

THE HAPPY MEDIUM

Ceramics are undergoing a revolution in the contemporary art world—but nowhere more so than in Los Angeles, where clay has a particularly resonant history.

By Leah Ollman

“CLAY’S TECTONIC SHIFT”: so a recent exhibition at Scripps College hailed the late ’50s and ’60s ceramics movement that rattled the Los Angeles art establishment.¹ Clay had long dwelled in the shadowy margins of craft, but such practitioners as John Mason, Ken Price and, especially, the charismatic Peter Voulkos were thrusting it into the sculptural limelight. Their work and that of their students and colleagues helped change the terms of clay’s production and reception, liberating ceramics from the constraints—and expectations—of domestic scale, nominal functionality and an emphasis on refined technique.

However “tectonic,” the shift didn’t hold. Over time, old attitudes slid back into place, keeping work in clay largely separate and unequal in the public eye—until recently. A new shift, roughly a decade old, has been catalyzed not by a single or even a few strong personalities, but by a broader redefinition and realignment of artistic practice. Increasingly post-disciplinary, artists roam freely among mediums, unencumbered by traditional boundaries and hierarchical divisions. Many show a renewed interest in work of the hand, which they see as an antidote to theory- and concept-driven art. A messy physicality is often their (defiant) answer to the disembodied digital; theirs is a rising constituency for authenticity which advocates the material over the virtual. Critically acclaimed shows across the country have focused attention on the vigor and diversity of new sculpture in clay,² and at the same time, such work has also become normalized, folded into non-medium-specific exhibition programming.³ Clay is back—without, of course, ever having truly gone away.

Again, L.A. has provided fertile ground for developments in ceramics. Voulkos famously upended conventional

training methods in clay when, in 1954, he established an open studio program at the Los Angeles County (later Otis) Art Institute. It became a center for experimentation, attracting Mason and Price, as well as Paul Soldner, Billy Al Bengston, Jerry Rothman and others. University art departments in Southern California have been, and remain, prime incubators for ceramic artists—particularly the prolific, vigorous programs in clay at UCLA (with longtime professor Adrian Saxe) and Cal State Long Beach (headed by Tony Marsh). Otis appears to be boosting its clay offerings, and CalArts has given a ceramics class a trial run this fall, to enthusiastic student response. Scripps College in Claremont exerts its own special influence, with the longest-running annual ceramics invitational exhibition (inaugurated in 1944) in the country.

Such programs, and the openness they foster, have attracted to Southern California countless artists interested in clay, and likely seduced others already living here into dipping their hands in the muck. The roster of L.A. artists engaging with the medium runs long and crosses generations: Tetsuji Aono, Tanya Batura, Phyllis Green, Gerit Grimm, Roger Herman, Anna Sew Hoy, Mitsuko Ikeno, Christopher Miles, Thomas Muller, Ruby Neri, Joel Otterson, Morgan Peck, Steven Portigal, Tia Pulitzer, Michael Reafsnnyder, Sterling Ruby and many others.

The four artists discussed below work in a range of materials, but clay is central to their endeavors. All speak proudly of their connection to the medium, even as they subvert or make sport of its history. Mostly, they aim to extend and expand clay’s enormous potential.

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Merkel Hess:
Silk Crate, 2012,
stoneware, 12 by
13 by 13 inches



Matthias Merkel Hess

Matthias Merkel Hess (b. 1978) moved to L.A. after earning an undergraduate degree in journalism and environmental science at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. He took classes in the “Voukos-inspired pot shop” at Pasadena City College, and decided to become a potter.⁴ After a postbaccalaureate year at Cal State Long Beach, he earned his MFA at UCLA in 2010. Now he refers to himself in irony-steeped promotional material as “the internationally known and unequalled, unrivaled and undisputed greatest bucket potter in the world.” George Ohr, no stranger to the combined power of humor and hyperbole, made that claim in nearly those words for himself a century ago; Merkel Hess simply adjusted Ohr’s original designation, “art potter,” for a better fit.

Starting with buckets and Rubbermaid Brute trash cans in 2010, Merkel Hess has been replicating by hand, in clay, the everyday plastic accoutrements of the home and the ceramics studio. He has redefined the traditional domain of the pottery vessel to include versions of milk crates, gas cans, laundry hampers, water jugs and more. He glazes the pieces in vibrant, gemlike hues—garnet, emerald, jade—or earth tones familiar from California studio ceramics of the ’60s. With each work, he transforms a mass-produced, functional container into an idiosyncratic, far less practical (because heavier and breakable) but more conceptually interesting object. He riffs on the readymade, pays homage to 19th-century American stoneware pottery used for everyday storage, and wittily flaunts clay’s relationship to the utilitarian and domestic. Earlier this year, Merkel Hess exhibited his “Bucketry” at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art in Overland Park, Kan. In 2013, he will have solo shows at ACME in L.A. and Salon 94 in New York.

For last summer’s Venice Beach Biennial (an off-site show linked to the Hammer Museum’s “Made in L.A. 2012” exhibi-

tion), Merkel Hess introduced a new line of locally inspired novelties in clay: sunglasses, six-pack rings and incense burners modeled after the Case Study Houses designed by Neutra, the Eameses and Pierre Honig. While MerkelCraft is a knowing wink to kitschy beach souvenirs, it is also a tribute of sorts to Treasure Craft, a defunct L.A. ceramics company that produced souvenirs, novelty items and housewares. It is as well a nod to the “fair wares” that Ohr sold at county fairs, and perhaps also to “Happy’s Curios” (1972-78), Ken Price’s loving take on Mexican souvenir pottery.

Wryly self-referential as a maker/merchandiser, Merkel Hess also produces functional pottery that he calls MerkelWare. His charmingly irregular planters, jugs and vases reinvest objects of everyday use with a direct connection to the hand of their maker—or to one of his other body parts. Creating impressions of his knees and shins in slabs of clay, Merkel Hess makes bowls that, as he puts it in a mock MerkelMall ad (modeled after a SkyMall spread, and appearing on four pages of the spring-summer 2012 issue of *Slake* magazine), “just scream Bruce Nauman crossed with a Zen begging bowl.”

Kristen Morgin

Born in 1968 in Brunswick, Georgia, and raised in Northern California, Kristen Morgin studied painting and sculpture as an undergraduate at Cal State Hayward, and taught herself cartooning. Soon after beginning at upstate New York’s Alfred University (MFA 1997), the bastion of ceramics education, she gravitated somewhat irreverently toward unfired, unglazed clay and has continued to use it, augmented by paint, cement, wood, wire and glue. Crusty and fragmented, Morgin’s early sculptures resemble excavated relics. A group of skeletal-looking, full-size cellos oscillates between presence and absence, sound and silence. She has also created several convincing versions of cars, true to scale, from the diminutive Fiat Topolino to a Cadillac hearse, each made to appear as if aged, partially rusted and rotted out. Time seems to have corroded them, pushed them into the past, while their familiarity as cultural symbols exerts a strong nostalgic pull. Morgin’s imagery is steeped in decay, but it also testifies to the persistence of matter. Her work was included in “Unmonumental” at the New Museum in New York (2007), as well as the Hammer Museum’s “Thing: New Sculpture from Los Angeles” and the 61st Ceramics Annual at Scripps College (both 2005). She taught at Cal State Long Beach for 10 years, and shows regularly at Marc Selwyn Fine Art in L.A.

Morgin favors subjects that are already old or obsolete, and, through paint and the deft manipulation of texture, she mimics the impact of regular use. Her board games (Monopoly and Candy Land, in which every element is shaped in clay) feature what appear to be much-handled tokens, play money and game cards. Her comic books and Harlequin romances have worn and doodled-upon covers,



Kristen Mordin:
Donald Dodo,
2011, paint, pencil
and ink on unfired
clay, 5½ by 4½ by
¾ inches. Courtesy
Marc Selwyn Fine
Art, Los Angeles.



Julia Haft-Candell:
dabalia, 2011,
porcelain, silk,
thread, wire and
mixed mediums,
55 by 37 by
28 inches.
Courtesy ACME.

and torn and abraded corners. Morgin exhibits some of these sculptures alongside the original objects that served as models, prompting a lively exchange between artifact and constructed memory. An example is *Untitled Mail Table*, a tabletop installation she showed at Zach Feuer Gallery in New York in 2010, which juxtaposed an array of real children's drawings and letters with their painted clay counterparts. The precise likenesses brought to mind 19th-century American trompe l'oeil paintings (by William Michael Harnett, John Frederick Peto and others) of personal ephemera—envelopes addressed, postmarked and torn open, along with calling cards, postcards and newspaper clippings. Morgin's work resonates as well with mid-20th century assemblage and its recognition of the physical and metaphorical power of found objects. There's also a bit of a Pop twist to her tragicomic gloss on American cultural icons and consumer goods.

Morgin's most recent works hint at darkly humorous narratives. Intimately scaled "collages" piece together clay-and-paint tributes to comic book pages, playing cards, matchbooks and sketches, cut, torn and reassembled with Hannah Höch-like wit. A new all-clay still-life, in progress at the time of this writing, joins alphabet blocks spelling out

"Hollywoodland" with altered record albums, toy figurines and cars, Pez dispensers and more, creating a kind of puzzle, or a child's game of make-believe, with its fantastic displacements and elastic scale. The installation conjures, she says, her experience of Southern California as a place of "plausible half-truths,"⁵ a seductive, stimulating mix of the false and authentic.

Julia Haft-Candell

Having begun working in clay as an undergraduate at UC Davis, Julia Haft-Candell (b. 1982 in Oakland, Calif.) grew intrigued with the ways it allowed her to push her painting and drawing into three dimensions. Her spindly floor and wall-mounted sculptures are essentially composed of lines executed in different mediums: formed of clay, torn from cloth, drawn and sewn. The works exude a DIY resourcefulness marrying the humble and the baroque. Haft-Candell's raw ingredients include silk scraps, rice paper, wire, ink, paint, rebar, wood, epoxy, PVC pipe, old spools of thread that belonged to her grandmother and clay (terra-cotta and porcelain) in a variety of shapes: delicate twigs, extruded spaghetti strands, small, thin slabs, chains of loops, tangles, nets and squiggles.

Among the influences on her provisional and process-oriented esthetic, which she began developing during her graduate studies under Morgin and Tony Marsh at Cal State Long Beach (MFA 2010), are traditional Korean and Japanese pottery, as well as the accretive ceramic and mixed-medium constructions of Linda Sormin. Haft-Candell's sculptures evolve in the manner of stream-of-consciousness sketches. She brings her pre-made components to her sites and remains open to accident and improvisation. She considers the intentional breakage of clay elements a type of "editing" that steers a piece away from neat resolution. Some of the broken pieces are mended and stitched; vulnerability is countered by the affirmation of repair. Wrapped fragments resemble fetishes.

Haft-Candell's assemblages from 2009-10 integrate found objects like alarm clocks, studio chairs, umbrellas, fans and magnifying glasses, but she has since shed reliance on the known and recognizable in favor of more ambiguous bodily and organic evocations. She derives much of her imagery from the realms of biology (ribs, spines, internal organs) and botany. She says that theories of emergence and adaptive behavior guide her construction: each entity is a response to what came before, part of an interconnected system of growth. In *Lobe (Cornelius)*, 2011, slim clay branches jut from the wall, connecting with irregular, fragmented armatures, softly geometric ladders, cages, nets. A gridlike pattern is inked onto several of the clay struts. Elements are joined with epoxy or bandaged together crudely with cloth and string. Scrappy and raw, the work nonetheless has a kind of humble elegance.

Ben Jackel

An avid model plane builder as a child, and a self-professed “warrior” trained in martial arts, axe throwing, archery and the whip, Ben Jackel (b. 1977) engages craft and conflict with equal intensity. He began using war imagery shortly after the U.S. invaded Iraq, gravitating toward weapons technology past and present, from a Civil War-era cannon in clay and wood, and a wall-mounted World War II battleship in clay, to a series of ceiling-suspended drone aircraft in graphite-burnished mahogany.

Jackel earned his MFA at UCLA (2005) and honed his skills at crafting precise, perfect surfaces as the lead sculptor in Charles Ray’s studio. Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath spurred a series of sculptures relating to emergency equipment—fire extinguishers, hydrants, sprinklers, standpipes and alarm bells, all rendered in dark, unglazed clay lightly coated in wax, a rich finish that reads ambiguously as metal

or even stone. His second solo show at L.A. Louver (May–June 2012) juxtaposed objects keyed to destruction (like the drones) with devices designed for rescue.

Jackel refashions his subjects with meticulous fidelity, but courts complication and contradiction. There is a surprising charge to the ubiquitous, overlooked emergency equipment but a curious neutralization of the drones. Many of his sculptures are actual scale, but he skews others to opposite extremes, rendering an army of 256 spear-wielding clay soldiers (echoes of the famous Chinese terra-cotta warriors) in miniature, for example (*Syntagma*, 2008–09), while radically upsizing to over 13 feet in height a 15th-century carved wood halberd head (*Pay Attention*, 2012). Jackel’s works typically exude a hushed sobriety, though an anthropomorphic humor occasionally wafts in. The standpipes, single and multiheaded, suggest squat little bodies with curved necks. The sumptuous, sinuous folds of a stoneware firehose (*Navy Hose*, 2012) hang like cartoonish tresses. Citing as influential the social commentary embedded in Richard Notkin’s barbed and beautiful ceramic teapots, Jackel makes odes to power that double as critiques.

IF THE CERAMICS COMMUNITY can be insular, the world of clay is now just the opposite—an open, amorphous playing field with no rules or entry requirements.⁶ The new guard may appear a threat to the old (much as “artists using photography” must have felt to self-identified photographers during the ’70s), violating the presumed sanctity of the medium and often willfully disregarding its history. Each of the artists discussed above acknowledges—in conversation and, implicitly, in their work—the friction that exists between the two realms, as well as the relatively new freedom to transcend it. ○

Ben Jackel: *NY Standpipes with Spikes* (detail), 2012, stoneware, beeswax and ebony, 20 by 26 by 13 inches overall. Courtesy LA Louver, Venice, Calif.

