

San Francisco Chronicle

Sculptor Stephen De Staebler Grew As Works Decayed

By Kenneth Baker

Thursday, January 19, 2012

The title "Matter + Spirit: The Sculpture of Stephen De Staebler" sounds like conventional museum curator's lingo. But it fits very well the two-room exhibition at the de Young Museum that it names.

The first gallery, with its comparatively low ceiling and artificial light, stresses the materiality of De Staebler's art. The second, with daylight showering from high above, reveals a skyward thrust in many of De Staebler's vertical sculptures that might go unnoticed and unfelt in a more confined setting.

Three De Staebler bronzes greet the visitor at the show's entrance, their characteristically shuffled aspects of antiquity and modernity warning of temporal dislocations to follow. Beyond them, just 50-odd objects by De Staebler (1933-2011), some quite small, make up the survey, far from exhaustive but amply justifying a high estimation of his work and its historical importance.

Early in his career, De Staebler found himself identified as one of several Bay Area practitioners making a case for ceramics as a medium of serious artistic ambition, rather than of "mere" craft. Long after that controversy subsided, De Staebler continued working with clay because it served his creative needs, and eventually it led him to casting sculpture in bronze.

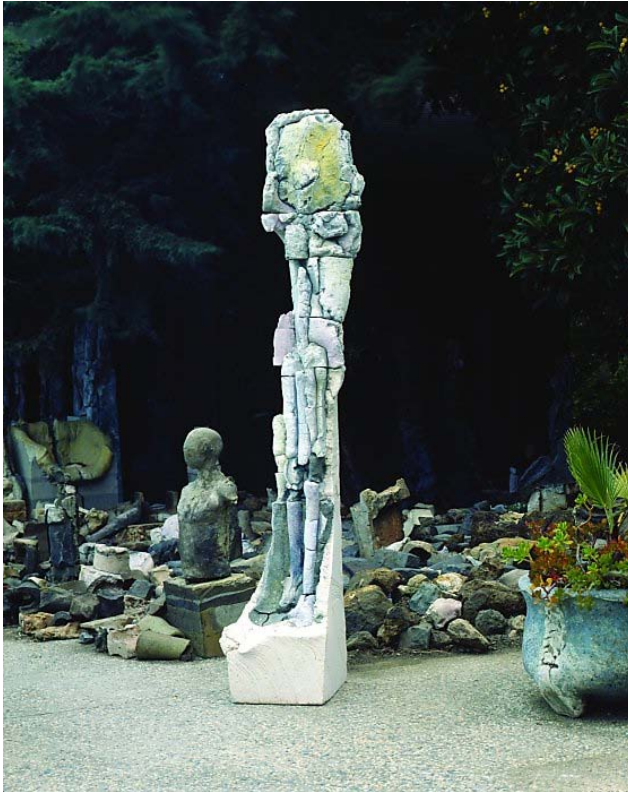
Some of De Staebler's last and most complex bronzes, such as "Figure With Crown" (2011) appear in an exhibition at Dolby Chadwick - pieces he made by jumbling fragments or discards from earlier work.



"Blue Face With White Stripe"
porcelain & pigmented stoneware

The first room at the de Young samples objects that hug the wall or floor: an array of "heads" or "masks" from the artist's estate that suggest mummified caricatures, a mass of ground-level slabs that waver in scale, evoking a relief map, a burial mound and the insinuation of a giant torso.

Long before ecological awareness went global, De Staebler wanted viewers of his work to keep in mind the terrestrial nature of his medium. The connections he makes between



“Standing Figure with Yellow Aura” (1985)
pigmented stoneware with surface oxides

the human form and the stuff of earth have only grown more poignant and immediate with time.

The main streams of late 20th century sculpture seemed to sideline De Staebler in an important sense: They deconstructed representation and the human figure, centering meaning on the viewer's embodied experience rather than on imagery of the body.

The de Young installation permits sidelong views in adjacent rooms of very different sorts of sculpture - David Smith's "Zig V" (1961) and Mark di Suvero's "Pre-Columbian" (1965) - as reminders of roads not taken by De Staebler.

De Staebler never lost faith in our reflexive identification with even the merest fragments of bodily form. But he also understood that modern life and history had brought too many

dislocations - psychological, spiritual, social - for the human form rendered literally to appear anything but sentimental or nostalgic.

He exploited the tendencies of his ceramic media to crack and shatter, imposing them deliberately on his work's form.

Sculptures such as "Standing Figure With Yellow Aura" (1985) resulted, an image so fractured that in circulating it we constantly watch its realism crumble and reassemble it, and thus discover in ourselves the impulse to do so. In "Figure With Lost Torso" (2008), De Staebler took his process to the threshold of complete abstraction.

De Staebler's stature as an artist shows in his ability to keep sentimentality at bay, while flirting with vestiges of the heroic, the seductive, the commemorative and even the morbid in human imagery's artistic ancestry.

A barely descriptive sculpture such as "Figure With Orange Arm" (2009) dramatizes the essence of De Staebler's art: a balancing act. It impresses not only by its results but also because he sustained it against the background of tumultuous change that has embroiled us all.

Matter + Spirit: The Sculpture of Stephen De Staebler: Through April 22. De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, S.F. (415) 750-3600. www.deyoungmuseum.org

Stephen De Staebler: Sculpture Through Jan. 28. Dolby Chadwick Gallery, 210 Post St, S.F. (415) 956-3650 www.dolbychadwickgallery.com



"Figure with Crown" (2011)
104" x 24" x 29", Bronze