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Critic's Choice Mineo

Mizuno at Samuel Freeman: serene, whimsical, surprising

Leah Ollman, May 8, 2015.

Mineo Mizuno's work over the last dozen years or more -- tall ceramic teardrops and rounded, stone-like discs in gorgeous glazes -- has been instantly recognizable as his. To enter his show at Samuel Freeman seems, at first, to encounter another artist.

But only at first. A deeply satisfying experience, the show exemplifies how constancy within change is a notion equally at the center of both Mizuno's aesthetic and practice.

The initial shock comes from a radical shift in surface appearance. Gone is the rich, thick gloss of the earlier work and its deeply saturated colors. The new sculptures, tall, vase-like vessels, are unglazed porcelain, bone-white with a fine-grained, matte texture. Their purity of tone offsets the exuberant irreverence of their forms. Most have a bulbous body and high, conical neck, but within that general schema, Mizuno revels in spontaneous, spirited play.

Keeping visible the shallow, encircling striations made in the wheel-driven process lends the work a rawness that Mizuno embraces further through uneven polka-dot smudges and punctures, and quick, dashing scrapes that leave crusty ridges around their edges. Rims are ruffled and delicately crisp, thinned to translucency. They evoke leaves, petals, fabric and lace collars.

No. 21 in the "FMR Series" (for the Fort Mountain Ranch in Northern California, where the works were made) has a slash in its side like the torn canvas of a Lucio Fontana and an ear-like handle that brings to mind the bodily humor of Kathy Butterly's sculpture.

The piece sits on a base of curls resembling extruded frosting, an ornamental flourish gone casual and comical. Like all the vases, it rests on a waist-high trunk of oak that has been shorn of its bark, so its own smooth, naked skin resonates with the luminous, undressed porcelain. The combination makes for a gorgeous installation and sets the sculptures within the context of nature's idiosyncratic elegance.

That distilled beauty is, to a large extent, the focus of the other set of surprising works here: six videos shot with a fixed camera, reduced from hours of footage down to 26 minutes or less. Mizuno, born in Japan, long a resident of L.A., and now living in New York, has never ventured into video before, but some of his earlier sculptures incorporating water or growing sheathes of moss have attained a similar sort of meditative stillness, within forms that move and change.

Mizuno frames a section of a waterfall in Japan, a pond and a beach in California, New York's East River, and watches what transpires. Moonlight wavers in reflection. Barges stripe past. Pine needles, leaves and twigs float upon glassy water, scrolling down screen. All is rhythm, pattern, continuous motion. The pace penetrates. The aesthetic (or is it an ethic?) of attention restores.

