ART

ROBERT WEDEMEYER ACME

**MATTHIAS MERKEL HESS'** recent ACME show of glazed ceramic works used everyday modern containers to riff on clay's early history in vessel construction.

**PACIFIC STANDARD TIME**

# Clay keeps breaking the mold

Pioneering artists on view at Scripps College and their modern peers reveal a form still taking shape.

LEAH OLLMAN

Objects made from clay have been classified in various ways over the centuries — as functional goods, ritual ware, decoration or craft. But not until the late 1950s were Americans likely to call them *sculpture*.

The change came about when Peter Voulkos (1924-2002) started tearing and cutting apart thrown cylindrical vessels and building large, rugged, vertical forms out of the pieces; when John Mason (born 1927) took to slamming slabs of clay onto the studio floor and joining the parts into linear, organic wall reliefs up to 20 feet long; and when Ken Price (born 1935) began to fashion biomorphic mounds and eggs with erotically charged orifices, intimate objects with vibrantly hued skins of paint, lacquer and glaze.

"Clay's Tectonic Shift," as a new exhibition at Scripps College portrays it, was catalyzed by these three artists and their innovative approaches to the material. Their work was seminal in clay's acceptance as a viable artistic medium. In 1954, Voulkos established a dynamic, open-studio program in ceramics at the Los Angeles County Art Institute (also referred to as Otis), attracting students and colleagues with his legendary energy and personal magnetism, and situating L.A. as an epicenter for experimentation in ceramic sculpture. Soon, works in clay began to be integrated into exhibition programs at the city's leading contemporary art galleries, prominently featured in museums and reviewed in major art publications.

The Scripps show includes work from 1956, when Voulkos had his first solo show in L.A. (at Felix Landau Gallery), through 1968, just after all three artists were represented in the LACMA exhibition "American Sculpture of the Sixties." Part of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time initiative to examine postwar L.A. art, the show and its informative catalog also provide a provocative framework for considering what followed.

Did the "tectonic" shift in perception happen once and for all, elevating clay's stature permanently as a result? Or has that change happened again and again, with subsequent generations of artists breaking new ground, and audiences (critical, curatorial, popular) continually discovering clay as if anew? How do younger artists working in clay perceive the art of Voulkos and his peers? What kind of legacy do they contend with as they navigate various, overlapping art worlds? And just how tiresome is it, for those who've long embraced clay's potential, to keep hashing out its position vis-a-vis the other arts?

It does get old, concedes gallery owner Frank Lloyd, co-curator with Scripps' Kirk Delman of the exhibition, which continues until April 8.

"Although this huge change happened, and ceramics did enter into the mainstream of commercial galleries, museums and criticism, and these works in the show are in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago — still, within the public's perception, ceramics is a craft related to pottery. It's amazing. We deal with that on a daily basis at the gallery. You're constantly fighting that same battle. There's an ongoing re-explaining and re-defending."

Lloyd, whose curatorial role has sparked controversy because of his position as a commercial dealer, is running a show at his Bergamot Station venue called "Peter Voulkos in L.A.: Time Capsule." It groups small ceramic pieces made by Voulkos, a pioneering potter (and painter) who assimilated the verve of Abstract Expressionism and a Zen-inflected embrace of chance and imperfection, during the years he lived in L.A. (1954-59) with work in other media that he owned, by Ed Kienholz, Billy Al Bengston and others. The assembly sends the message that Voulkos and his peers were collectively setting the terms of modern art and abstraction in L.A., pushing away from tradition toward bold explorations of materiality, texture, scale, mass and color. Those working in ceramics were, according to Lloyd, "liberating the medium from a set of expectations and a set of rules."

Few if any rules still hold in the pluralistic, permissive art historical moment of today. Artists are freer than ever to pursue an independent path and to use any and all physical materials — or none whatsoever. Many are choosing clay, exhibiting widely and meeting with critical success; German-born, L.A.-based Sterling Ruby, whose viscerally engaging sculptures and installations incorporate a range of media, is a name that comes up often in this regard. Work by Ariene Shechet, a New York artist fusing traditions of figurative, abstract and functional sculpture, appears on the cover of this month's Art in America.

A lingering prejudice against ceramics does persist in some sectors of the art world, but the bias works both ways: Some in the ceramics community maintain an equally stubborn resistance to being subsumed within the larger art world. L.A.-based Kristen Morgin, 43, uses unfired clay, paint and other materials to make sculptures steeped in loss, decay and nostalgia — corroded cars, carousel horses and bicycles, trompe l'oeil board games and old books — that she shows locally at Marc Selwyn. She recognizes the radical shift brought about by Voulkos and his peers but feels that a protectiveness over the purity of the medium has held clay back from broader acceptance.

"Those particular artists who knocked something off the pedestal were changing ceramics, but it was still ceramics, and they were glorifying all the great things that the stuff could do," she said by phone from an artist's residency in Georgia.

"Contemporary artists are trying to do something different with ceramics, but oftentimes it means ceramics itself is being knocked out of the picture. The need among ceramic artists to keep it on the pedestal is keeping it in the dark ages. It's a real problem, but I understand both sides of the argument. You take all the ceramics out of ceramics and it becomes sculpture and loses the distinctness of ceramics."

Matthias Merkel Hess' recent show at ACME consisted of several dozen ordinary containers — milk crates, garbage cans, laundry buckets, coolers — translated into glazed ceramic. The work makes explicit connection to clay's history as a vessel-making medium but with a sense of humor and self-consciousness that is distinctly of the moment.

"I'm trying to make ceramics that function in the contemporary art world," says the L.A.-based artist, 33. It's a vexed challenge. "I'm very interested in tying my work into the history of pottery, but I've also heard criticism of this type of work in general, that it's giving a contemporary art audience exactly what they want out of clay, which is pots."

Matt Wedel, 28, grew up within the culture of functional pottery, helping in his father's studio, and while he studied metal sculpture in school, he turned back to ceramics because of his emotional connection to the medium. "There's baggage with being a medium-specific ceramic artist today," he acknowledges, "but I want to explore one medium and expand on that history."

Wedel, represented by L.A. Louver, sculpts figures of innocence and wonder — children with oversized heads, rocks that sprout blossoms and multi-headed mythical creatures, glazed in vivid tangerine, crimson, silver and turquoise. "Working in clay fits my sensibilities," he said en route to resettling in Athens, Ohio. "It's the most fluid material. There's no lag time between my idea and the object."

That love of immediacy and directness sounds straight out of the playbook of Voulkos, whose work influenced Wedel early but came to represent for him "the new conservative artwork in the ceramic community. The community latched onto Peter Voulkos' work and became kind of stuck. It didn't evolve."

To Morgin as well, Voulkos, Mason and Price "seemed like the foundation that I was starting from. By the time I finished graduate school, I was really tired of hearing about this revolution in ceramics that happened 50 years before I got there."

Voulkos himself felt much the same about what preceded him. "The limitations that were imposed ... by the establishment were ludicrous," he once said, "because some guy's limitations are some guy's jumping-off point."

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**PETER VOULKOS'** seminal work, on view at "Clay's Tectonic Shift," helped establish ceramics as a credible artistic form.

JERRY L. THOMPSON Scripps College

**KEN PRICE,** shown alongside Voulkos and John Mason at Scripps College, crafted vibrantly hued, erotically charged pieces.

MATT WEDEL L.A. Louver

**WITH WHAT** Matt Wedel calls "the most fluid material," whimsical figures take flight.

ROBERT WEDEMEYER Marc Selwyn Fine Art

**WITH HER** works, Kristen Morgin aims to maintain ceramics' mark of distinction.

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