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The shape is the thing at Saratoga Arts' exhibit

Three-person show pulls up just short of absolute abstract

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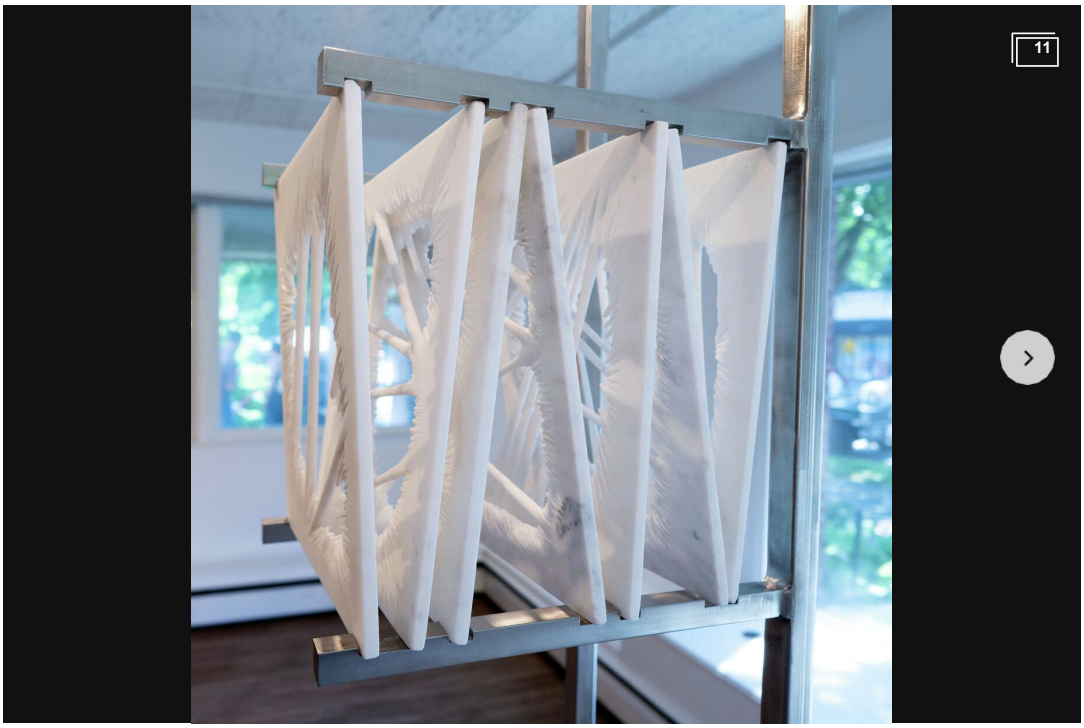

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Caroline Ramersdorfer, Inner View_Floating, 2017. Marble, stainless steel. Photo William Jaeger

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We all know about totally abstract sculpture—objects that are full of themselves, their surfaces, their materiality, their shape. The new three- person show "Progressions" at Saratoga Arts presents work that pulls up just short of absolute abstraction, so there is a wavering, welcome dance of suggestion.

You might not agree, but for me the shapes here have hints of something we can get a whiff of without always knowing quite why. The two accomplished sculptors in the main galleries, Caroline Ramersdorfer and Mia Westerlund Roosen, are experts at making more of their materials than is obviously there.

Rambersdorfer's marble objects certainly rely on the beauty of gossamer stone, with some slabs stacked and others given crystalline form like findings from outer space. By contrast, Roosen's felt and resin forms curl, layer, and intertwine in ways that imply a botanical logic, as if pulled from very deep waters.

This is actually a rather otherworldly show, with finished sculptures alongside preliminary models and sketches on paper. The third artist, post- war sculptor Dorothy Dehner, acts as spiritual support, with a few small but important works on paper down a hallway.

The pleasure in "Progressions" starts with how these 3-D works—made of all kinds of materials from marble and wood to felt, plaster, and ceramic
—look good. It expands the old Duke Ellington adage: if it sounds good, it is good. Their works draw you in and around, and then around again, inviting spatial analysis, fitting forms and deviations into comprehension. This isn't about meaning or deciphering content and symbolism, and there is no personal angst. The show is about shapes that feel like they are right, and that hide an ambiguous complicity with the viewer.

Take the complex, towering "Carmelite II" by Roosen. It stands not like a figure, but as some kind of plant form, its flattened tendrils reaching with a surge of arms in bi-symmetrical waves. It doesn't give away its underlying nature of felt hardened with resin—it could easily have been a large sheet of clay, bent and cut and fired. If it feels like it was once alive, it is also in an inevitable stasis, a still frame for the viewer.

All of Roosen's work wrangles an energetic outward force with rectitude and resolution, so the loose ends and angles and long, narrow forms end up contained. This might sound contradictory, but it makes the objects convincing. Roosen's small ceramic studies are easily expanded in your head to fit the finished effects of the larger works.

Some of Roosen's sculptures over the years have been designed for larger, outdoor spaces, where scale and the environment contribute. (One of her works will greet you from the gardens just outside the doors to the building.) And so it is with Ramersdorfer's works, which are known for their public settings.

Everything in Ramersdorfer's half of the gallery is cool verging on cold in its cosmic vision. The hard angles, marble resistance, and stainless steel supports put the viewer at a distance. They are lifeless by design but imply logic. There are geometric shapes within shapes, or layers of similar forms mounted in rectangular steel frames that make spectral sandwiches. There are fewer complexities than you might prefer, but they have a flashy finish.

The many preparatory drawings here give a sense of formal process and add a human sheen to the works. Two studies even include slightly three- dimensional constructions, as if the drawings are coming to life on the page, an engaging novelty.

The third artist in this show feels like a peripheral add-on, but Dorothy Dehner has regional fame for her sculptures from the 1950s and 60s. Here we have works on paper from 1953 and 1954, just before her breakthroughs in sculpture, that show a developing vocabulary of geometry and form that comfortably presages the other works on view.