

ROSEMARIE CASTORO, "ROSEMARIE CASTORO: WORKING OUT", BY LUCY R. LIPPARD, *ARTFORUM*, PRINT
SUMMER 1975

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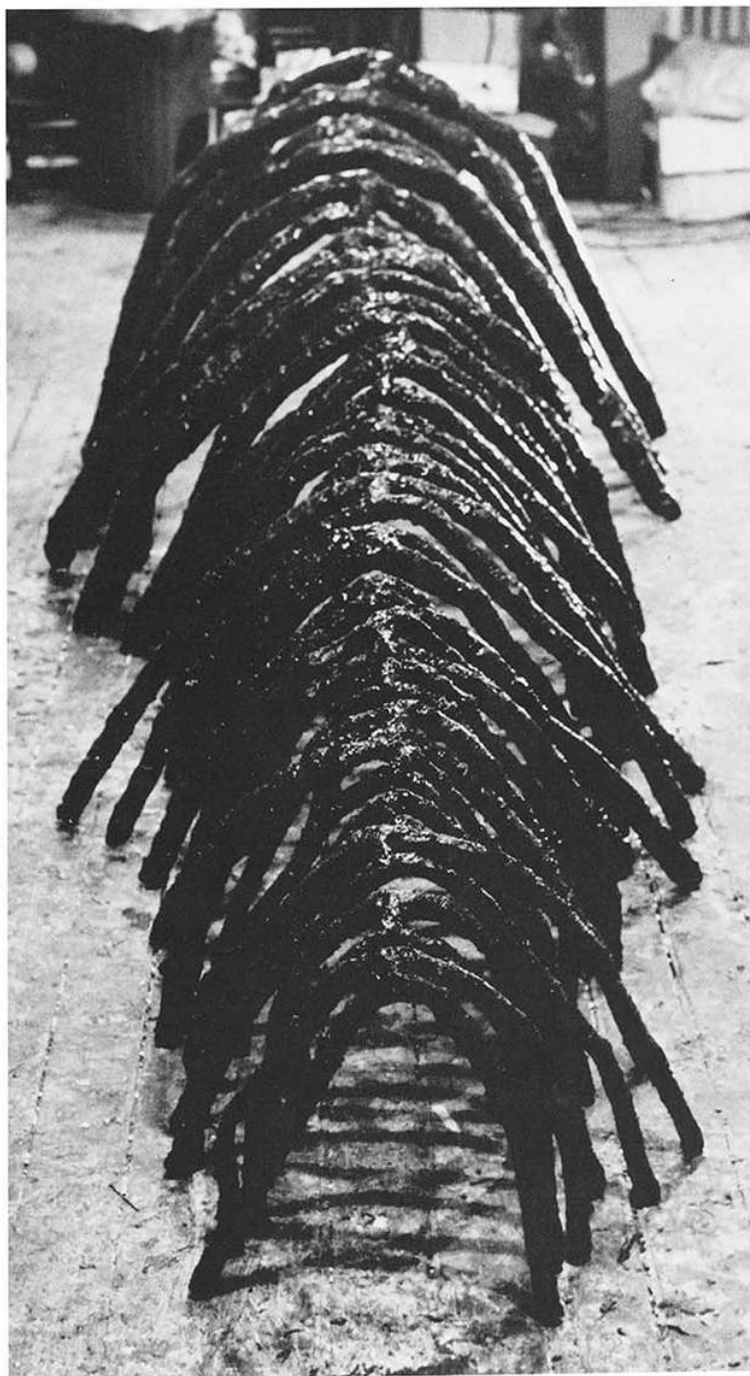
LUCY R. LIPPARD

All of Rosemarie Castoro's art is about a fine bond between mind and body — gestural, but above all disciplined. Its major impetus is kinesthetic. (Not incidentally, she has on occasion danced with Yvonne Rainer and while a student at Pratt was seriously involved in choreography.) She invests movement, and by implication, her work, with a highly personal content: "When I danced," she wrote in a 1973 journal,

I leapt through the air and continued to remain up there. . . . I felt a self-propelled air-stretch. It was a way to leave this earth to think in an other path, to bring coherence to reality, to find the path again, to deeper the grooves and push through the forest of the half-blind.¹

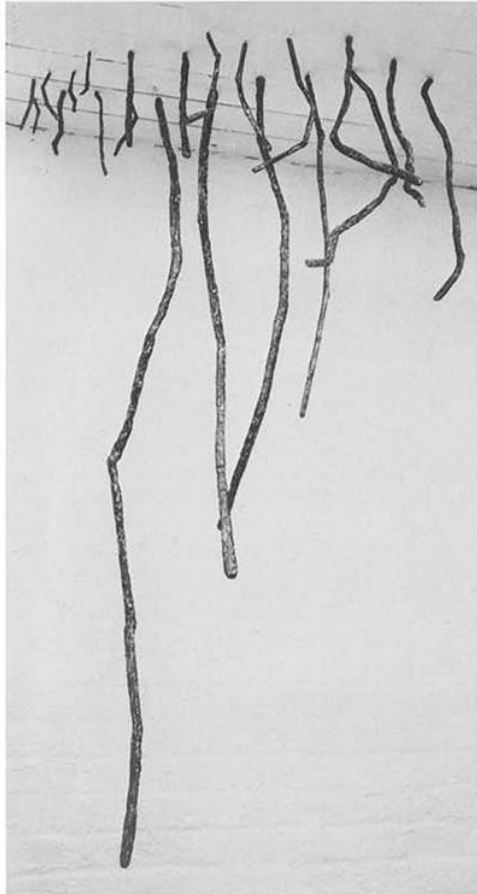
Castoro's continuous activity focuses on line as a formal solution. Although sexual in its drive, her work is too fast to be sensuous, too controlled to release all of its energy; it exists in a state of extremely structured tension, its momentum expressed with great physical intelligence by implied projection of the body (and the body ego) into space. ("What does an artist want? Exposure. Something snaps out vision. The body responds with production. . . . I think of myself as a container, and what I do as an eruption of what I am. Where do you get nourished? That's where you have something to do.") Until she began to make sculpture in the round, some of this momentum seemed frustrated by the rectangle, the formalist limitations of abstract painting. In 1964–65, Castoro was making all-over abstractions of gestural but tightly packed tilelike shapes which evolved into a basic "Y" unit, and then into strands or bands, like beams of light intersecting and interweaving in space. Several of the latter were shown in Eugene Goossen's "Distillations" show in 1966. In the next two years, the structure became somewhat freer but the tension was maintained by an obsessive diagonal line, anticipating the later graphite panels. In the meantime, from around 1968, though still painting, she also ventured out of the studio, "moving ceilings," "cracking rooms," doing street works, and making Conceptual pieces in the form of diaristic texts ("I sometimes watch myself in time by recording my activities with a stop watch"). These constitute the best "fiction" I have read about the life of an artist.

In March, 1969, Castoro rode her bicycle at midnight from Spring Street to 52nd Street, leaking white enamel



Rosemarie Castoro, *Two-Play Tunnel*, 1974, min., 34" x 48" x 10"

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Rosemarie Castoro, *Small Burial*, 1973, m/m, 6' x 3' x 19'.

paint from a pierced can and leaving behind a linear trail. In April she "cracked" a block of the sidewalk on 13th Street with a meandering line of thin silver tape; in May she used the same medium to splinter the rooms of the Paula Cooper Gallery, and in September, she made a gigantic cracking at the Seattle World's Fair Center. It visually evoked a seismic disturbance quite out of proportion to the material expended. These curious kinetic remains were accompanied by a similar activity — the "moving" of ceilings, or parts of them, by marking out a rectangle overhead with four wheeled "casters" (the pun was intended).

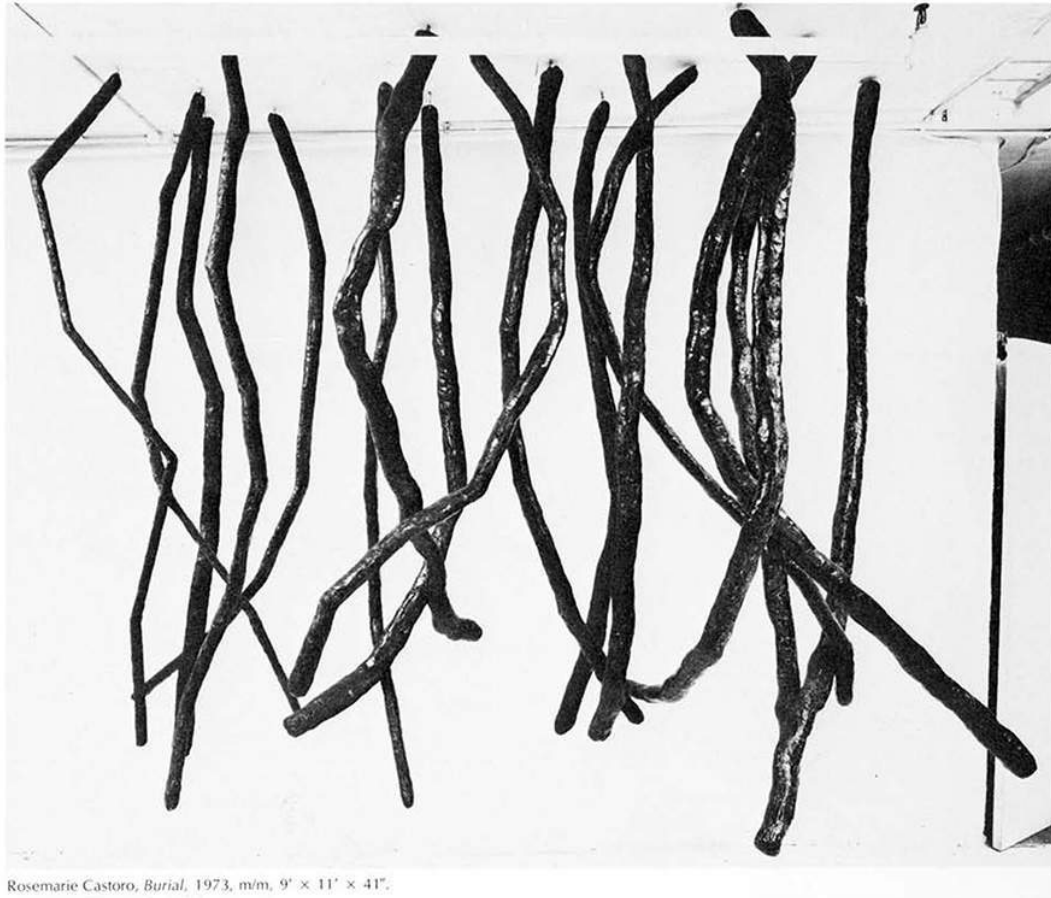
The element of humorous hostility in these inconspicuous but startling objects was later resurrected in the 1973 suspended sculpture — *Burial* — which, more organic than geometric, reflected the change in her focus. Its "roots growing down from the ceiling" were seen as metaphoric extensions of "buried people on the roof." In 1970 she constructed a room in Vancouver within which a rheostat-controlled light grew gradually brighter over a 3½-minute cycle maintained until the door opened — part of an evolving conception of manipulating spaces which led to the free-

standing panels and combinations of panels shown at Tibor de Nagy in 1971 and 1972. These were paintings taken off the wall and transformed into their own enclosures — "screens," "corners," a "revolving door," and a curving "tunnel entranceway." Graphite rubbed over a dense impasto surface of gesso and modeling paste provided a muscular abstraction of their creation. The vigorous swashes resisted and eventually rebelled against rectangular confinement, and during 1972 the "brushstrokes" broke away and became separate entities. Actually broom-and-mop strokes on Masonite, cut out with a sabersaw, they were hung on the wall as individual or groups of units. One series of flowing single strokes suspended vertically from the ceiling or horizontally from an edge were named after body parts (*Bangs*, *Armpit Hair*), a result of the artist's starting "to relate to myself as a building. . . . parts of me coming off different parts of the wall."

The brushstrokes soon acquired an animistic life of their own and developed from abstractions into a calligraphic shorthand which stood for initials and people, then into smaller hairpinlike stick figures — "groups of people in the streets relating to each other." Hung almost randomly with space between them, these tighter units retained some of the liveliness of their broader predecessors, but when shrunk, and crowded or regimented together to form an illusionistic X or "parade ranks" dwindling into the distance, they got fussy and lost the vitality which was their major advantage. The relative failure of these "exoskeletal auras as wall sculpture" may have resulted from an uneasiness about moving toward an overtly anthropomorphic from a long-standing nonobjective approach to physical phenomena. In any case, it also led to the next step: bringing the work into three-dimensional space and eschewing dependence on a wall support.

While Castoro was teaching for two months in Fresno in 1973, she symbolically "buried" these figures, and in *Small Burial* — a group of silvery twiglike stalactites suspended from the ceiling — they also found their regenerative function. When she returned to New York, she began the large organic sculptures, some of which were exhibited in her "Suspensions" show at Syracuse University's Lubin House Gallery in December, 1973, in New York City. Objects whose presence was finally supported by their own properties rather than by an implied activity in the past, the three large pieces consisted of long, awkwardly gangling tentacles of pigmented epoxy and fiberglass daubed over styrofoam and steel rods. *Growing* leapt in midair; *Tunnel* hovered like a huge spider, and *Burial* dangled from the ceiling. Like *Symphony* and *Two-Play Tunnel*, the two pieces in Castoro's most recent show at Tibor de Nagy (February 1975) — both of which are firmly rooted to the earth and can survive outdoors as well — evoke exotic vegetation, weird creatures, trees, roots, legs. Their shiny surfaces, with slabs of brown, black, blue, olive, ochre, are painterly when seen up close and look like generalized skin, or bark, from a distance. *Symphony*, which filled the larger room, is several units of four tall "legs" joined at the top. *Two-Play Tunnel*, its legs multiplied and closer together, crouched malevolently in the small room, an earth-bound version of the

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Rosemarie Castoro, *Burial*, 1973, m/m, 9' x 11' x 41".

1973 *Sky Tunnel*, whose more bulbous units threatened to drop over the viewer; "My tunnel thinking has to do with the left and right hands coming together and not touching, as if to hold an imaginary body."

In all of these works there is an underlying current of pathos (they sprawl like a young animal learning to walk) that relates to Eva Hesse's early sculpture or to some of Tony Smith's solemn incursions into space. Their uniqueness lies in the projection of Castoro's restless, self-oriented energy. "Paintings are the places where you watch yourself. Paintings are reflections. They are the manifestations of sexuality," she wrote in 1970; two years later she noted that her work is "about people and how I feel they relate to one another and myself." The subtle element of auto-eroticism, or auto-voyeurism, is a natural outcome of her subject matter — her own "activities," paramount among them the motions of her own limber and athletic body. Although she declines to be politically classified as a feminist, preferring the image of an androgynous amazon ("the politics of my mind is one big orgy"). In the so-called "woman's issue" of *Art News* in January 1971, she quoted, without comment: "Castoro, Cas-

toro, I saw your paintings at Johnny's. I liked them very much, I thought you were a boy." The heightened sense of self which pervades her work can be attributed at least in part to her position as an independent and ambitious woman *in* the art world, long denied the degree of respect she might justifiably have expected as a serious working artist.

For several years the sexual origins of Castoro's art were more or less hermetic, appearing mainly as an expansive gesturalism, an insistence on either filled or vacant stage/space. A readable image of "the jungle" of "chaotic experience," emerged when the forms became three-dimensional, though there were clues in her journals, such as a poem about eating apple pie: "Peel Off/Poke Into/Pass Through/Emerge from under/ Scrape your eyes/ Clamber about/ Trip over mound of hard darkness/ Land backside/Stop breathing. . . ." In 1970, the theme of organic immersion was applied to the drawings:

I am in dirt continually. The closer I am to myself the dirtier I become. My studio is covered with graphite. I am

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Rosemarie Castoro, *Georgia Branch Dance*, 1974.

Diogenes sitting in a pile of dust. My ocean is made of graphite in front of which I tumble, chase, flop over.

Later she talked about survival in terms of

depth of roots, elbow room. . . . An elbow was in my heart. I swung out and away. It touched my shoulder. I went to sleep at the foot of the forest. A new piece started yesterday afternoon: crouching crotches in a circle. . . . I am making a forest. It will crowd out anguish and misery. Structure comes from chaos, from quiet contemplation after engaging experiences. . . .

Castoro uses the image of the forest — its "male" components and "female" entity — in her writing and sculpture (as has Max Ernst). In another journal entry she expands this metaphor to include the city:

New York is Dante's *Inferno*, extruded up from the horizon of roof tops meeting sky, down through the layers of dirt polluted, facaded levels. New York is buried down from its roofs. It is female from chimney to basement. You might think upon approaching New York from Brooklyn or New Jersey that it is a rectilinear mountain. . . . male, you say. Not when you are in it, occupying any level of coffin space chimney down from the roof.

The sculpture is clearly about this sort of experience, evoking as it does the groping forms of physical adaptation to an environment.

When you bury something it grows in a different form. . . . I am thinking I have a balanced anima/animus. I wanted to be rooted (anima needs penetrating). . . . I extended my animus (to penetrate) into reality and released suspended crotches/double penises/legs, into three interdependent groups. . . .

The sexual dualism found here is essential to the best art of erotic content. Castoro's work has metamorphosed and expanded to include e-motion as well as motion. *Branch Dance*, made of simple tree branches in two days this past summer in Mt. Berry, Georgia, suggests the choreographic freedom sculpture has offered the artist. In the process, the "lines" have been reintegrated, disembodied limbs combining now to form another whole, the activities of which have yet to be fully determined. ■

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from the artist's journals as published in the Lubin House catalogue or from conversation with the author.