



Sightings: Anna-Bella Papp
 Nasher Sculpture Center
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Nashersculpturecenter.org

DALLAS—On the south side of the Nasher Sculpture Center, facing Flora Street, an intimate gallery serves as temporary host to Sightings: Anna-Bella Papp, the first solo museum exhibition of this Romanian-born artist who lives and works in Rome. The sixteen small-scale, table-mounted sculptures in unfired clay clearly illustrate an inspiring reflection on the ancient city. The pieces at first glance resemble stone tablets, carvings, and mosaics from antiquity, while also referencing 20th-century minimalist sculpture and architectural models.

Exhibited as slabs on tabletops, like specimens under investigation in a lab, they are intended for viewing in the round, as is usual with pedestal sculptures. In this case though, Papp's vision offers a multivalent experience, because the pieces change as the viewer observes them from different angles. Viewed from above, they may appear to represent a pyramid or ziggurat, as in *And Always Leave Images Behind* (2014); or conversely, as a geometric

bas-relief when, viewed from the side. Here, the textured surface of the pyramidal shape contrasts with the smooth base of clay on which it sits. What would be the tip of the pyramid appears to have been sliced off and enveloped by the background, while the sides are truncated by the actual borderline of the clay.

These design choices elevate the tension that revolves around each piece in the show and make it clear from the beginning that no resolution as to a total meaning is possible—just the sheer enjoyment of an intellectual and perceptual puzzle. At one moment the pieces express an interest in the notion of ruins, and the next one finds a hint of postmodern indeterminacy. In the 19th century, ruins were perceived by artists and writers as an expression of the Romantic sensibility, itself a reaction to some of the painful events of the Enlightenment that preceded it. Papp seeks to take this aesthetic into the complexity of our current image- and information-based experience with more than a touch of thematic and visual multiplicity.

The small-scale, careful, exquisite handling and carving of the material add to the mystery that emanates from the pieces. In *Eclipse* (2012), the scale transforms from the tabletop into the

suggestion of celestial events involving the earth, sun, and moon. On a flat rectangular slab sits an elevated crescent shape, hence the eclipse of the title, but when viewed obliquely it resembles a sculpture garden or a site plan with one of Richard Serra's titled arcs in steel. Papp herself is reluctant to reveal sources and is usually delighted to discover her work has been compared to other famous artworks that she was completely unaware of. In the exhibition essay, she is quoted as saying "it may well be a kind of irrational joy I feel when compared to historically significant art" after being compared to Masaccio, Giacometti, and Michael Heizer.

Comparisons and sources aside, Anna-Bella Papp has seized on an original aesthetic vision that does credit to the Nasher curatorial staff for choosing it for this inaugural exhibition. She manages to alter the archaic context of what the Greeks called *ousia* (substance, essence) by imposing the contemporary, each melded together.

—JOHN ZOTOS
John Zotos is a Dallas-based writer.