



What We Have to Lose

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Written by Robert Silberman

What *We Have To Lose* is Kimberlee Joy Roth's most ambitious work to date, and arguably her most successful. It reveals a path of development that extends back to the artist's childhood even as it incorporates new elements that reflect her ongoing evolution as an artist.

Roth studied physics and math before she devoted herself to ceramics. *What We Have To Lose*, with its striking geometry and symmetry, shows that her love of order remains as strong as ever. But that is only part of the story behind this work. Roth grew up in Skokie, a suburb of Chicago. She was familiar with the ceramic elements in many downtown buildings, including the terra cotta used instead of stone on the sides of the noted architect Louis Sullivan's Carson Pirie Scott department store, a landmark building famous for the extravagant metal ornament surrounding the main entrance. Roth also was impressed by the Bahá'í temple in nearby Wilmette, Illinois, with its dramatic dome and intricately carved concrete surfaces. When Roth turned to functional pottery, she

retained a fascination with architecture and architectural ornament, especially the Moorish and Middle Eastern Islamic examples. She admired their use of color and decorative patterns in the design of individual tiles and, more grandly, the elaborate use of ceramics on the surfaces of mosques, palaces, mausoleums and other structures.

Like other contemporary ceramicists such as Monica Rudquist and Julia Galloway, Roth has turned to wall installations as a challenging new way of presenting her work. The arrangements



incorporate functional and non-functional elements, balancing geometrical rigor and ornamental fluidity, while drawing on her interest in architecture and architectural ceramics. In *What We Have To Lose*, with its large scale and horizontal sweep, Roth has created a work that invites the viewer both to survey the overall design and to examine up close the details and surface richness.

For the first time, Roth has layered the ceramic elements instead of mounting them against a design painted on the wall. One layer of tiles, attached to the wall, serves as a two-dimensional background, although the thickness of the tiles does provide a slight sense of depth around the edges and in the small gaps between the individual elements. These tiles are not all square or straight-sided, but include a variety of forms that combine in an intricate jigsaw puzzle-like harmony. In addition, Roth impressed the surface of each tile with a floral pattern in barely discernible relief and deliberately allowed the green and blue areas to blend into one another. As a result, the backdrop avoids being a flat monochrome. Similarly, although Roth usually favors straightforward, clearly defined areas of color, among the elements set away from the wall, one grouping has delicate dappling and two others have colors that display subtle modulations. Roth likes to use complementary colors to provide visual drama, and she does that by setting the blue-green background layer against the intense orange of the wall. This marks a bold departure from the all-too-familiar



neutral white galleries of modern art, and gives the entire work a humming vitality.

What We Have To Lose is a stylized, symbolic representation of a garden. Its floral designs are richly sensuous and, like some of Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers, have sexual overtones as well. Roth has a special fondness for orchids, and for the sinuous curves of Art Nouveau; her designs are recognizably flowers yet involve a lyrical abstraction. The plates and platters that make up the floral groupings retain their functional potential, but they also possess sculptural qualities that help them stand



out from the background plane as if seen through 3-D glasses. The small turtles, snails, and rock-like forms that appear throughout the work serve a practical purpose by concealing the metal elements holding the ceramic elements in place. The turtles and snails also add a sense of animal life to the garden, and a playful irregularity to the dominant geometry and symmetry. The entire design moves smoothly from the overlapping diamonds at the center to the tripartite forms on the ends, and brings together an impression of straight edges with the lively rhythms and curved shapes inspired by Islamic architecture.

The refined forms that populate Roth's work reflect her admiration for the beauty

of historical examples, but her art is far more than an expression of the revival and transformation of architectural motifs. Roth's work also relates to classic modern art and ceramics, epitomized by the work of an artist she admires, Eva Zeisel, the Hungarian-born industrial designer who emigrated to the United States. Zeisel created modernist ceramics with a simplicity of form that retained a sense of warmth and intimacy. Those qualities are shared by Roth's art. *What We Have To Lose* feels human in spite of its commanding size.

Roth always seeks to combine complexity and elegance in her art, and she has done that here. She also wants her art to be more than "just" beautiful. In the

past she has made work that engaged environmental issues, such as *It's Plastic* from 2012, which addressed the degradation of coral reefs and plastic pollution in the oceans and other waters. *What We Have To Lose* expresses its political concerns overtly only in its title, but Roth's underlying goal is to offer a positive vision of what could be lost if nothing is done to address water scarcity and pollution, global warming, and other related problems. As she says, "This is what we have, let's not destroy it." The vivid colors and kaleidoscopic patterns create an impression of enchantment as well as energy, while the snails and turtles add a touch of good humor—and a reminder of how ecosystems bring flora and fauna together in harmony. Rather than presenting a melodramatic expose of what has been or might be lost, a dead garden illustrating an environmental nightmare, Roth conjures up a dream-like paradise as a captivating reminder of what should be preserved.



Kimberlee Joy Roth

Kimberlee Joy Roth graduated from the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities with an MFA in Ceramics and an Art History minor in 2007. *It's Plastic*, her fall 2012 solo exhibition at The Catherine G. Murphy Gallery at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota raised both awareness to plastic pollution in the worlds oceans and \$1,143 for The Algalita Marine Research Institute in Long Beach, California.

She is a 2013 McKnight Artist Fellow in Ceramics and a Fiscal Year 2016 and 2011 recipient of an Artist Initiative Grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board. Her ceramic work is in the permanent collection of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis, Minnesota; Mayo Clinic Rochester (Minnesota); 71 France Apartments, Edina, Minnesota and the Lincoln Arts and Culture Foundation in Lincoln, California. Her work has been shown nationally in invitational and juried ceramic exhibitions.

She maintains a studio in the Northeast Arts District of Minneapolis and is the Technician for the Art and Art History Department and The Catherine G. Murphy Gallery at St. Catherine University.

Robert Silberman

Robert Silberman is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Minnesota, where he teaches courses on the history of cinema and other subjects. He received his Ph.D. in English Literature from Columbia University. He was senior advisor for the 1999 PBS series *American Photography: A Century of Images* and, with Vicki Goldberg, co-author of the companion volume. A regular contributor to the *Burlington Magazine*, he has curated exhibitions on art, photography, and ceramics, including six exhibitions at Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis, most recently *Out of the Labyrinth: Contemporary Mexican Ceramics*. The many ceramic artists he has written about include Warren MacKenzie, Gail Kendall, Ken Price, Amy Sabrina, and Randy Johnston.

