excitement – was it mid-century? Contemporary? Much of the modern design and art I prize has this timeless quality.

I purchased the vessel immediately, describing it on my website as a “minimalist but sculptural vessel in unglazed porcelain [...]. The surface is textured and slightly variegated, imparting a sort of beton-brut aspect.” The allusion to the proto-modernist materiel favored by the Swiss-born Le Corbusier was deliberate on my part. From the beginning, I assigned an architectural character to Duò-Meyer's work. More Ronchamp than Villa Savoye, with a feminine quality that transmitted some of the deepest symbols from our collective past, rendering them in a direct and fresh way.

Next up for me was a series of vessels in an ovoid form with a walled aperture, highlighted by an example with three spike-like protrusions. These came directly from Sonja, who began an e-mail correspondence with me after noticing the first piece on my website. Of these vessels, I wrote that they “reference pre-dynastic Egyptian pottery, having at once an architectural bearing and an anthropomorphic quality.” From an American perspective, the architectural references could be to Anasazi cliff dwellings or Eskimo igloos. And they worked beautifully in groups, forming compositions with even greater vitality and abstract visual character than the vessels alone.



By then I was hooked and ready to push Sonja onto a larger American stage. For this, I connected with Kim Hostler and Juliet Burrows, friends and principals of one of New York City's top design galleries, Hostler Burrows. Fortuitously, they were mounting an exhibition of contemporary women ceramists, a subject close to their hearts. Like me, they were drawn immediately to Duò-Meyer's work, in particular the larger "Monumentals" visible on Sonja's website. As Juliet put it, "Sonja's ceramics fit perfectly into our group show; they shared the characteristics of all the artists' work – strength, fragility, a connection to nature, undeniable beauty, and a timeless appeal." For the show, we selected a grouping of three "Figures" in white and three "Monumentals" in black engobe, along with four small ovoid vessels and a larger Cycladic vessel. The show, simply titled "Six Women," opened in October 2014 to an appreciative crowd. Sonja's larger scale work was for the first time being viewed in New York City, alongside her con-



temporaries Kristina Riska, Elizabeth Turk, Maren Kloppman, Hertha Hillfon, and Babs Haenen. Sonja herself would arrive in mid-November, her family in tow, to put her imprimatur on the installation.

Not surprisingly, the “Monumentals” stood out at the show. Juliet captured their allure: “Apart from the obvious impact that the works have due to their impressive scale, they have an ancient, organic appearance – almost that of a menhir erected long ago, its slate-like glaze polished by time and the elements.” More surprising was the enthusiastic response to the three “Figures,” totemic sculptures presented on white pedestals at three different heights, the holes in the top sections arranged to place them in conversation (or pas-de-trois given Sonja’s affinity for dance). Despite this implied animation and conviviality, the group of “Figures” also conveyed a solemn stillness, channeling perhaps the sentinels from a Fremont River cave painting or the monolithic statues on Easter Island. For Juliet, herself a former dancer attuned to archetypal rhythms, the “Figures” evoked nomadic people in the desert or primitive homes in an ancient culture.

“Six Women” confirmed that Sonja’s work exerted both a visceral and an abstract visual appeal on an American audience. From there, Hostler Burrows brought Duò-Meyer’s large works to “Design Miami/Basel” in December 2014, and then to the “FOG Art+Design” show in San Francisco in January 2015. “Design Miami/Basel”, an offshoot of the prestigious art fair, draws an international clientele seeking iconic design and introduction to new work. “FOG Art+Design” draws heavily on a regional audience, tech-oriented and art savvy, with a particular passion for ceramics. Hostler Burrows presented Duò-Meyer’s sculptures and vessels in artfully crafted interiors, a good fit with seating by Finn Juhl, Kerstin Horlin-Holmquist, Illum Wikkelse, and Axel Einer-Hjorth; tables by Bruno Mathsson and Paul Frankl; and works by Stig Lindberg, Marta Maas Fjetterstrom, and Richard Filipowski. The juxtaposition of vintage and new in such harmonious and beautiful settings reinforced the enduring character of all the selected pieces.

These events demonstrated that Duò-Meyer’s work belongs at top American venues. And with sales of multiple “Figures” at “Design Miami/Basel” and multiple “Monumentals” at “FOG Art+Design”, both times to established collectors of contemporary art, the future stateside for Sonja Duò-Meyer is bright.

Larry Weinberg has been operating Weinberg Modern in the New York Design Center for the past six years. In addition to curating an ever-changing collection of modernist design and art, he writes regularly on design topics for “Interior Design Magazine” and “Modern Magazine”.

Weinberg is a graduate of Amherst College and an alumnus of the Hagley Program in the History of Technology, University of Delaware. He has studied and worked at numerous museums, including Historic Deerfield, Strawberry Banke, and the Brooklyn Museum. In 1994, he co-founded the Lin-Weinberg Gallery, which became one of New York City’s premiere showcases of vintage modernist furniture. Lin-Weinberg participated annually in Sanford Smith’s Modernism show, and it hosted a number of design exhibitions. In December 2009, the Museum of the City of New York exhibited 50 items from Lin-Weinberg’s collection of mid-century American design.