

Martha Russo: Creating *nomos*

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It is not surprising to learn that Colorado sculptor Martha Russo was an Olympic-caliber athlete, for her work displays qualities from that earlier life: a big physicality, an energetic restlessness, and a willingness to defy certain challenges off-putting to ordinary mortals (such as gravity, the boredom of repetitive practices, and sheer exhaustion) in pursuit of her vision.

Seeing *nomos*--a sixteen-foot long, eight-foot tall installation that curves around the corner of its gallery wall--gives the viewer pause. The piece, most recently shown at Denver's Carson Gallery in the summer of 2003, is striking, and often renders viewers temporarily speechless: People entering the gallery stop in their tracks to take it in. Viewed from a distance, *nomos* is surprisingly organic, and almost soft looking. Shimmering with life, it suggests the ocean, like a delicately-tinted anemone quivering underwater. A step closer and it is a huge sea urchin that has somehow unfurled itself on the wall.

As though tugged by a tide, viewers step forward to witness how the piece is made up of thousands of organically shaped porcelain tubes. Once physically surrounded by *nomos*, the viewer's initial impression of neutral softness changes, and the complicated individual nature of the porcelain tubes becomes clear: Some reach out straight like the inquisitive trunks of elephants, nearly two feet long; some are bent, curving in toward the wall; some appear tangled, like the loops of a terrycloth towel. From a distance, *nomos* has the light, silvery-blond shades of bleached driftwood, but close up a more dramatic, even disconcerting range of colors is visible in the mouths of these tubes, from pale blues and greens to rich browns and blood reds.

Viewing *nomos* and the remarkable effort of its assembly (all of the porcelain tubes—together weighing about 4,000 pounds--have been laboriously inserted into a Masonite pegboard backed with Styrofoam and covered with a stretchy Japanese paper and clay pigment) it is impossible to avoid the questions: Who made this piece, and why?

The title *nomos*, translated from its Greek root *to wonder, to wander*, reveals much about the work itself as well as the indirect path of its creator: Russo didn't plan to be a ceramic artist. In fact, she was a top college athlete with a future in the 1984 Olympics when a knee injury sidelined her. With time on her hands, she signed up for a Princeton ceramics class taught by Toshika Takaazu. Takaazu, who would become an influential mentor, initially had little time or sympathy for Russo, whom she called "sports-girl." Takaazu refused to let Russo take the class as a diversion ("I need artists, not athletes"). She also instructed Russo not to feel sorry for herself. Her time as an athlete would have been over soon anyway; she would be able to make art for her entire life.

The energy of the thwarted athlete was immediately apparent in Russo's early interactions with clay. "In the beginning, it was about me getting tired," Russo explains. She approached her work as an athlete inventing the rules of a new game, challenging herself to "see how many coils I could do in a ten-hour period." For Russo, ceramics was initially about "the physical act of working."

After nearly a decade of nomadic wanderings through a series of jobs teaching art in a variety of settings, Russo found herself in graduate school at University of Colorado in Boulder, Colorado. Though she loved inventing forms from clay, she often felt herself an uneasy outsider, not fluent in the language of the art world. Her husband advised her to apply what she knew from her life in the sports world: “he said, ‘trust your gut’ (which is how I played sports).”

The works that resulted are very physical in nature; in fact, they focus on the space in the body between neck and hips, in particular the “gut” and the pelvic areas, sites of digestion and reproduction. Russo, who at times appears wary of language’s power to pin down or even dominate a viewer’s perceptions, does not capitalize her titles. Her lower case titles, she points out, are more “egalitarian”—they don’t overpower her pieces, but instead provide suggestions, or “whispers” in a viewer’s mind.

Russo uses her pieces, which are familiar enough to ring a visual bell, but abstract enough to be hard to pinpoint, to capture a viewer’s curiosity and “lure them close” while they are still experiencing what she calls a “temporary suspension of adult language.” This way, she explains, they get to “linger in a sensuous state.”

With pieces such as *vagus* and *drop*, Russo challenges herself to express in clay the kind of strong feelings that simultaneously invite and resist description in language. These pieces are about intuition, and instinctive or “gut” reactions; or, as in the case of *vagus* nervous feelings that “pass through you.” The piece “two bellies” suggests the kind of wordless but compelling bond humans can form with one another; in them, one sees a link to the attenuated, reed-like forms also in *nomos*. Together these pieces suggest the physical intersection between thought and feelings: the kind of reflection that is often wordless, but powerfully felt in the body.

Like the path of Russo’s career (“follow your gut”), the installation, *nomos*, evolved over time and as a result of the artist’s willingness to be led by a series of hunches to a sense of wonder after much wandering. In the summer of 1995 before her MFA show, Russo found herself searching for direction.

Whenever she was between large projects, Russo would make porcelain tubes on which to test glazes. She would roll these tubes up with a piece of toilet paper inside to keep them hollow; one end of each tube is sharp while the other blossoms into a kind of creaturely orifice. The great subtlety in *nomos*’ shading results from Russo’s glazing process: each of the tubes has a slightly different value and hue, since they are fired in a gas-reduction kiln in which Russo varies the atmosphere each time.

That summer, she began obsessively making and stockpiling these tubes, using two tons of porcelain and maintaining a grueling ten to eleven hour schedule of tube-making and firing. She laughingly refers to this time as “Ground Hog Day art-style.” Living in the kiln shed that summer, Russo was surrounded by boxes of porcelain tubes, and felt “rich in a way,” though without a clear sense of what she would do with all her pieces. It was a period of disciplined freedom: the only rules were to work for a certain number of hours each day, for a defined period of time to see what would emerge.

Russo credits the influence of artist Eva Hesse with giving her courage and motivation to continue. “She said to never to squash a hunch,” Russo explains. Hesse’s words also reminded Russo of the happy consequence of being surprised by one’s own work as an artist. At the same time, Russo was intrigued by what she calls “the transformative power of the many,” how individual objects, once grouped together, take on a very different identity from their collected parts.

The inspiration for *nomos* came when Russo was squid-fishing with her siblings in Rhode Island; one night, she had a vision that electrified her: she saw squid, drawn by a flashlight beam, flooding the water with color and “shimmering in the glow of the phosphorescence being swirled around.” Russo understood then that she wanted to use her porcelain pieces to create for viewers a similar experience of “happy disorientation,” to envelope people with a sense of “floating mass” while suffusing their peripheral vision with texture and delicate color. Now the only obstacle that stood in her way was gravity.

Russo discovered that pegboards could allow her to create this sense of floating mass. And Eva Hesse would have been pleased to know that Russo was surprised: she couldn’t have imagined the effect of *nomos* the first time (delightfully overwhelming), or the way the piece would look from different angles (it took so long to install that she didn’t have a chance to really step back and take it in until the opening).

Though viewers are often struck by the sheer physical labor required by *nomos*, whose installation is a marathon athletic event, for Russo, each tube is a unique creation. She places each with the deliberate care of a brushstroke, as though she is “painting with porcelain.” “I savor every one,” she says, especially as the piece nears completion.

And despite its commanding scale—since it is placed two feet off the floor, even a tall person must look up to take it in, with the longest pieces placed at the top looming out over viewers’ heads—*nomos* is also striking for the intimacy of its assembly. Russo alone creates the ebb and flow of the piece, and insists on installing all of the tubes without assistance, although she does allow friends to help her take the piece down.

Like a living creature (Russo refers to *nomos* as “she”), the piece has evolved over the years and with each installation. First displayed at the University of Colorado Art Museum in 1995 for Russo’s MFA show, the piece was shown again in 1997 in the Barrick Museum in Las Vegas where it was part of the National Conference on Educators in Ceramic Arts’ invitational exhibition. In its most recent incarnation at the Carson Gallery in Denver in 2003, Russo says, the piece was much more “rich and dense”; she had increased the numbers of tubes by one third. She also used a more saturated and varied palette for the interior mouths of the pieces.

Each time Russo has installed the piece, it has taught her something, and she takes extensive notes during installation on both practical and aesthetic matters. Russo is right-handed, so she has learned to start from the top right and move downward and left in order not to get in her own way; she’s also learned to do the hardest physical work early in the day when she is fresh. In *nomos*’ next installation, she plans to “push the boundaries” on the length of the tubes and to have a larger patch of straight tubes and a dense palette of more “garish” mouths in order to “change the rhythm” of how people look at and absorb the piece.

As *nomos* continues to evolve, so do Russo's plans to take it to other venues. She intends to show it on both East and West coasts of the United States and is exploring international opportunities as well. Russo looks forward to witnessing the reactions her piece provokes in those different venues. Russo continues to hope that the spectacle of *nomos* will lure viewers close, capturing their imaginations and providing a visual experience that even the most seasoned viewer "doesn't have the word for."