



NEW YORK

Ruth Hardinger

Tama

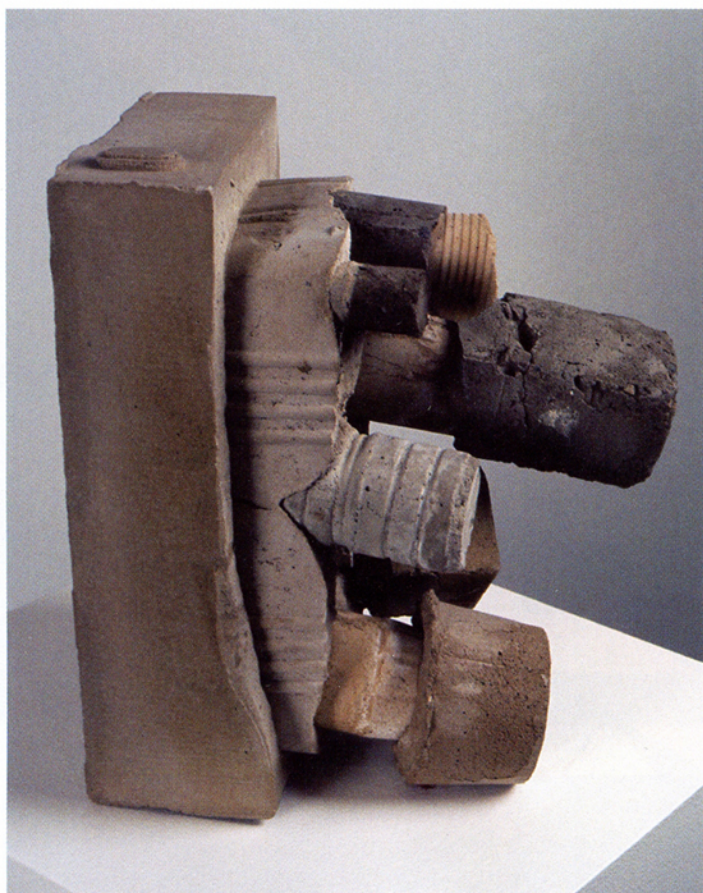
Originally from the Midwest, Ruth Hardinger has lived for many years in downtown New York. She has a long history of casting objects in Hydrocal and plaster of Paris, but in this show, her idiosyncratic forms are the result of concrete casts that take their shape from food containers, box cartons, and miscellaneous tubes. Hardinger now works in several series, which she calls “Extensions,” “Conundrums,” and “Extrusions.” While not very large—most of the sculptures are less than 40 inches tall—her output is graphic and tactile, monumental in both form and materials. In conversation, Hardinger has said that she would like to be able to work large, and indeed, her compositions, nearly epic in their vertical rise, look like maquettes for much larger pieces.

The “Envoy” sculptures, like all of the works in the show, are marvelously tactile entities that suggest the standing body, rather like watchmen in the night. Hardinger has long used a deliberately clunky, awkward

her sophisticated command of form. The relatively small *Envoy 1* (2007) is composed of casts taken from throw-away containers whose internal markings are revealed in the fine detail of the concrete surface. The sculpture seems to list a bit to one side and bulges outward slightly in the middle. The shades of gray create subtle tonal values that add to the experience of the work. *Envoy III* (2007), slightly larger, consists of four cubes built from the bottom up, with each cube smaller than the one below. This work is so subtle that its outlines might be mistaken for those of an Asian vase. It shows the degree to which Hardinger can get delicate effects from so basic a material as poured concrete.

The “Extrusion” series refers to how the sculptures are made—pushed, or extruded, through an opening in the slab of concrete at the back of each piece. These sculptures, with their face-like fronts, might be seen

Above: Ruth Hardinger, installation view of the “Conundrum” series, 2006–08. **Right:** Ruth Hardinger, *Extension 2*, 2006. Concrete, 20



Left: Ruth Hardinger, *Extrusion 2*, 2007. Concrete, 13 x 11.5 x 9 in.

as a very modern rendering of Northwest Coast Indian masks, as Stephen Westfall points out in his illuminating catalogue essay. *Extension 3* (2007) looks like a child’s version of a face, with a cylinder nose pushing beyond the two circles that serve as eyes. The piece is a bit of humorous, postmodern Surrealism, recognizable as figuration but also dependent on an abstract sense of form that is more intricate than it might seem at first. The “Extension” series works a lot like the “Extrusion” pieces, with forms rising from pedestals made of the same concrete material. *Extension 2* (2006) is a wonderfully funky abstraction, with two capped poles inching up from a vase-like concrete support.

Along with unusual skill, Hardinger also possesses a sense of humor: her smaller series, “Conundrums,” gives a nice sense of how a raw material like concrete can have amusing effects. Arranged in a row on a shelf, the “Conundrums” look a bit like

abstracted figures; their small parts and gestures have a decidedly human charm. Each individual work has slightly different elements and tonal variations, although most of them consist of a shaft with a square head on top. It is hard not to see these totems as phallic, which adds to the sense of celebration accompanying their display. Hardinger is a very sharp artist working in sculpture, a medium that struggles to survive in New York, where the rents rise by the half hour. She is to be commended not only for her achievement, but also for her tenacity.

—Jonathan Goodman