



## New York

### Roberley Bell

Black & White Gallery

"Dressing," Roberley Bell's recent show, consisted of four deliberately artificial works in the concrete yard at Black & White, one of more than 40 galleries now active in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The once ethnic neighborhood is now a site of bistros and cafés, but an urban grittiness remains in the air, and in a way, Bell's work is suited to the industrial edge of the area. Her small garden posits a moment's breath, a bit of relief from the urban environment in which it was shown; but her topiary urns—cornucopias, really—stress the vulnerability of nature in this outdoor setting at the back of the gallery, whose tall concrete walls disallow any extended view that isn't directed upward. Her point is well made—so much of the contemporary experience of nature is ersatz that it makes sense to build on an artificial world, one that comments on our desire for natural beauty even as it compli-

**Above: Roberley Bell, *Dressing*, 2004. Steel frames, Astroturf, fiber cement, artificial flowers, oil cloth, paint, and foam, detail of installation. Right: Mia Westerlund Roosen, *Althea*, 2002. Concrete, 84.5 x 27 x 12 in.**

cates our relation to that desire. Bell suggests, with her curving organic forms and plastic flowers, that the experience of beauty is an appropriation rather than the genuine article and that this theft of the real carries more weight than the actual site of a magnificent view.

The sculptures themselves are not unfriendly, only manmade. The two large topiary urns are built with steel frames that create a kind of cornucopia or hoop skirt covered with sewn Astroturf and artificial flowers. On the back edge of the urn are cushions made of flowered cloth and foam, while the front of the structure opens out onto a spill of actual grass decorated with pink plastic flowers. Bell, who conceived of "Dressing" as a site-specific

installation, was taken with the view from the sculpture court and included in both pieces a small mirror that would reflect the sky. The two smaller urns, called "bubbles" by the artist, consist of fiber cement on a steel frame. They are composed of a doughnut-shaped base from which a rounded tower rises, their tops completed by a circlet of plastic flowers and, again, a mirror reflecting the sky. The effect of the four-work grouping is charming in its refusal to give up on the consequences of nature, even if those consequences are experienced at a remove from the real thing.

Bell's art is representative of a kind of sculpture, often seen in the contemporary art world, that is concerned with the eccentric, even disturbing mixture of natural and feigned imagery, in which the artificial is the basis of what might be considered a sincere response to the outside world. In a way, then, her site-specific project, with its combination of organic and plastic, supports an idyllic, idealizing treatment of

flowers and sky. Her sculptures resonate with the human wish to keep alive a sensitivity to the world—indeed, she includes seating for our comfort as we interact with her iconic structures, which maintain a dialogue with a small, but actual, patch of grass. The sky, really the only available view of nature in the courtyard, is captured for our pleasure by Bell's mirrors, which reflect what lies above them. Yet it should be remembered that the mirrors themselves are conveyors of artifice, underscoring what is reflected on the glass surface. Bell very wittily plays off these distinctions, intent on emphasizing the complex manner with which we embrace the otherness of nature. Her creations may be plastic, but they reference organic form as well as the female body; flowers are central to her image-making here. Her humorous creations seem light-hearted enough, yet they carry the bold message that art and nature are not easily separated, that sometimes the artificial is based on praise of the real.

—Jonathan Goodman