



Rosemarie Castoro
Working Out

Rosemarie Castoro

Working Out

The first solo presentation in the UK of works by Rosemarie Castoro (1939–2015), a central figure in New York’s Minimal and Post-Minimal art scene, spans four decades of her multidisciplinary practice. The exhibition takes its title from a 1975 article by Lucy R. Lippard, the art critic and curator who identified Castoro as one of the women artists ‘who subverted or overrode Minimalism on its own turf’. Informed by her background in dance, she developed an intensely physical approach to art-making. She projected herself into her works, creating an embodied, eroticised form of abstraction that functions at the intersection of Minimalism and empowered female identity.

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 [...] into space.

– Lucy R. Lippard, 1975

Defying easy categorisation, Castoro considered herself a ‘paintersculptor’. Her illusionistic giant *Brushstrokes* are a sculptural interpretation of the most basic element of painting, sometimes appearing to grow from the walls. This interplay between artwork and architecture represented the artist’s desire to ‘relate to myself as a building [...] parts of me coming off different parts of the wall’. She experimented with other architectural interventions, such as her *Cracking* works from 1969, represented in the exhibition by a site-specific recreation. In later years, she adopted metal as her medium and learned to weld, creating the multi-part sculptural installation *Mountain Range* (2003–06). As she once said, ‘I function as a human being in art. My art is grounded in expressing my life...’

6 April—21 May 2022
Thaddaeus Ropac London

ropac.net



Rosemarie Castoro working on *Party of Nine*, 1972

Rosemarie Castoro

Metamorphosis and Transmigration

Rachel Stella

With her art of constant renewal and regeneration, Rosemarie Castoro is a master of metamorphosis. Her forms are embodied ideas, and they pass from one series of work to the next in a protean progression.

This aesthetics of transmigration, in which forms expire but their essence passes from one body of work to another, is a fundamental aspect of Castoro's vision. As her work matured, the tempo of dying and rising quickened to the point that she skillfully juggled several related series at once. The beginning of the twenty-first century was one of the most fecund periods of her life. Invited to teach in Corciano, Italy, she was inspired by the spectacular views. From them derived the *Mountain Range* series, expressed in sensuous landscape studies on paper and, later, steel sculpture. At the same time she made *Orbits*, images of linked arterial circulations inspired by her medical experiences. Far from her studio and her tools, she ingeniously found a lightweight material that could be manipulated with ease. In her hands, wire mesh structured the *Orbits* into the *Mosquito Net Works*.



Mountain Range, 2003–06
Welded stainless steel, 9 parts, 350 x 650 cm (137.8 x 255.9 in)

Castoro graduated from the Pratt Institute of Brooklyn, NY in 1963 with the skills to earn a living as a graphic designer, a love of dance and the firm intention to become a painter. Yet by 1968, with her *Tape Painting* made of surgical adhesive tape on canvas, she reached the limit of her confrontational response to the tradition of paint on a rectangle. Thereafter she experimented with practices not yet proclaimed post-studio.

She was tapped by her peers for events outside of galleries and institutions. On 18 April 1969, she made 'an atoll out of Manhattan Island' by delineating the imaginary space with silver tape. By May, when she was invited to contribute to a benefit exhibition for the Art Workers' Coalition, her appropriation of sites had acquired a defining protocol, and she symbolically cracked the walls of the Paula Cooper Gallery with silver tape. In September, she proved that the concept could function at any scale when she participated in Lucy Lippard's '557,087' exhibition in Seattle, cracking the former Fine Arts Pavilion of the 1962 World's Fair. The intervention created for Castoro's current exhibition at the Thaddaeus Ropac gallery in London respects the site-specific protocols she devised.

When Castoro applied for a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in 1970, she wrote one sentence: 'I want to make oceans seven feet tall.' That was no conceptual proposal; there was nothing virtual about the imposing panels presented in her first solo show, in 1971 at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. With hindsight, they seem fairly provisional propositions for resolving the conflicts around pictorialism that had sent her out of the studio in the first place. Rather, it is with these elegant *Brushstrokes* that Castoro realised the transitional objects that expedited her independence from the picture plane. They make their point with gentle irony. Are they the brushstrokes of a giant? Or the humorous reminder that the *matière* precludes painting from being literally flat?

Amongst the artist's most intriguing works, the *Brushstrokes* are gracious and vivacious, and impossible to categorise. Made from idiosyncratic materials, neither painting nor sculpture, they inhabit the wall with choreographic intensity. The question of pictorial space that haunted artists of Castoro's generation is addressed with flirtatious wit in these works. The numerous preparatory drawings for the *Brushstrokes* point to the bountiful ambiguities of visual perception. Each drawing employs the same graphic trope: a white cube depicted in one-point perspective with a minimal number of lines. This convention allows the image to be perceived as a room, and the sheet of paper on which it is drawn as a transparent fourth wall. Miniature reliefs made from modelling paste and graphite cavort on the back wall of this illusionistic space.

Brushstrokes come as singles or small groups. Their air of mystery arises from the peculiar method of their making. The process starts with the application of a thick layer of gesso and paste on a sheet of Masonite, using a broom to delineate a form. The form is cut from the Masonite with a jigsaw; the raw edges are covered with the gesso and paste mixture. The result is sanded, then treated with a graphite stick and an eraser. Describing 'The Technique of Flat Strokes', Castoro calls this rubbing of graphite into the grooves made by the broom 'drawing'.

Both *Gentless* and *Corner Cut* consist of a single component. Thanks to her disproportionate tool, Castoro's gesture surpasses what can be handled by a paintbrush, even as the pigments expose the strong graphic lines no paintbrush could describe. The enlarged and simplified motifs read as enormous signifiers, parodies of painterly strokes whose guffaws pointedly refute their status as paintings. Yet their

relative flatness and adherence to the wall precludes their categorisation as sculpture. They are free spirits, liberated from the burden of formalist criticism.

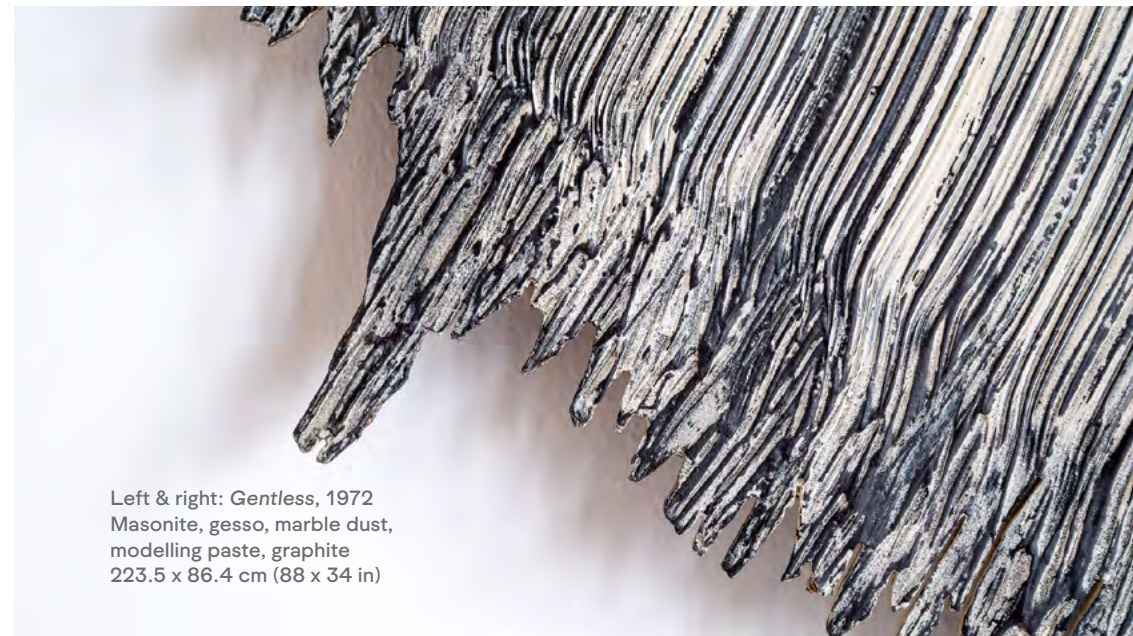
Although they were made during a period when theatricality was a shibboleth, these works have no qualms about their come hither approach. Multipartite works such as *Climbing* or *Bangs* or *Mimic* set individual components free to run amok with illusionistic space. They do not dispute depth or perspective, but the space between. Frameless, they activate the entire surface of the wall, regardless of its dimensions. Visual paradoxes abound. Under changing conditions of light, their modelling provokes optical effects that muddle our perception of the relationship between the units composing each work and



simultaneously interrogate the wall's function. Seeing them does not suffice to apprehend them. They ask our senses to perceive volume and ponderability in addition to visual appearance.

While the *Brushstrokes* exploit the tension between tactile and optical reception, they also exhibit the artist's fondness for wordplay. A little inside knowledge teases out the name of the art dealer Julian Pretto from *Pray Do*. On 15 December 1971, Castoro wrote in her diary: 'Pitman shorthand has returned in the form of brushstrokes spelling people's names.' Where in Castoro's life Pitman returned from is not specified, but we can easily understand its allure for her. She relished the simplified and easy-to-draw characters, which she manipulated to evoke names and words with her own secret system of metonymy. In her contribution to the album published in Pretto's memory, Castoro writes: 'Julian changed his name from Leonard in 1972 after I made a cut out graphite masonite work called *Pray Do*, based on the short-hand symbol for Leonard Pretto.'

The *Exoskeletal Auras* are made from similar materials to the *Brushstrokes*, but they display a distinct kind of playfulness, for they are voluntarily evocative of the human form. The component elements seem to outline the posture, silhouette or movement of small figures tightly grouped on the walls, in crowds, meetings or parades. They call for a different type of attention. In her notebooks, Castoro refers to them as 'little people'. Perhaps it is no coincidence that they were born around the same time as Charles Simonds began populating the *Dwellings* he discretely placed in safe spaces in cities throughout the world.



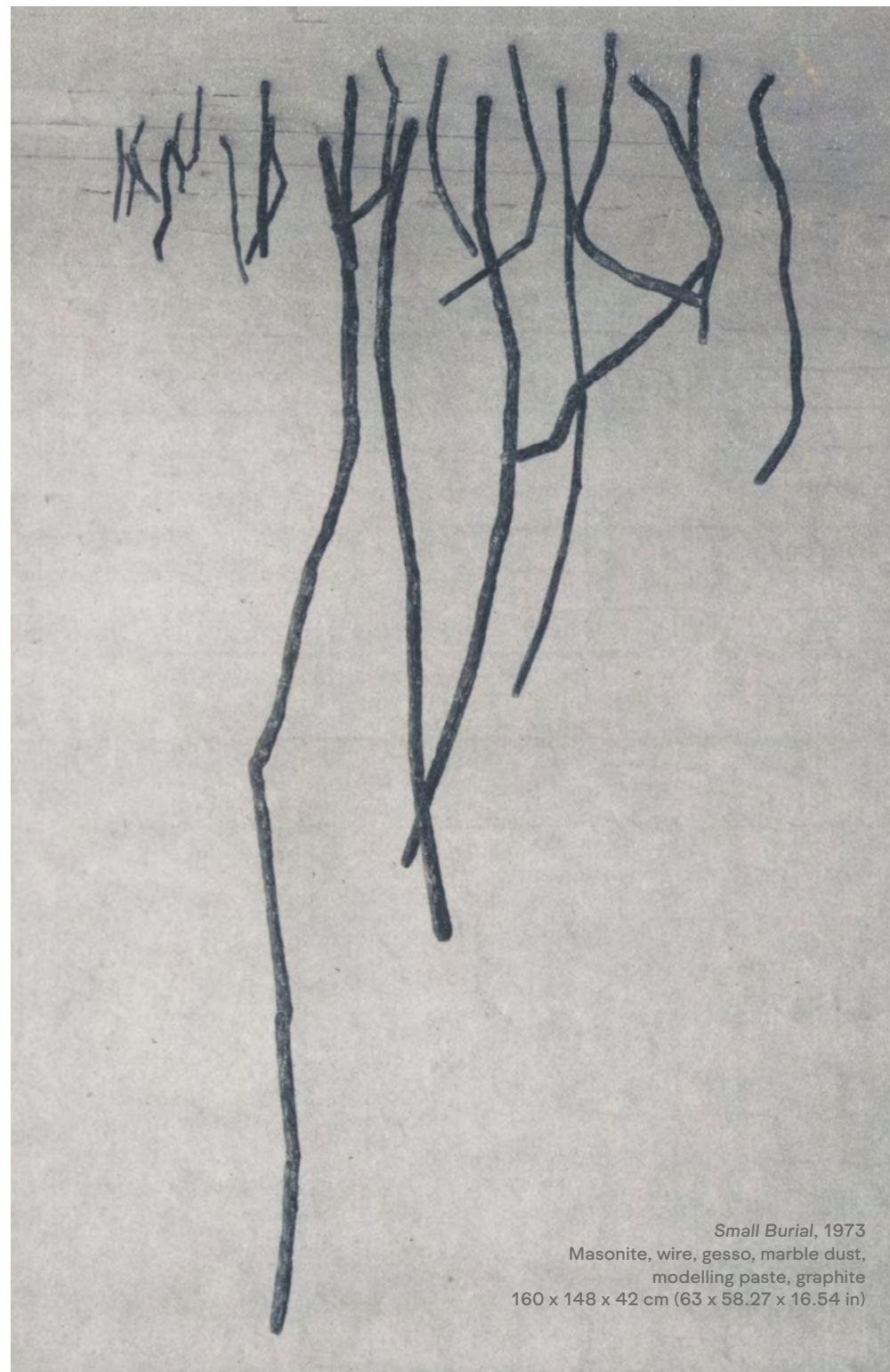
Left & right: *Gentless*, 1972
Masonite, gesso, marble dust,
modelling paste, graphite
223.5 x 86.4 cm (88 x 34 in)



Pray Do, 1972
Masonite, gesso, marble dust, modelling paste, graphite
203.2 x 203.2 cm (80 x 80 in)

As the *Brushstrokes* begot the *Exoskeletal Auras* of little people who returned in a later ideation as *Burials*, so every series of Rosemarie Castoro's work evolves organically from one proposition to another. The roots of *Shadow Flasher* can be traced back to the experience of constructing *Trap a Zoid* in 1978 from 200 tree trunks. The bark of the tree trunks, curved and balanced, found a new expression in the multitudinous members of the *Flasher* clan who preoccupied Castoro until she exhausted the form and sent them to the great gallery in the sky as *Angels*. As she said about *Small Burial*, 'to bury something enabled it to grow'.

— Rachel Stella
Paris, March 2022



Small Burial, 1973
Masonite, wire, gesso, marble dust,
modelling paste, graphite
160 x 148 x 42 cm (63 x 58.27 x 16.54 in)

About Rosemarie Castoro

Born in Brooklyn, Rosemarie Castoro lived and worked in New York until her death in 2015. Major posthumous career retrospectives have been held at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Geneva (2019) and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona (2017). Her work has also been featured in group exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2017); National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2016); Museu de Arte Moderna Rio de Janeiro (2014); Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York (2012); and MoMA PS1, Queens, New York (2003).

Thaddaeus Ropac

London Paris Salzburg Seoul