

San Francisco Chronicle

Conceptual artist mixes Dada, dry wit

By Charles Desmarais, July 19, 2016

“Equilibrium: A **Paul Kos** Survey,” an exhibition at **di Rosa** in Napa through Oct. 2, was an eye-opener for me. I have worked with Kos in a curatorial role, at Orange County’s Laguna Art Museum in 1990 and again at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati in 2004. His work is conceptual to a degree, but it takes a real, generally sculptural, form. Add to that a strong vein of Dada absurdity and an ultra-dry wit, and it adds up to one of the Bay Area’s most entertaining, influential and important living artists.

But what was not fully apparent until this exhibition is the work’s strong connection to the natural world. The di Rosa is a 217-acre preserve that also encompasses a small museum-like space and a house museum chockablock with late 20th century California art. It was founded and endowed as a public trust by **Rene di Rosa**, who, before his passing in 2010, created a kind of year-round visual arts salon and artists’ residency on his farm and in his home, barns and even on the small lake on the property.

Amy Owen, the curator at di Rosa, and her collaborator **Tanya Zimbardo**, a curator of media arts at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, trace Kos’ earliest significant works to the time when, still a student at the San Francisco Art Institute, he worked grafting vines on the property. With di Rosa’s encouragement, he made two painted fiberglass sculptures before deciding to do something more suited to the natural site.

The result was “Lot’s Wife” (1968-69), a stack of standard feed-store salt blocks on a tall spindle, set in the middle of a pasture. Visually reminiscent of Constantin Brancusi’s famous “Endless Column” series, textually related to the biblical story of Sodom, Kos’ pillar of salt gradually shrank and disintegrated as cattle in the field licked the lower blocks—absolution of human sin by the grace of nature.

Following upon the success of that work, Kos’ boss became his most important patron, nature his constant muse. Watching the artist’s work develop through the lens of this concise and pellucid presentation, as he builds and balances on this uncertain foundation, is a deeply satisfying experience.

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Photo: Paul Kos, “Lot’s Wife,” a 1969 installation by Paul Kos at di Rosa in Napa, is documented in an exhibition there through Oct. 2.