

*Notes on Works by Tamara Ralis*

*Ursula Street in Schwabing, a turn-of-the-century apartment house with wide doors, narrow steps, and a tightly winding spiral staircase ascending to a fourth-floor studio apartment. One's gaze sweeps across roofs, sparsely flowering maple trees, and finds, framed between other works of man, a segment of pale blue sky and sculptured white clouds.*

*The room is white with white-painted floor boards. There is no furniture, except along the white walls, which are lined with glass cubes atop slender white pedestals. Inside these cubes are Tamara Ralis' art works: delicate miniature worlds, each of which concentrates on sculptural symbol-bearers enveloped by space. Each glass cube contains one such world, and, at the same time, sets the space of that world apart from the real world which surrounds it.*

*When one approaches one of these cubes and tries to understand its essence, the work itself contracts into a kind of island. It becomes a precisely cordoned-off place which has been inserted into space. These islands are rigorously articulated architectonic forms: planes with vertical elements, raft-like rectangles, stepped pyramids, staircases upon which one finds a human figure, a column, a relief bearer inside a mandorla, or a pointed cone. Rather than standing erect or lying prone (as if their own weight had enabled them to gain a foothold), they seem instead to hover tentatively on the diagonal, just barely able to assert themselves.*

*Space surrounds this ensemble of humanity's being-in-the-world with all its historical sediments and iconographic implications. Through the walls of glass and their separation from real space, the surroundings become outer space for these islands. Here the inhabitants and their things manifest themselves, yet do so only by exerting tremendous effort to maintain balance – or remain miraculously held – even as they continue to fall.*

*This world of images – diametrically opposed to the artificial, eruptive violence of a presentation fraught with surprise, evocation or discharge – reflects the path and artistic career of Tamara Ralis, who studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich from 1970 to 1974. During those same years, she also attended the Otto Falckenburg*

School of Acting, where she received a state diploma in 1973. Soon thereafter she performed on the stages of state theaters in Bremen, Hamburg and Munich. Studies in philosophy and literature at Bard College (New York State) and at the University of Maryland followed, as did a teaching commission from Lewis and Clark College (Munich). Sculpture, drawing, acting and poetry line her path, dilate like a transparent foil behind her sculptures, and facilitate access to the imagery.

Golden elements emerge from some of these islands and their inhabitants: delicate vessels, staffs, and antennae reach into space like tentacles; slender golden strands – thin as hairs – are strewn upon steps and ellipses. The name "Phaedo" occurs repeatedly in these worlds. It is an allusion to Socrates' favorite disciple, the man whose name is the title of Plato's dialogue about the immortality of the soul. Tamara Ralis recasts Phaedo in the form of sculptural abbreviations upon a raft made of beams which bends under the force of an upwardly pointing golden ray – or is the raft in fact supported by that same gleaming ray? Phaedo materializes again, without arms, wearing a pointed cap, in the midst of a rectangular island, atop a clay pedestal with instruments that have been laid aside along a diagonal.

The exposed human being, it would seem, tries to center the island he occupies, or else laboriously endeavors to maintain his verticality on rafts or temple steps. In other works, pointed cones or ellipses tumble in seeming defiance of the law of gravity, sprout protruding heads or hands, or rest upon fragmented staircases. Their antennae point into space, exposed and vulnerable, seeking contact with it.

This exploration of the theme "space" derives much of its uniqueness from a familiarity with the theater stage and its techniques, e.g. sculpturally stylized platforms, pillars, stairs and steps like those which first appeared at the turn of the century in works by Adolphe Appia of Geneva, reappeared later in works by Craig, Tairoff, Meyerhold, and Schlemmer, and were developed to their ultimate limits by the Bauhaus artists. Yet it is the theater, the only artistic genre in which man immediately represents himself through himself, which cannot fully abstract itself from humanity without ending in the absurd. Perhaps it is the consciousness of this that allows the beings and forms in the objects of Tamara Ralis to survive as points of crystallization within the spatial matrix. Despite all reduction in terms of volumes or materials, and without ever autonomously dominating their surroundings, the beings and their works continue to determine the character of these islands. The theatrical props of human existence-in-the-world

are aimed far more towards the task of reconciling themselves with spatial powers. They stretch upwards as symbols of temples, as emblems of exposure and vulnerability. At home on sites of transcendence, they yearn for consolation and the will to assert themselves.

The theme, then, is the fundamental drama that conditions human existence, and it is unusual to see that this theme is staged and staged again, repeatedly brought to expression inside glass cubes with their hand-sized, miniature sculptures, since modern art typically presents this phenomenon to us more drastically, in objects of far larger dimensions. Yet it is precisely this miniaturization through which the artist has found a form that enables the "small" to assert itself as a symbol in the face of the "large". Smallness often serves as an incarnation for vulnerability, lack of protection, or the need for help. This alone can refute human attributes like the abuse of power, penchant for violence, addiction to domination and haughty autonomy. Together with these narrow islands or rafts, i.e. with their extremely limited resources, the boundaries of human being itself are revealed with striking clarity. All that remains to do in these straits is to evolve an individual shape out of a preexistent form. The comparatively large space of the glass cube seems merely to endure the presence of the miniature staging within it, yet the human being nevertheless succeeds in asserting a physical shape within dimensionless space.

When one looks more closely at these protagonists, they appear as eminently sculptural works whose details and surfaces have been carefully smoothed and delineated and which stand in well-balanced yet tense relationship to themselves and their surroundings. Centering and symmetry – especially as they relate to axial and static components – are fundamental principles. The formal harmony which this engenders is subverted by the slightest deviation from symmetry – even a minimal shift away from balance is an extraordinary event. The concordant structure and the order which the forms have been given, together with the order of the things themselves, bestow a sense of stillness upon the entire ensemble. Yet this is not the quietude of relaxation, but rather the stillness of a precariously maintained equilibrium asserting itself in infinite space. Thoughts like these went through my mind after I left the atelier, the house, and the city and, during the next few days, read poems by Tamara Ralis – poetry whose words evoked related images.

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