

# ceramics

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Ben Jackel

# USE ONLY IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

by Kathleen Whitney





1 NY Standpipes with Spikes, 26 in. (66 cm) in length, 2012. 2 Emergency Horn, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, 2011. 3 Ruby St., 28 in. (71 cm) in height, 2011. 4 SF Hydrant, 32½ in. (83 cm) in height, 2011. All works are handbuilt using Laguna B-3 Brown clay, with a polished beeswax coating. All photos courtesy of L.A. Louver gallery, Los Angeles, California.

First you see them, then you don't, all those objects you pass by every day and don't notice; they hide in plain sight on street corners, in parking structures and public spaces. They fall under the radar of observation because they're small, placed below eye level or stuck in corners. They're often symbols of catastrophe, to be touched by people trained to handle them. These half noticed things, safety devices such as fire extinguishers, stand pipes, pressure releases, hydrants, are background dwellers, there only in case of an emergency. This topic is part of Ben Jackel's subject matter; the objects inspired the title of his 2012 exhibition at L.A. Louver gallery in Los Angeles, "Zero Percent Contained," a term used to describe a fire that firefighters can't control. His hydrants and other objects symbolize hope in a negative way; they are

things you hope not to have to use and that you hope will solve a problem. Because they are isolated from the environment where they ordinarily would be, Jackel's sculptures become exotic; more than imitations of the functional. It doesn't quite matter that you don't know anything about them; the point is that they are both mysterious and beautiful.

A good builder and a good artist have a lot in common; they both construct items that exhibit craftsmanship and employ an economy of means. These similarities explain the appearance of Jackel's work. He photographs the safety devices and uses the images like blueprints, sizing them up approximately to their original scale. While his pieces replicate existing structures, the translation from metal to clay changes the nature and meaning of those objects.



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Instead of the remote quality of the industrial objects they are based on, they have the warmth and intimacy of the handmade. His work process transforms the fabrication methods of metal casting and tooling originally used to create the objects that inspire him. He carves his work from clay and bolsters it with invisible supports of wood, brass, and steel. Jackel's forms are not identical to their sources; a close look finds the imperfections that humanize and animate them. Many of his surfaces retain the marks of carving. Although each of Jackel's sculptures has shared characteristics, each has its own distinct persona.

To Jackel, craft and imagery is a single element; his technical ability is astonishing. His precision, choice of imagery and attention to detail have been influenced by three ceramic sculptors; Richard Notkin, his UCLA graduate school professor Adrian Saxe, and Ken Price. All the work is made from Laguna's B-3 Brown clay; he coils, carves, and smooths it. Jackel has a die he's designed for his extruder that produces coils approximately one by two inches thick with a groove at the bottom to facilitate attachment; he's also invented a tool that scores a curved surface before applying slip. He uses an electric kiln, soaking the pieces for some time before bringing them to temperature; firing takes about a week.

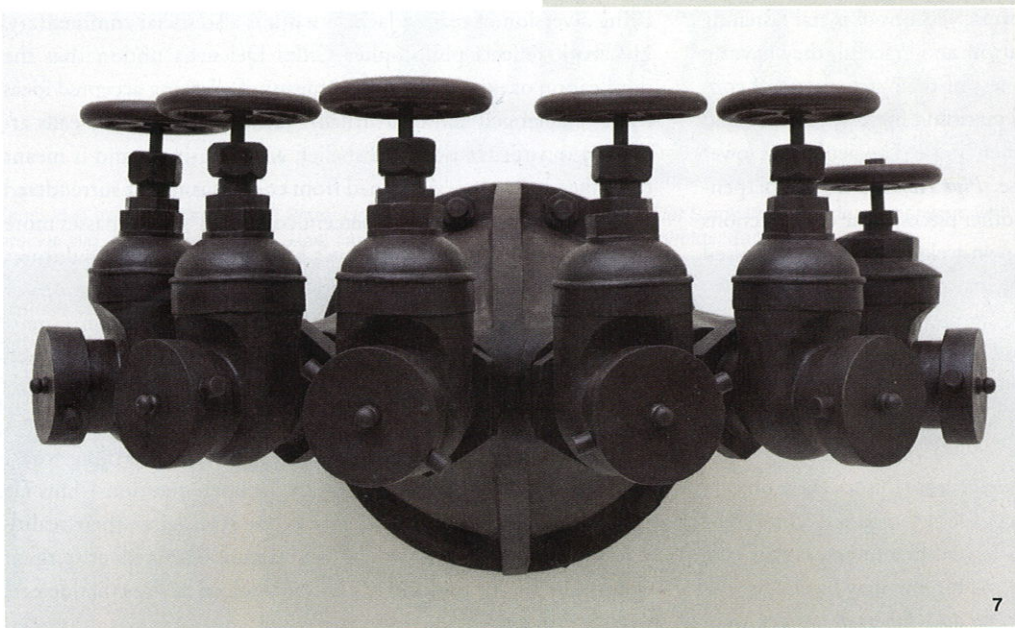
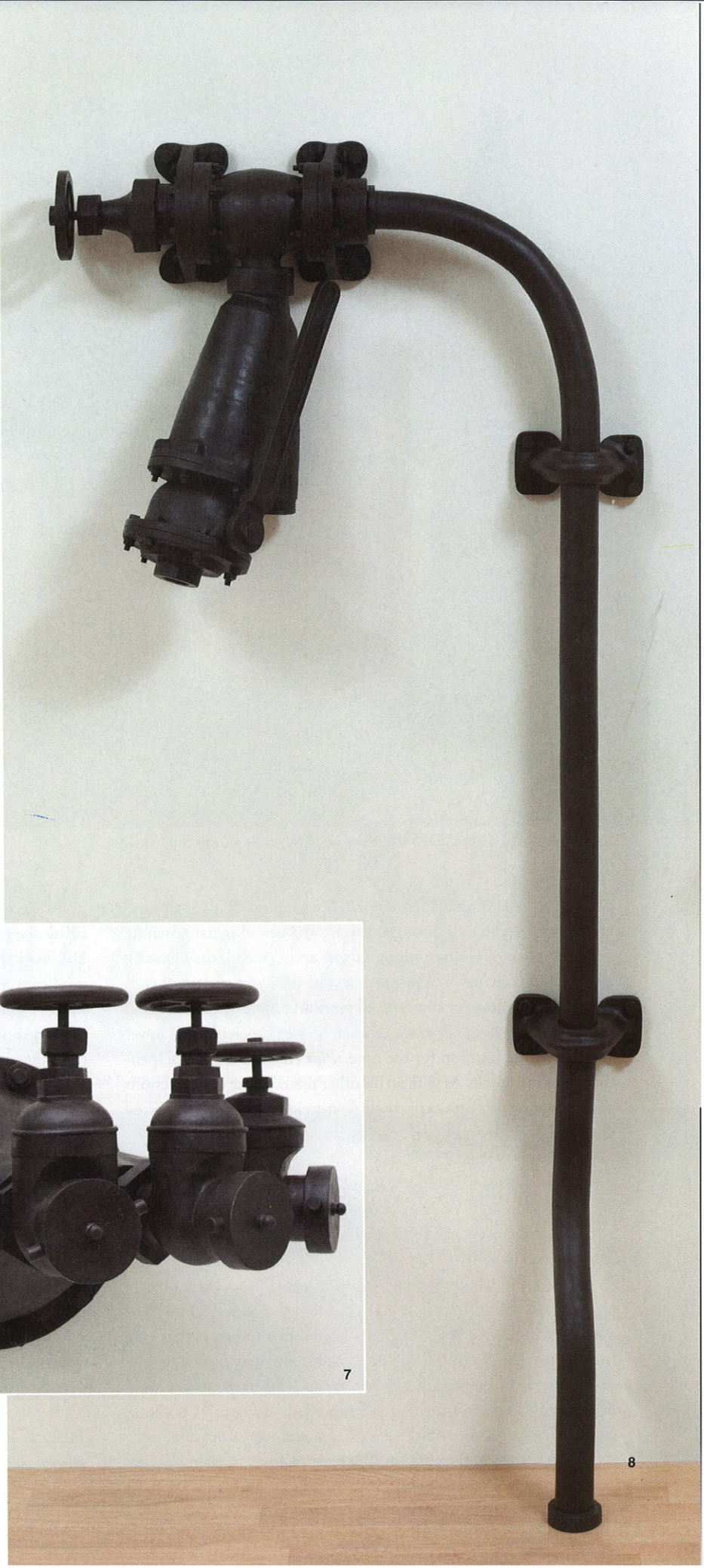
The majority of his work is fabricated as separate sections. There is no instance in which the protruding ceramic elements carry their own full weight. Each section has threaded sleeve inserts fitted into drilled-holes that allow the insertion of concealed threaded rods. These rods are bolted to walnut wood plates hidden in the interior; the pieces can be separated but the joints are invisible and seamless. Many of his pieces hang from or are attached to wood inserts; they're suspended from the wall without revealing how they are supported. He uses an epoxy that matches the brown/black clay to fill cracks and anchor parts to each other. Jackel surfaces his finished work with a thin layer of beeswax, polished to a matte glow.

*Wrapped Firehose* and *Navy Hose* feature flat, rolled-up hoses and bulbous regulator or coupler elements. The hoses were made from thin slabs cut into long rectangles that were then folded over. There are two elements; the hoses, valves, and pipes are one piece, only the nozzles are separate. The nozzle of *Wrapped Firehose* hangs from the hose like a phallus. The hose part of *Navy Hose* appears animated, the loops of hose swinging free, as if they've just been used and rehung.

Jackel's *Hydrant* series is his most humorous; each object is unique and singular. Each has distinct characteristics, from the detailing of the breast-like hose nozzles to the incised flutings of their columnar barrels. All the chains are ceramic and mimic darkly rusted steel. Each hydrant is typical of a locality; *S.F. Hydrant* is stripped down and minimal, *Ruby Street* (a hydrant located near his grandfather's house in Oak Lawn, Illinois) is far more florid, detailed with three nozzles of different sizes and a central band. The *Large-Headed Hydrants*, each with a different number of nozzles, represent three different generations, distinguished by the amount of wear each displays. This wear is indicated by carving marks and the worn looking surfaces of nuts and bolts. The titles refer to the unusual length of the pointy valves at the top.

Because the objects mimic something that performs a task, it's difficult to describe them without also describing their function; Jackel's *Standpipe* series illustrates this point. *N.Y. Standpipes*, *N.Y. Standpipes with Spikes*, *Garrison*, and *Triple Standpipe* depict a type of interior or exterior hydrant built into or adjacent to multi-story buildings. *N.Y. Standpipe* and *N.Y. Stand Pipes with Spikes* are minimal—pipes with paired nozzles at right angles to each other and to the main pipe. The spiked standpipes have a bar meant to discourage people from sitting or standing on them. *Garrison* and *Triple Standpipe* are the most spectacular of the series with their numerous nozzles and curvaceous, complex structures. *Garrison* is one of the most complex of Jackel's pieces; the turret-like nozzles and upright valves make the piece resemble a weapon. The way it hangs off the wall, combined with its slight sheen, make this object that's meant to save lives vaguely threatening. The title, *Garrison*, is a kind of play on words; Garrison is the name of a friend of Jackel's who passed away prematurely, and, as a noun, the word is defined as "a group of soldiers defending a town or fortress." Jackel found this six-headed defense mechanism in a high-rise building in downtown Los Angeles.

*Sea Strainer* and *Pipe Hose* are derived from pipe-style hydrant systems and have multiple parts. Because of the way large sections are connected to the smaller, more delicate appearing pipes, it's



5 *Navy Hose*, 32½ in. (83 cm) in height, 2012. 6 *Wrapped Firehose*, 24 in. (61 cm) in height, 2012. 7 *Garrison*, 3 ft. 4 in. (1 m) in height, 2012. 8 *Sea Strainer*, 6 ft. 3½ in. (1.9 m) in height, 2013.



*Large-headed Hydrants: Youth, Middle-age, Elder, to 34 in. (86 cm) in height.*

difficult to believe that these objects are ceramic. Both sculptures are screwed to the wall through ceramic versions of metal fastening straps. Because they are so thin, narrow and graceful, they have an air of fragility belied by the sturdiness of their structure and construction. *Sea Strainer* is a type of maritime fire extinguisher that strains seaweed from ocean water when in use. The pendulous lower coupling is the location for the hose. *Pipe Hose* has a valve perpendicular to the nozzle. As with all his other pieces, none of the sections of these two sculptures carry their own weight; they are buttressed and held together internally in ways that make breakage unlikely.

*Emergency Horn* is one of Jackel's simplest and most ornamental pieces. It represents a somewhat old-fashioned alarm, a type that has often been replaced by electronic sensing devices. It resembles a twisted trumpet and its elegance seems at odds with the noise it might produce.

In the world where the original objects are found, these objects are painted some attention-getting OSHA-required color that makes them easy to find. Hydrants have different colors that give firemen certain bits of information, standpipes may be yellow; the original objects that inspired *Garrison* and *Emergency Horn* were bright red. The uniform dark brown, with its neutral beeswax coating marks Jackel's objects as art, far removed from function. As a group, they both reflect and pervert reality.

Art recognizes actuality in its own idiosyncratic way; aside from being a version of reality, Jackel's work is also social commentary. His work reflects philosopher Gilles Deleuze's notion that the duplication of existing forms is a means of allowing accepted ideas to be "challenged and overturned." Jackel's commentary calls attention to issues of denial, disbelief, and skepticism and is meant to retake territory we've banned from consciousness or surrendered to the digital. The idea "zero percent contained" encompasses more than a hypothetical fire that can't be put out. Jackel's sculptures symbolize powerful forces beyond our control; the replications of existing forms underscore those forces' potential destructiveness. He lives and works in Los Angeles, a city constantly threatened by disasters: earthquakes, high winds, pollution, and fire. We Angelenos take for granted that we are protected in case of an emergency, but can't identify the safety devices, how they work, or where to find them. Jackel pursues the open question—how far can the factors of action and survival be stressed so their reality is recognized in a useful way? His sculpture lets us identify these remote and oddly beautiful objects; unnoticed devices that detect, alert, and defend.

*the author Kathleen Whitney is a sculptor and writer living in Los Angeles, California.*