

## **“Alison Ruttan’s Ceramic Minefields” by Tom Denlinger**

*Catalog Essay, “If all you have is a hammer everything looks like a nail”, Chicago Cultural Center, January 23-May 10, 2015*

At first sight, Alison Ruttan’s ceramic reproductions of bombed buildings, invoke news footage of smoking ruins in Lebanon that I had seen when I was young, living in California. These were distant events, but constant companions on the TV, that engendered vague guilt in my juvenile psyche as to our role and involvement in the Middle East, as instigators, perpetrators, co-participants.

Images of Modernism, buildings in Beirut (‘Paris of the Middle East’) disintegrated on the evening news, their open grids eviscerated, along with promises of better, more egalitarian lives embedded in those progressive towers. But the bulk of the destruction happened on the periphery of that center, in places that abut the warm-water resorts and playgrounds of wealthy nations. These were suburbs and towns built to house populaces and workers newly democratized by the correct leaders.

It was unclear during the war in Lebanon whether the bombings and shelling of the evening news were a revocation, a denial or a rejection of those erstwhile promises.

Ruttan’s work invokes those lost places, invites us to revisit that suffering. The horror of her ceramic reconstructions is not in their realistic depiction, but rather in the convulsive memory that comes rushing back, the renewed realization that these distant events were all too real for those living there. Ceramic reproductions of buildings from photographs, and notably lacking in human representation, duplicates of the cheaply constructed malls, governmental buildings and 1960’s residences that dotted my California landscape, stand in her work as blackened specters of a failed social experiment. The absence of corpses prompts us to identify with Ruttan’s buildings, with their supple clay contours, the damaged elasticity of their outer membranes, the crippled folding of their structures. These pieces haunt the present, ongoing horror, as a fragmented backdrop, complete with monsters that lurk just beyond the frame.

Ruttan’s ceramic constructions of exploded places re-enact specific moments of cultural memory, recollect the lost minutiae of the historical record. They recall the forgotten particulars of individual suffering embedded within political/economic upheavals. Her work recognizes that the evening news has become more than historical record, and is now part of the framing of our cultural unconscious, in which the human details of violent events have become gritty irritants, and uncanny referents for our present experience. Her fractured structures re-cast the egalitarian, gridded frame as a traumatic talisman of the destructive hierarchies of investment capital, and the historical, video record of our zombie past come back to bite us.

In some instances Ruttan invokes absence or irretrievable loss, as in the reproduction of a bomb crater. In these instances one is reminded that war creates its own landscapes, and that its topographies, such as the 'minefield', have also altered language with potent references.

Ruttan's latest series re-builds more recent erasures. The mass killing of escaping soldiers and civilians along the road from Kuwait was portrayed at the time, in part, as successful testing of experimental war technologies. Ruttan presents crashed and burned-out vehicles along a desert track, a sketchy road that also traces the diverse wreckage of our involvements. She addresses our familiarity with these places, as well as the familiarization of horror and destruction that accompanies war reporting, that anesthetizes, and makes our collective empathy more difficult to access as conflicts continue.

By reviewing and revisiting these disturbances, by excavating these buried moments as ceramic environments, by turns cartoonish and accurate, Ruttan rejuvenates them as renewable and present suffering, as NOW\_AGAIN pain in empathy.

Ruttan de-familiarizes us with our anesthetization, re-injecting these ordeals into the cultural psyche as actual physicality and loss. We are asked to deal with them, to include them, while we attempt to construct a shared cultural memory, and acknowledgement, of the true impact of our actions in historical events.