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Davina Semo: 'Ruder Forms Survive'

By Roberta Smith

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Davina Semo is a promising young artist with a great love of industrial-strength materials trying to strike out in new directions. But despite working in pigmented cast concrete, heavy chains, stainless steel mesh and acid-stained one-way mirrors, the results are pat and inert. Too many pieces are heavy-duty imitations of monochrome paintings, which is by now a genre. Others are just too literal, and remain so despite the efforts of the histrionic punk-noir titles. Seven tall X's made from thin brass rods is still just that, even if it is titled "They Seem to Come to Me Asking to Be Broken."

There are signs of hope: a scatter piece made of bronze caltrops – small pronged devices used in warfare – and a slab of reinforced glass painted red on one side, repeatedly smashed and crudely mended with concrete. (It's titled "She Passed By, Moving Through the Streets like a Dog at Large," but don't hold that against it.)

But on the whole, Ms. Semo's best works remain the narrow metal-lined vertical apertures she inserts into walls, as confirmed by two recent examples in bronze. At once startlingly erotic, votive and minatory, they suggest armored female genitalia, archers' slits and narrow fissures of light. They focus the eye uncomfortably, make looking feel voyeuristic and take over whole walls. Another memorable piece is their opposite: a shiny bronze flange that tapers upward and outward from the wall to a depth of less than two inches. At first you don't quite know what you're looking at: Is it another crevice? You want to touch it, but it's so pristine that touching seems taboo. It's like an idol or an abstracted hood ornament without a car. Nothing else here quite matches these three pieces or elicit such tantalizing confusions of perception, material and emotion.