



Sculpture for the Home: Gerard McCarthy at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, New York City (Jan 5–Feb 9, 2019)

Written by **Janet Koplos**

New York-based Gerard McCarthy's stoneware sculptures can be read two quite different ways. In the general context of art, they are modest-scale reductive architectonic forms, marked by windows, doorways and stairs but filled, one might say, with emptiness. Their surfaces and the frequent imperfection of the openings gives them an aura of age: they signify wear and bleakness. They offer no color but tones of white terra sigillata, and only basic details, no ornament or personality. The lonely streetscapes implied by the structures recall the empty plazas of De Chirico or the impersonal warehouse-like spaces in which George Tucker painted interchangeable people. They are often facades rather than fully-enclosing structures, which may bring to mind a variety of images, from cowboy-town or movie-lot false fronts to the kind of precariously retained frontage sometimes seen in urban demolition sites. In all these cases, McCarthy conveys a sense of melancholy and loss.

Multiplex, 2018,
stoneware, 8 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 3
1/2 in (21.5 x 21.5 x 9 cm).
Image credit: Adam Reich.

Although McCarthy has been working in ceramics for many years, he seems to remain apart from the ceramics community. From a craft-world point of view, he denies the easy attractions of the material. Not only is there no color but also none of the tactility and gloss that clay and glaze can offer. Instead, these works have a dry, even powdery surface that makes them more suggestive of plaster than of typical ceramics. While the architectural implications, of course, call for slab construction, he allows only the softness of imperfection, especially slightly rounded edges, as evidence of hand-building. He erases other evidence of touch – undoubtedly wisely, because it would be out of scale with the architectural quality – while avoiding the cool perfection of casting. If one remembers so far back, they might recall the architectural ceramic forms of William Wyman. More recently, Robert Winokur's ceramic structures vastly differ in surface interest and have a more playful effect.

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McCarthy does draw on a typical ceramic scale in these tabletop sculptures. The modest dimensions encourage the viewer's projection into the environment each work creates. *Tent* establishes a high-walled rectangular court (or prison yard) escapable only by a small doorway into a much taller enclosure with a pyramidal roof. The allusions might range from Aztec ball courts to Greece's Treasury of Atreus – grand spaces nevertheless evoked by this 6 1/2 x 4 x 9 inch (16.5 x 10 x 22.8 cm) object. *Platform* is a 7 1/2 (19 cm) inch horizontal square that despite being only 2 1/4 inches (5.75 cm) tall, seems massive. The center of each of its sides is cut into high steps, like some Mayan ceremonial site. Among the façade works, *Multiplex* is a standing 8 1/2 inch square with a grand entry defined by a rectangular four-step telescoping frame, above which are four parallelogram windows, almost bell-shaped, each larger than that tunnelling entrance.

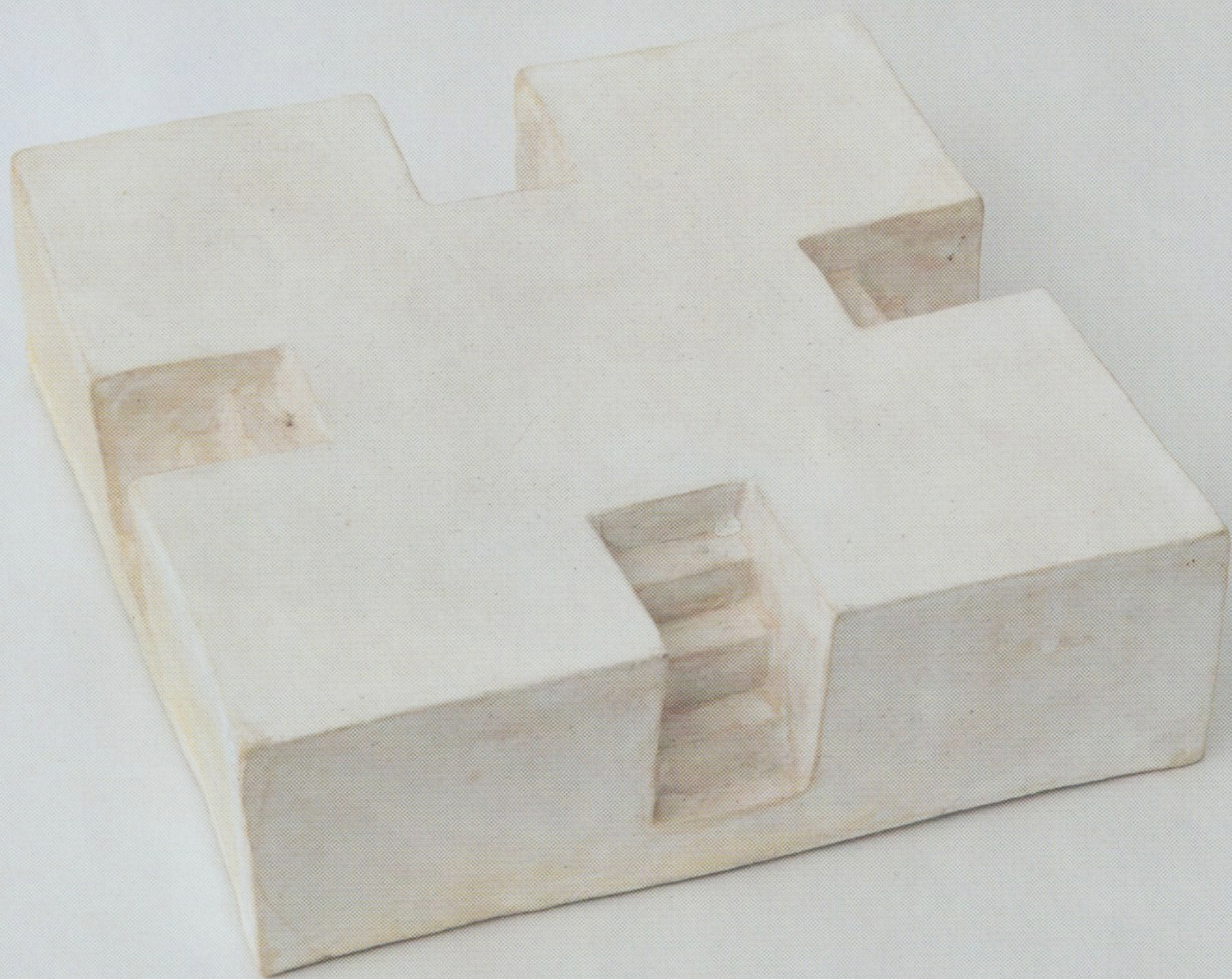
The exceptional piece in the show is *Dancers on a Plane*, six elements roughly two-feet tall and displayed on the floor, which suggest growing forms as much as dancing bodies. They consist of four or more stacked segments, recalling thick bamboo or horsetail plants except that they lean and sway. With the same grayed tones they seem less celebratory than searching, perhaps like some plants looking for light.

This exhibition, consisting of eight works from 2018 and two from 2017, follows a slightly larger show at a different gallery in 2016 of conceptually consistent work. This most recent show was happily paired with paintings by William Carroll (in a separate room) that capture high-rise urban buildings with the same simplicity, in black and white. The two solos played off each other beneficially. ■

About the Author

Through her writing and scholarship, Janet Koplos has been highly influential in framing the critical discourse on contemporary craft and has contributed significantly to our knowledge of the field. A graduate of the University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communications with a MA in art history from Illinois State University, Koplos has been writing about art since 1976. She has published more than 2,000 articles, reviews, and catalogue essays in the US, Europe, and Japan. She is the author of *Contemporary Japanese Sculpture* (1991), *Gyongy Laky* (2003), and co-author of *Makers: a History of American Studio Craft*, intended as both an important resource for the field and a much-needed college-level art history survey. Koplos was senior editor at *Art in America* (1990 – 2009) and served as guest editor of *American Craft* in 2009. She lectures, juries, and critiques frequently and is a member of the Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art and the College Art Association. She has taught criticism at the Parsons New School of Design and other schools. For her numerous scholarly contributions to the field, Koplos was elected an Honorary Fellow of the American Craft Council in 2010.

Platform, 2018, stoneware, 2 1/4 x 7 1/2 in (5.75 x 19 x 19 cm)
Image credit: Adam F.





Tent, 2018, stoneware,
6 1/2 x 4 x 9 in (16.5
x 10 x 22.8 cm).
Image credit: Adam Reich.