Clifford Rainey
Habatat Galleries
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The figure for Clifford Rainey is like a blank canvas, a format into which he injects all manner of ideas. His glass sculptures, set on wooden tables, revisit his 1980s preoccupation with St. Sebastian, adding new layers of content. The earlier glass torsos made reference to the martyrdom of the Irish in Rainey's native Belfast. These rather fetishistic recent forms grew our of an experience he had in Napa Valley, California where he has lived, while teaching at California College of Arts and Crafts, since 1991.

A close friend of his, a young woman of 34 died of breast cancer as Rainey was beginning to think about work for this show. "She thought she had beaten it, but it came back with a vengeance," said Rainey. "It was devastating and I needed to do something with it." By making St. Sebastian a female torso this time, then slicing away at her body, her breasts and her psyche in various sculptures, Rainey began conveying the pain of the disease. A few of the figures pierced with rusty nails recall both religious martyrs and the traditional African art practice of healing by inflicting a sculpture or fetish with a sign for the human problem.

The torsos are also headless and armless, the bodies twisted in an idealized S-curve pose, connecting to classical Greek goddess sculptures, which had physiognomies admired for their beauty. Rainey achieves a high level of formal beauty with these torsos by manipulating color and light, losing the innate gorgeousness of glass to overcome any kind of insistent horror of the mutilation. While this could diminish the draw, in this instance it doesn't. The majority of the pieces convey women, not as victims, but as heroic in their struggle. The body is a shell, a cast cocoon and a weight encasing, even encumbering the soul. The fact that the 20 sculptures are made from the same two molds generalizes the figure, making it stand for women, not a specific person – emphasizing the numbers of women, one in seven, who will die from breast cancer every year.

The glass is colored blood red or a deep cobalt blue that is the intense hue of a tropical sky or earthy amber. Or it is so vaporously clear you can sense the spirit inside. For Rainey the color makes an important connection to nature. A conservationist who describes the earth as his heaven, he used the color references and the fact that glass is also a natural material to broach the cycle of returning to the earth, being of the earth.

Reinforcing this are the river stones Rainey carefully selected and placed in the support struts of the tables on which the sculptures sit. Like the rusty pipe armatures that appear to support the torsos from the back, and the table which is a traditional sculptor's surface, the stones were used by artists as counterweights to stabilize the tables when the clay they were sculpting got too heavy.

By using these materials, Rainey is connecting to the long history of craft that informs his art. But he is also balancing the wholeness of the rock with the fragmentary nature of the glass, the eons of geological time with the minutes and years of human existence, evoking with both a thought of the vulnerability of people to time and these natural forces. Yet, he also casts rocks from other rocks and sets twin figures together, bringing up the mimetic nature of reproduction and genetic issues, an

aspect of enduring life.

These Rainey sculptures are loaded with meaning and conviction, layered adroitly to avoid any blatant moralizing. The sense of the mass of inflicted women is crucial, though the Habatat installation didn’t emphasize the repetition. Add to the content the skill with which Rainey sculpts the figure, his rough assemblage of the body parts and careful juxtaposition of materials, and this all gives the sculptures an emotional intensity that is rare in glass and makes them very satisfying sculptures.

Marsha Miro