

## ART

# Artist with a Cinderella touch

## Sono Osato's sculpture makes a ball of hard work

By David Bonetti  
EXAMINER ART CRITIC

**I**N HER sculptures made of found objects, Sono Osato, whose new work is being shown at the Terrain Gallery through April 13, combines the material poverty and spiritual richness of Joseph Beuys and the Italian *arte povera* artists (not to mention Bay Area visual poet David Ireland) with the visual wit and artistic delicacy of Joseph Cornell and H.C. Westermann.

That might sound like a prescription for aesthetic chaos, but Osato's lively imagination, which sees clear through the aggregation of age and distress to the beauty at the heart of things, only skates across those derivations while doing her own thing.

In other pieces, she throws in a little Zen calligraphy, some *tachiste*-style painting and a nod toward the witty wall drawings of Richard Tuttle, but she does it all with such a nonchalance that you can't criticize her derivations. Instead, you admire her broad sympathies and her syncretic ability to make such disparate styles her own.

But to talk about style when you discuss her work is all wrong. Osato's eclectic approach is based on process and the joy of finding something beautiful (or useful) among the junk piles of the universe.

Osato lives in Oakland, but she taught this past year at the Kansas City Art Institute where, from the evidence at hand, she was obviously very busy. The Terrain Gallery is filled to overflowing with the work she brought back, and it is nearly transformed into a simulacrum of grandma's attic or grandpa's basement workshop.

Everything is rusted, stained, old, broken, cracked, dried up and



"Ball + Chain" (1990), made from found objects; at Terrain Gallery

desiccated. There are sets of shelves stuffed with rusted and barnacled tools and hardware pretty much left the way they were found. There are other pieces where, with minimal touch, Osato has transformed the forlorn and leftover into exquisite statements of personal sensibility.

This is definitely one of the best gallery shows of the season by a local artist — by any artist. What's remarkable is that it doesn't depend on wearing theory on its

sleeve to make its impact, nor does it resort to empty exercises in worn-out technique — the two major strategies contemporary artists employ to get attention.

In her work, Osato takes an object, often a piece of junk, and alters it in simple but often magical ways that reveal the inherent beauty of the material or form. Her process is alchemical in the tradition of Beuys and Jannis Kounellis in that purely by artistic means she turns detritus into jewels.

To see, all you have to do is to look — without prejudice or preconception about what art has to be.

The show includes 69 numbered pieces. It could have benefited from some weeding out — some pieces might not stand on their own. But the generosity of experience the exhibition offers is extraordinary.

Within the general practice of assembling found objects, Osato follows several patterns.

"Kansas City Poem #1," for instance, is a straightforward presentation of visual information. On a raw piece of aged wood with notches cut out of its two upper corners, Osato has attached eight metal and rubber objects, all roughly "O"-shaped, across its upper edge, giving the piece a linguistic structure. In "Hinge Pulley Plug Switch" the poem is more literal. A hinge, a pulley, a plug, a switch, all rusted, cracked and abandoned dangle on strings from a length of metal.

In "Homage to Ray Charles," Osato has combined found objects to create a new object with its own essence. Here, two oversize work

shoes with yellow laces sit on a welded metal stool, the top of which has been papered with sheet music of "Georgia on My Mind."

In a similar transformation, "Key Chain Rat Trap" — a key chain loaded with keys with a rusted metal rat trap attached to it — dangles from the wall without apology, more than the sum of its parts.

In several pieces nails are used as lines. Similarly, in "Wire Drawing," Osato has covered a wall with curlicues and zigzags of twisted and bent lengths of metal, turning it into a mural. "Wire Drawing" is reminiscent of Richard Tuttle's fey wall drawings made of string and thin lengths of wire from the late '60s, currently re-created at Los Angeles' Temporary Contemporary. But where Tuttle's work is light and evanescent, Osato's is punkish and industrial.

Osato's new work makes an implicit statement that art is about making. You take something, you do something to it, you put it aside. You take something else, you do something to it, you put it aside. You keep on repeating the process, and before you know it, you have a body of work.

You keep on working.