

Receivers and Transmitters: Michelle Segre's Recent Sculpture

by John Yeo on March 2, 2014



Installation view, "Michelle Segre: Symptoms of Escape Velocity" at Derek Eller Gallery (all images courtesy Derek Eller Gallery)

In Michelle Segre's sculpture "Self-Reflexive Narcissistic Supernova" (2013), a mushroom cap—made of wax and the feet in charcoal—lies on its side in a provocative position evoking a horn, ear, and vagina—a form that receives and/or transmits.

Held erect by metal pipe in the shape of an inverted L, the mushroom's fleshy, ridged underside faces out, with the smaller section of the L forming a large open hole, apparently left by the removal of the stem. On the other side of the cap, lines of brightly colored yarn, from which drying mushrooms hang from strands of brightly colored yarn, which extend to a large oval wire structure enclosing clusters of smaller ovals.

Colored yarn has been wound between the larger oval's circumference and the circumferences of the smaller, interior ovals, inside of which various objects have been suspended, including an irregular sheet of yellow paper and a wadded-up, pale green plastic bag.

Taken together, the yarn and wire become a fine drawing in space, which is connected to a disc-like, three-dimensional form (the mushroom cap). At the same time, the open vacuoles suggests of the yarn-bound wire oval suggest a cellular structure that will evolve into a mushroom, with the drying mushrooms as miniature iterations of the larger one. Finally, through her use of yarn, thread, metal piping, wax, modeling clay, and dried mushrooms, Segre breaks down the distinctions separating materials into such categories as "industrial" and "domestic."

Because of the way it is used, each material feels absolutely necessary to "Self-Reflexive Narcissistic Supernova"—a very clear indication of Segre's deft marriage of the formal and the imaginative, which happens rarely these days.

In "Self-Reflexive Narcissistic Supernova" and the other sculptures in her current exhibition, *Symptoms of Escape Velocity*, at Derek Eller (February 15–March 15, 2014), Segre invites viewers to speculate upon, as well as tease out, the various open-ended narratives she has adroitly folded into her work.



Michelle Segre, "Birth to Crumb" (2012)

At one point, I imagined that Segre's assemblages were the work of a genius critic drawing about the sculptures of David Hare and Theodore Roszak. There are also allusions to Yves Klein and his evocation of deep blue; to the 16th-century English Paracelsist and Qabalist, Robert Fludd, and his diagram of the mind; to Nancy Graves's interest in organic form and Sol Lewitt's investigation of the cube.

Perhaps because of the allusion to Fludd, who, as a Paracelsist physician, believed in homeopathy, I found myself thinking about Emory Wigdorn's wondrous healing machine, which is in the collection of John Michael Kohler Art Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Segre's sculptures send one's mind in many directions, even as their many discrete parts compel one's attention to constantly shift and refocus.



Michelle Segre, "Spaghetti Love" (2014)

Some of these associations and connections can be found in an installation, "Spaghetti Love" (2014), mounted on the wall, which the artist has painted red, of drawings and Xeroxed sketchbook pages. Looking at her intricate, organic line drawings—sketches for possible sculptures—I got the feeling that Segre had absorbed the work of American painters such as Charles Seliger and Jerome Kamrowski, as well the previously mentioned sculptors, Hare and Roszak, who are associated with Surrealism. Other sources seem to be science-fiction movies and television programs, along with molecular biology and crystallography. On one page of her sketchbook, a list begins each line with the word "transmissions," and on a different page, another list begins each line with the word "ancestors."



Michelle Segre, "Spaghetti Love" (detail) (2014)

Despite the wide net Segre has cast, and distinct points of reference she makes in her drawings and sculptures, the work does not come across as being cluttered or pedantic, much less burdened. If anything, through her unlikely combinations of organic, industrial, and domestic materials, she has absorbed and transformed her sources and affections into something all her own. Like the mushroom, her work seems to have grown out of dead matter and organic material, history and everyday life.

Segre has quietly but forcefully staked out a territory that pushes both hard and smartly against the thing as thing, the literal and rational approach that has been central to postwar American sculpture. Her interest in sculpture as a discrete object capable of transmitting and receiving occult information seems genuine. She wants her work to be totemic. The kinship she exerts with artists as diverse as Nancy Graves, Sol Lewitt, and Hare isn't about lineage, but about reverence and community.

Segre's use of mushrooms and slices of whole wheat bread—some pieces of which have been painted blue—underscores her belief that knowledge can be gained through shamanism, through achieving an altered state of consciousness where one can communicate with all kinds of spirits. Seen in this light, her reference to Fludd's diagram of the mind fits with her interest in Surrealist impulses and forms, organic matter and totemic objects.



Michelle Segre, "Powers of Tenuous" (2014)

In "Powers of Tenuous" (2014), which is perhaps the simplest and most austere sculpture in the exhibition, Segre suspends pieces of reflective material in an open cube made of wire rods. The cube is suspended within the circumference of two circles made of bent rod. Lengths of wire are attached to each circle's edge and the cube's wire shell. The circles and the cube, in turn, are mounted on a rudimentary tripod made of three overlapping planks.

Formally speaking, "Powers of Tenuous" is a sculpture made from different kinds of lines. Meanwhile, flat pieces of reflective material, attached to wires hanging from the top of the cube, slowly turn, interrupting and shifting our

perception of the cube, disrupting the order. The simultaneity of order and disruption, organic and inorganic, growth and decay, seen central to Segre's motivation. Together, with the marriage of the formal and the imaginative, what distinguishes her art from that of her peers is the state of ecstasy she directs us toward. For Segre, the world can be magical, mysterious and even surprising—she hasn't lost her sense of wonderment.