

art

Harold Wortsman at Art Mora

Jonathan Goodman

Harold Wortsman, a sculptor and printmaker based in Brooklyn, put out an excellent show, of prints and also, additionally, a group of sculptures. Many of the works were recently made for the exhibition. The artist, a veteran of the New York art world, has come to the fore with work that relates to modernism and its heyday, with an emphasis on both geometric and organic form. But this does not mean that the prints or the two three-dimensional works have lost contemporaneity or their plastic expressiveness; in fact, all the work is outstanding for its warmth of voice. At a time when many of the arts, including the fine arts, have been relegated either to academic concepts or to populist, antiformalist declarations, Wortsman's art governs a middle ground, both intellectually and formally. His approach may mean that some will find his work historically bound; however, such a perception indicates that the artist has turned his gaze backward in time—something he has not done. What Wortsman *has* done is to enlist a series of stylistic attributes that have become more or less classic in measure, over the duration of modernism and the following years. There are certain kinds of art that endure beyond the novel effect, demonstrating an awareness of time-honored methods and even historically potent imagistic biases, and Wortsman's art belongs to this ongoing vision.

Besides the timelessness of Wortsman's creativity, he has also looked long and hard at indigenous art—African sculptures and the patterned intricacies of tribal textiles. Much of this interest comes out in the artist's mid-size prints, which seem to take on shapes with depth and even textures despite their flattened nature. Distinctly abstract, they relate to music more than narrative; there is something both very old and very new that animates these works of art. Knowing the time the prints were made, and the person who made them, it would be impossible to call the works tribal, yet the influence is there. The interlocking forms feel sculptural—we remember that Wortsman studied sculpture at both Brandeis and the Studio School—and result in a mostly organic gestalt that appears to speak across centuries. But the shapes are not so much primitive as they are primal: *Proposition* (2016) consists of what looks like an orange building with a rounded window toward the top; to the structure's left is a snake-like form that seems to be enveloping the construction, embracing it with an sensuous aura that approaches the erotic. This may just be speculation, but the point is that geometric and organic forms coexist within the same confines, made lyrical by Wortsman's hand.

Figures in Winter (2016) may be the most lyric of all Wortsman's highly poetic prints. Consisting of two olive-green figures set against a lighter-green ground, the composition represents a dialogue taking place, likely within a snowy landscape. The figures are not naturalistic in any way—instead, they roughly show eyes and mouths in simple cut-out shapes. A primitive, totem-like aspect appears in this piece, as happens in most of Wortsman's art. One has the sense of sculptures offering a dialogue from both old and recent times; the artist, who admires Giacometti, could well be borrowing an atmosphere

if not an actual form from the earlier artist, just as he makes use of ancient tribal arts from Africa. The title of Wortsman's *Palace at Midnight* (2016) actually plays off Giacometti's great surrealist sculpture, called *The Palace at 4 AM*. But Wortsman's print is sculptural only in the sense that the abstract components seen in it feel like the elements of a building's structure: a black frame, with blue spots, surround a purple plinth decorated with darker lines and spots and three orange strips that partially cover it. A black, horizontal stripe, part of the print itself, supports the image from beneath.

Three relief sculptures stood on the wall next to the prints, but for this viewer the two recent fired, stand-alone clay works really stood out. *Palace* (2014) consists of several earth-color planes, some with holes in them. While the dimensions are small, the feeling is nonetheless that of a monumental building—perhaps the flat walls of the piece lend the sense that the work is bigger than it actually is. Two tower-like structures push up against the sky, giving *Palace* the feel of considerable height as well as weight. *Monument* (2016), also a small piece (five by five by seven inches), is a brown-and-beige rectangular cube with overlapping layers. Closest to the core is a black area filled with what looks like a night sky filled with falling fragments of stars. Enigmatic, ritualistic, and mystical, the piece envelops us in hidden meaning; it is a religious memorial to a god we do not know. Very beautiful, and very powerful despite its small size, *Monument* possesses an inexplicable gravitas, based on ritual activity and poetic mind. Like many of Wortsman's art pieces, it is secretive about its purpose, which proposes a deep knowledge of a world we would usually consider unknown. This is not to say Wortsman is a passive mystic; instead, he is a visionary intent on seeing far beyond what the eye can see. His sense of being thus animates his art, keeping it marvelously alive.