



Review: Anna-Bella Papp's sculptural objects at the Nasher



STAR-TELEGRAM / RON T. ENNIS

Sightings: Anna-Bella Papp

- Through Jan. 18
- Nasher Sculpture Center, 2001 Flora St., Dallas
- \$5-\$10, children under 12 free
- 214-242-5100, www.nashersculpturecenter.org

By Gaile Robinson

DALLAS It is odd how a common material presented in an unusual but not unremarkable way can look so completely new. Such was the case in viewing the sculptural works of Anna-Bella Papp at the Nasher Sculpture Center. Her exhibition, "Sightings: Anna-Bella Papp," opened over the weekend in Dallas.

This is a confession — an embarrassing one. But when looking at Papp's slabs of unfired clay laid out on the most minimal white tables, I was befuddled.

Was it one thing? An installation? Or were these different things that just this once were presented on tables? Were they always presented on tables and never on walls? Were they always presented in the same order with the same neighbor? Were the unfired slabs always created in this size?

The very young and very patient 26-year-old Romanian woman explained that they are always presented on tables — not on walls — and that the number changes depending on the space, and they are always about 12-by-12 inches but tend toward rectangles rather than squares. As she works on them, they insist on a certain dimension.

It was soon apparent that these blocks on tables were individual sculptures and that the tables were the walls of her gallery. Ah. The clouds of confusion dissipated.

This is Papp's first solo museum exhibition, and her first exhibit in the U.S. Jed Morse, the Nasher's chief curator, has written the first museum publication on her work. This is the moment that Papp, who lives in Rome, becomes a full-fledged international artist, and this exhibit is the launchpad for even larger solo museum shows, a career trajectory most artists hope to obtain by middle age.

Papp understands the strength of subtlety. She uses a variety of clays — individually, they would all be described as gray. In a room with good natural light, the range of grays moves from almost white to yellow to taupe and to a mottled blue gray. One slab is composed of all the clays squished together, and it looks garish in the middle of all the monochromes. None of her pieces is fired, so they all have a dusty matte surface like that of powder makeup.

The slabs have the size and visual weight of books, and they impart a similar suggestion of sharing an experience.

She uses tools to cut and sculpt, but the surfaces are obviously hand wrought, caressed into compliance. As they dry, they tend to warp a bit, curling up on the edges so they cast a bit of shadow on the table. All of the slight changes that happen during drying give each piece more individuality, and they become even more separate from the others.

They are extremely simple, or intricate. Their attraction is obvious, or slow to catch on. In their simplicity, they entice further inspection. After first being such a mystery, the unveiling is delightful.

The slabs do not slowly morph from one to the next; it is impossible to find two that might have gestated at the same time. Papp says this is on purpose: "I like to surprise myself."

And should something just not work, she says, it's not a loss. The clay is simply folded back into itself and she tries again.

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