

VISUAL ARTS & ARCHITECTURE: Smallest blocks of life inspire sculptor's forms

By Debra Wolf
For the Journal-Constitution
Published on: 12/30/2007

REVIEW

"Annette Gates: Symbiosis"
Through Jan. 12. 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-
Fridays, noon-5 p.m. Saturdays. Prices:
\$3,200-\$8,000. Kiang Gallery, 1011-A Marietta
St., Atlanta. 404-892-5477; www.kiang-gallery.com.

Bottom line: Small sculptures are fanciful, symbolic and exquisitely detailed.



Photo Walker Montgomery

Detail from 'Daughter Colony'

How would a sculptor reinterpret life at its source?

Annette Gates presents her version of cellular activity in "Symbiosis," a gorgeous, meditative display of wall sculptures on view at Kiang Gallery.

Sized to fit in your hand, Gates' quirky creations are vaguely spherical, cylindrical or conical. They appear dotted and carved, coiled and spiked. The artist bases her forms on a continuing study of naturally occurring single-cell structures — seeds and stamens (called diatoms), as well as their aquatic counterparts (called radiolaria).

Captivated by their metaphorical aspects and their beauty, Gates uses these organisms to depict symbiotic relationships, addressing what is seen and unseen in social as well as biological systems. "Differentia," for example, offers 20 porcelains neatly displayed like a treasure trove of creatures and objects. Some resemble marine protozoa. Others suggest archaeological finds — bones, vessels, totems.

Gates groups her works into colonies, simulating both cellular and human behavior. Sculptures appear to cohabit — reaching, emerging and interacting. Cloth (handed down from mother to daughter) is used in fashioning molds, reinforcing the notion of community or family, as Gates infuses each small work with layers of personal, cultural and genetic memory.

"Daughter Colony" is surely the *pièce de résistance*. Each of its 30 milky porcelains is minutely detailed and seemingly etched, imprinted, beaded or ruffled, as if by fossilization. Gates achieves this effect with a unique process that combines fabric, needlework and tape to create molds for her slip clay. Ultimately subjected to high-temperature firing, fibers are burned away, leaving delicate and translucent sculptures that are, simply put, breathtaking.

THE ARTIST'S PROCESS

An unusual slip-cast porcelain process distinguishes Annette Gates' remarkably detailed sculptures.

Gates creates her molds through sewing, crocheting, knitting and embroidery, combining remnants of worn garments (from family members) with new bits of cloth or stitching. She stuffs each fabric form with beads or rice for volume, then reinforces the form's exterior with tape and other materials until it is rigid. Gates then empties the stuffing, fills the structure with slip-cast clay, allows it to sit long enough to be absorbed (creating a skin-like layer), then pours it out.

Gates fires her work at high temperature, twice. The resulting sculpture is extraordinarily delicate, with soft, textural elements that come from fibers, knots, folds and ultra-fine stitches.

Each small piece is unique, since the fabric burns away, leaving only a shell of porcelain. Likening what she creates to fossils, Gates says "it's like recording the memory of a short-lived organism."