

Arnold Zimmerman at John Elder

The large ceramic columns Arnold Zimmerman showed outdoors at Snug Harbor a few years ago made a powerful impression: their complicated organic imagery in a vertical architectural format held off the tough competition of both nature and buildings. The two largest works in his recent show are also made for outdoor siting. *Twisting Column*, an all-white 96-by-30-by-30-inch work that is both glazed and white-washed, was inspired by whitewashed buildings in Portugal, where Zimmerman travels frequently. The column

is a spiraling dance of three strange organic growths, fungoid and science-fictiony. One of the three elements evokes muscles and sinewy ribs. Another suggests a gargantuan Japanese *daikon* radish, while the third is a sequence of squashed globes separated by plates—a sort of caterpillar body. Interspersed among these components as they rise from a low rusty-iron base and curl together are a spiny ball and stuff that looks like bone marrow.

Fountain of the Fools Paradise (95 by 48 by 48 inches) is meant to be set in a large pool and to be more effusive in its watery show than it could be in this Chelsea gallery. Three columnar supports are set on a triangular clay base; each has different fleshy, grooved or lumpy contours. Each is topped with an oddly articulated, brightly colored pot that has a too-big spout or knob. A midlevel catchment is supported by a cluster of thick, rootlike legs which eerily suggest a ruin or cave.

The fountain relates to all the shorter but no less ambitious works in the exhibition, which take the grotesque as a theme. The specific notion is a collection of fools (one will not ask whether Zimmerman was inspired by an art opening or recent events in Washington). Surrealism suffuses these works (Tanguy out of Bosch and Brueghel) but memories of folk traditions are also embedded in them, from Mexican Day of the Dead images to the earthenware *haniwa* grave figures of Japan. *Fools Ferry* (48 by 60 by 35 inches) has about a dozen figures on a triangular base. They are lumpily conical, like carrots with embellishments, and are connected with long ropy arms, which are support structures but also visually reinforce a sense of tangled, pointless movement.

The terra-cotta *Fools Congress* (32 by 60 by 30 inches) has two sections of three curved tiers with about 15 figures on each; it sits on a curving iron table. Some of the creatures have faces. Others lack features but wear hats or sport something like antennae. The effect is festive in a painful way. In all the figural works, Zimmerman takes advantage of the fleshy qualities of clay and its responsive surface to suggest growing, puckering, pouching and sagging: the fate of all creatures, no matter how remarkable we think ourselves.

—Janet Koplos



Arnold Zimmerman: *Fools Ferry*, 1998, ceramic, 48 by 60 by 35 inches; at John Elder.