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Victoria Miro

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Bettina Samson

GALERIE SULTANA



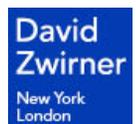
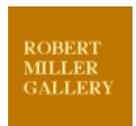
Bettina Samson, *Kink (More Honour'd in the Breach) IV*, 2015, terracotta, 17 3/4 × 16 1/4 × 13".

Facing off from opposite ends of the gallery, two small wall-mounted sculptures in Bettina Samson's recent show bookended a wide spectrum of three-dimensional works. At the entrance was the cratered, amorphous, and mottled *More Honour'd in the Breach 1*, 2014. The *informe* incarnate, this hole-riddled green-glazed earthenware object was in stark contrast to the minimalist *Bauspiel*, 2015, directly across the room. Titled after a Bauhaus building-block set, this orderly construction of wooden letterpress blocks resembles a miniature of a David Smith "Cubi," 1961–65. Arrayed between these two poles—primitive formlessness versus reason, geometry, and modernity—Samson's handful of new sculptures ran the gamut of materials, subjects, style, and references.

Presented on pedestals, two two-and-a-half-foot-tall terra-cotta sculptures appeared to have no true front, back, inside, outside, beginning, or end. Complex though they are, and despite certain affinities with Max Bill's "Endless Ribbon" sculptures of 1933–95, Samson's seamless carved forms are more lyrical than mathematical. Thanks to the gritty pinkish-beige terra-cotta, a material the artist likes for its humble association with cheap garden decorations, Samson's abstractions appear earthy and corporeal. The more biomorphic of the pair, *Kink (More Honour'd in the Breach) IV*, 2015—the recurring parenthetical title is a line from *Hamlet* arguing that breaking a custom is more honorable than observing it—looks like a tangled Gumby leg stretched over, under, around, and through itself. *Kink (More Honour'd in the Breach) III*, 2015, features a Gothic-style arch and a series of connected chambers that bring to mind Antoni Gaudí's Park Güell (1900–14) and Anasazi cliff dwellings. Perhaps the "breach" Samson admits to in her titles is one of conventional classifications, as these sculptures are at once abstract and figurative, organic and architectural, modern and primitive, high art and kitsch.

A departure in terms of material, scale, and subject, the centerpiece of the show, *Anima (Steam*

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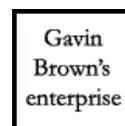
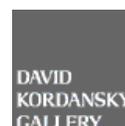
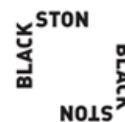


Whistles, 2015, spanned nearly the width of the gallery. Based on a scene from Walt Disney's first synchronized-sound cartoon, *Steamboat Willie* (1928), the gray-blue-glazed earthenware sculpture comprises three trios of steam whistles. Inspired by Sergei Eisenstein's writings from the 1930s and '40s relating animation to the animism of primitive cultures, Samson focuses on the anthropomorphic qualities of Disney's steam whistles. Mouthlike holes convey cute expressions and conjure a chorus of voices, while bent "legs" appear frozen in the midst of a jolly march. Wrestling these animated inanimate objects from their mise-en-scène, Samson's sculpture suggests a horizontal totem pole—a staid, silent tribute to idols from another dimension.

An actual artifact presented unceremoniously on the floor next to the steam-whistle memorial underscored Samson's interest in animism. *La Borne*, 2015, a small chunk of brick, is titled after the French potters' village in Haut-Berry, known for its wood-fired ceramics, where the artist found the piece of rubble. Crumbling and jagged, the brick was part of a kiln and bears traces of glaze. It has also sprouted green moss, revealing that objects don't need faces and voices to come alive. To mark the spiritual resonance of this brick—earth transformed into artifact reclaimed by nature—Samson has adorned it with a silvery, diamond-shaped fishing lure. The resulting talisman celebrates and equates man-made and natural processes.

—[Mara Hoberman](#)

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