

ArtSeen

Mia Westerlund Roosen: *Aftermath*

By [Lilly Wei](#)



Installation view: *Mia Westerlund Roosen: Aftermath*, Betty Cuninghams, New York. Courtesy Betty Cuninghams.

Aftermath, Mia Westerlund Roosen's fifth show with Betty Cuninghams, is one of the sculptor's most overtly political ventures, even if she has consistently advocated for feminist, environmental, and other topical issues over the years. Her perennial engagement with materials, objectness, and process continues to impress. Form and content dialogue in a thrilling, at times, fractious repartee, her organic forms morphing into the abstract, then into the representational, neither one nor the other. An installation of eleven works, the show is characteristically spare—as well as characteristically elegant. It is also, less expectedly, more about volume, space, buoyancy, and light than it is about the weightiness of matter that marked her earlier works. Even then, her sculptures were endowed with a kind of balletic grace that countered gravity, perhaps a nod to dance and the dancer that Westerlund Roosen once thought she would be.

A mix of freestanding floor pieces and tabletop objects are divided between the upper and lower gallery. Two of the smaller works, installed near the entrance to the gallery, *Sac* (2019) and *Billow* (2021), are made of flannel soaked in resin, the forms stiffened, aerated, as if drawing breath. It's a technique she has used in the past, the wrapped and layered shapes molded to suggest the soft interior of an emptied enclosure, its inhabitants gone, its stories left open. They appear fragile but are tougher than they look, and could be scaled up easily. Westerlund Roosen is comfortable in a range of scales, but the effect is never crushing, keeping the human body in mind as her implicit measure.

Downstairs, one of the two smaller works is carved in polished rosy marble, and matter-of-factly named *Marble I* (2019). It was inspired by *Ruff* (1991), a work made of concrete faced with lead. The marble is more intentionally voluptuous, the coloration close to warm flesh. It evokes a bust, but instead of a head, there are a series of labial-like protrusions in its place that swerve into the surreal and sensual—another set of hallmarks. It's also a nicely complicated, double-edged vision of female sexuality and stereotypes.

ON VIEW
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Detached (2020), of concrete and resin, leans into the figurative too. It's rougher, and jauntily, if awkwardly, perched atop a base. Two tubular stems dangle from its plump body, and overlap like crossed legs. Oddly appealing, it makes you smile. Like Humpty Dumpty, the little figure seems about to fall, but unlike that unfortunate character, she's made of sturdier stuff—and might we think not as foolish?



Installation view: Mia Westerlund Roosen: *Aftermath*, Betty Cuninghams, New York. Courtesy Betty Cuninghams.

The two major groupings are also placed upstairs and downstairs. A pair of beautiful, slender columns, one nine feet tall, the other nearly eight feet—commandeer our attention upon entrance to the gallery. Architectonic forms, —which appear frequently in her work—they recall, for starters, tree trunks, the pillared remnants of antique temples that in turn evoke thoughts of caryatids and the female body. The columns, like most of the sculptures here, are made with flannel soaked in polyester resin, and are pleated like the grooves in Greek columns, the folds of the chiton of a kore figure, or an Issey Miyake design. Lighted from above, they glow like candles, beacons that draw you toward them, shaping light.

The ultimate focus of the show, however, are the five boxes made of epoxy resin, a new material for the artist and one she finds more physically seductive. Her boxes all have luster that conjures living flesh, each in a different skin tone. While Westerlund Roosen titles them *Box I - V*, disingenuously maintaining their neutrality, leaving it up to the viewer to parse their identity, they inevitably recall sarcophagi, if you are antiquity-minded, or both cradles and crypts, first and last habitats: in our beginning is our end. Just short of four feet, each velvety interior contains something different, a residuum, memorialized, sacralized. One is a grid of sorts that suggests a sieve, another suggests flayed skin that has been scarified, a tale for the absurdities and shame of our era and the failure of civilization. The artist says that for some time, it has become increasingly difficult for her to reconcile the horrific images in the news that show the consequences of forcible displacement, of drowned bodies washed ashore or of civilians slaughtered in the streets, and how disparate and heartbreaking our realities are, depending upon who and where we are.

Westerlund Roosen has had a long and estimable career and it's still going strong. She was supported by Leo Castelli as a young sculptor, one of the very few women he represented. In defiance of male minimalist prescriptions, decades ago, she shifted away from her popular and critically successful geometric sculptures toward more organic, idiosyncratic forms, a vocabulary that was closer, truer to her own artistic voice. Non-conforming then and now, she has always placed female agency at the center of her practice, the female as heroic, her work not quite like anyone else's with its odd seductions and memorable images. Now eighty, she is long overdue for a major reassessment, for wider attention.

Contributor [Lilly Wei](#)

Lilly Wei is a New York-based art critic and independent curator.