

ART REVIEW

# At SMFA, an artist's minimal approach speaks volumes

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated January 29, 2020, 3:36 p.m.



Kate Costello's "Mouth & Smoke." PHOTO BY BRICA WILCOX, COURTESY OF KATE COSTELLO

Paring an image to its essence widens its scope. Think of Kara Walker's wild, silhouetted vignettes of enslavement. Described only by their contours, her figures become larger than life.

Kate Costello's practice revolves around similar distillation. Her show "The Tip of the Tongue" is on view at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University. In

drawings, sculptures, and more, she simplifies imagery into archetypes and symbols, which, like language, she assembles into a new syntax.

This is comical in drawings such as “Mouth and Smoke” and “Slime, Heel.” She concretizes ephemeral or oozy things with flat plumes, and adds more identifiable forms — stylized black lips, a high-heeled shoe. On first glance, these look like clean, goofy abstractions. Spend time and her shorthand becomes legible, and more meaning pops up. I saw an impaled mouse in the slime.



She strings symbols into puzzles in her “Rebus” series. “Rebus, Scissors” depicts a hand and a pair of scissors over a mushroom patch, and then punctuates it all with stacked ovals and circles. Our minds strain to read meaning that doesn’t come together. Yet the hint of it lingers, nudging at us.

With such sly misdirection, Costello’s symbols become guideposts to her viewers’ own imaginings. “Echoed Agent,” her commissioned mural at SMFA, revolves around an archetypal figure, the Traveler, who does not appear. We are left to infer what we can from the Traveler’s world: a swordfish in water; ancient ruins and the foot of Colossus; dominoes; a horse with handprints above it. Like Walker’s narratives it reads like a shadow play, but absent a protagonist. Costello invites us to gather clues — about mark-making, civilization, and communication — and put a story together.

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A detail from Kate Costello's "Echoed Agent, 2020." PETER HARRIS (CUSTOM CREDIT)/PHOTO BY PETER HARRIS, COURTESY OF KATE COSTELLO

Not all her work is in silhouettes. But even her sculptures, such as the paired busts of Gertrude Stein in “writer/writer,” have a kind of purity. They’re dyed plaster — the same all the way through.

Stein’s linguistic minimalism inspires Costello. She, too, deconstructs her art, and uses the familiar foundation stones to build something new — confoundingly odd, yet fresh and awakening.

### **KATE COSTELLO: THE TIP OF THE TONGUE**

At School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, 230 Fenway, through April 4.  
617-627-3518, [artgalleries.tufts.edu](http://artgalleries.tufts.edu)

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Cate McQuaid can be reached at [catemcquaid@gmail.com](mailto:catemcquaid@gmail.com). Follow her on Twitter [@cmcmq](https://twitter.com/cmcmq).

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