Review: In the Nasher's 'Return to Earth,' 20th-century masters undertake the third dimension

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DALLAS In the lobby of the Nasher Sculpture Center is a 6-foot-tall ceramic sculpture by Joan Miró, *Déesse (Goddess)*, from 1963 that is a precursor to the large Miró outside the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth.

Both have a tortoise shell in their midsection, a symbol of fertility; stubby yet welcoming arms; and a beaklike protuberance from their heads.

Goddess pre-dates *Woman Addressing the Public: Project for a Monument* by almost two decades. *Goddess* is made of clay;*Woman* is bronze and twice the size. But *Goddess* is not a study for something larger or meant to be cast in a more durable material. They are both gatekeepers: *Woman* for a repository of sublime artwork of millennia, *Goddess* for an exhibition of humble clay pieces that cover a scant 20 years by some of the 20th century's greatest avant-garde artists.

“Return to Earth: Ceramic Sculpture of Fontana, Melotti, Miró, Noguchi, and Picasso, 1943-1963” contains more than 70 works created during the post-World War II years, from 1943 to 1963. Responding to the upheaval the artists had witnessed and personally experienced during the war, they found a great release of pent-up emotion when they turned to working in clay.

It was a readily available, inexpensive material, and ceramic items were considered by many to be inconsequential — more closely akin to craft than sculpture. There was a freedom of intent when working in clay. The artists could be experimental, and they found a therapeutic release in handling the material.

“I have to confess that the war upset me very much,” said one of the exhibition’s Italian artists, Fausto Melotti. “You can’t even think about making abstract art when there’s something inside your soul that I’m not saying leads you toward desperation but toward figures of desperation.”

His collection of boxed tragedies he called his Little Theaters are quite bleak, but none is as emotionally overwrought as *Cat Dog (Gatto cane)*, an animal in tremendous, muted pain.

These are tragic figures and desolate images, to be sure. But there is also whimsy and humor and a beseeching emotional embrace. There is an undeniable universal humanity to the pieces.

Plus, they are new to the eye. Many of them, almost half, belong to private collections and have never been exhibited. Still others reside in small museums or institutions that rarely exhibit them.*Goddess* is the centerpiece of a sculpture garden in France, and this is the first time her passport has ever been stamped.

Clay often plays ugly stepsister to the Cinderella bronzes from the same period. These works are given scant attention; massed at the Nasher in “Return to Earth,” it seems a hideous oversight.

The exhibition was organized by the Nasher’s chief curator, Jed Morse, and it is possibly the best exhibit the center has ever mounted. It brings unknown works by well-known artists in a medium that is worth the gallery space and the time of attention.

What a surprise it is to see the ceramic works of Lucio Fontana, known for his eviscerated canvases. The same artist who slashes a single rip on a two-dimensional piece to make the viewer imagine the physicality of cutting also makes roiling wall sculptures that look animated. The movement is created by a frenzy of glazes, golds and silvers in the recesses so they fight the darker colors on top for supremacy. Arms and legs writhe in *Battaglia (Battle)*, and the flowing robes and emphatic gestures of *Harlequin (Arlecchino)* make all of Fontana’s pieces look like stills from a video. He was intent on capturing the fourth dimension, that of time, and he certainly seems to have done that.

There are the more familiar works by Pablo Picasso, and fortunately, Morse does not overemphasize his contribution or let it overshadow the work of Isamu Noguchi and Miró.

Picasso’s transmogrification of vases, slicing off necks and reattaching them to form legs and heads, instantly makes a vase a bird in *Condor*. He stuffs a vase with ceramic flowers or cuts a huge mouth in the belly of a vase and glazes the pot to resemble a head. They were groundbreaking for their out-of-the-pot thinking.

But we’ve seen these on display before. What we haven’t seen is the larger, center-stage work of Noguchi and Miró. Morse gives these two artists the bulk of the exhibition’s real estate.

Noguchi brings the whimsy in little pieces such as *The Policeman,* a ceramic box with moving parts such as a billy club that hangs from a hook, and *Big Boy*, a baby lost in a voluminous kimono with only his little face peeking through the folds.

His spectacular ceiling-to-floor hanging *Even the Centipede*, with 11 parts strapped together by hemp cord, is sweetly charming and only conjures the image of the repulsive insect by its multi-unit configuration.

The delight of discovery is in the Mirós. He paints his signature celestial bursts and unspooling lines on ceramic vases as a starter exercise in the early ’40s and is soon retrieving cast-off shards from the damaged pile to make plaques.

Over time, he begins to make his own bodies with appendages, and they take on sculptural forms. By the late ’50s, he takes ceramics full circle, compressing lumps of clay back into rock formations and painting them with little faces.

He seems to have assimilated all that clay can do, from little lumps to monumental sculptures such as the 8-foot-tall pair *Man and Woman*, and the gallery greeter, *Goddess*.

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