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De Staebler sculptures

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The work of Bay Area sculptor Stephen De Staebler never gets topical, yet it always feels up to the minute. Anyone who knows his art will enjoy the airy presentation it receives at Dolby Chadwick.

As he has done for many years, De Staebler continues to play variations on the fractured monument: upright assemblages of ceramic components that may resemble shards of architectural sculpture or other building fragments, or read as granules of abstraction.

During the Bush II years, De Staebler's tumbledown structures evoked the ruin visited on Mesopotamian antiquity by imperialism, neocon style and a concomitant moral crumbling of the American body politic.

Today, a piece such as "Column With Split Torso" (2009), with its illusionary mingling of body parts and stone fragments, more immediately conjures mental images of Haitian earthquake victims. The apparent instability of De Staebler's armature anchored sculptures always threatens to awaken tamped-down memories of temblors we have experienced ourselves.

De Staebler works on a level of visceral intuition that connects with our concern for our own bodily integrity and mortality. He can go deep into artistic allusion, as when he attaches vestigial wings to a figure, or create uncomfortable immediacy by baiting our reflexive impulse of seeing a human figure as mirroring us.

His mastery shows not only in technical control over his ceramic medium but also in the fact that his work is instantly recognizable though he appears never to repeat himself.

Stephen De Staebler: New Work: Sculpture. Through Feb. 27. Dolby Chadwick Gallery, 210 Post St., S.F. (415) 956-3560. www.dolbychadwickgallery.com.