

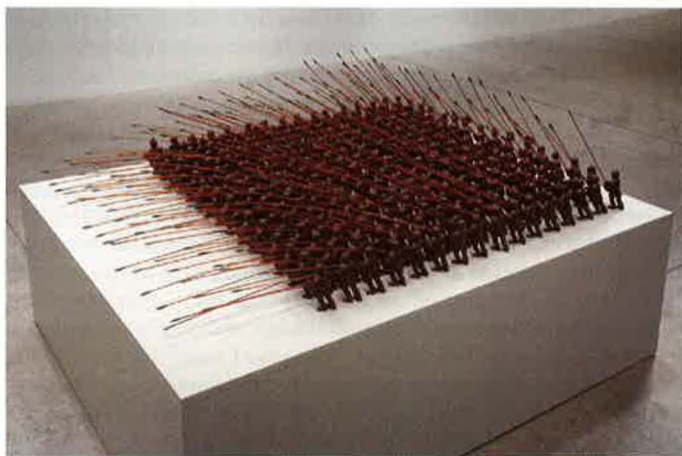
## Ben Jackel

LA LOUVER

Ben Jackel's first solo exhibition made a fine mixture out of the imagery and accoutrements of warfare, its attendant memorialization and glorification, and the putting out of fires. An artist with a background in ceramics, Jackel has studied with Charles Ray (for whom he now works) and ceramicist Adrian Saxe, and the influence of both artists is evident in his work. The sculptures here strike a balance between faithful mimesis and a tendency toward caricature, while revealing Jackel's predilection for ornamentation and plays on scale, as well as his keen sensitivity to matters of display.

The exhibition's centerpiece, titled *Syntagma* (all works 2008–2009) gathers 256 six-inch-high Greek warriors, girded in a grid formation. Made from chocolate brown porcelain and assembled through the mixing and matching of individually cast parts—a selection of different helmets, shields, and breastplates—the Lilliputian soldiers suggest both action figures and confections and are at once reminiscent of China's Terracotta Army from the third century BC and Allan McCollum's displays of similar-but-different objects in massive quantities. Though Jackel's figurines have slightly different postures, they all hold formation and assume roughly the same stance, each soldier holding aloft a long spear with a mahogany staff.

Miniaturization is also employed to produce a collection of six ceramic, toyishly abbreviated but generally accurate replicas of US battleships from the Battle of Leyte Gulf, the largest naval battle of World War II. Hung on the wall sideways, the work suggests an aerial view of ships on the open sea. But scale is flipped the other way in *Down to the Bone*, and *Deaf as a Cannon*. The former, a ten-foot-tall replica of an ancient ax head, was hewn with an ax from a giant slab of redwood and then coated in graphite. Here, it leaned against a wall, recalling both an unused tool and a minimalist plank. *Deaf as a Cannon* is a Goliath-scaled, but otherwise exacting, replica in brown stoneware clay of an ornament-encrusted sixteenth-century Milanese burgonet helmet from the armor collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. These oversize works are unnerving, uncanny, and compelling.



Ben Jackel, *Syntagma*, 2008–2009, porcelain, mahogany, bismuth alloy, 72 x 55½ x 16".

Four objects—a fire extinguisher, fireman's ax, fire hose, and a set of spare fire-sprinkler heads—were faithful in scale. Jackel formed the pieces in stoneware, adding minor details made from other materials, such as ebony or bronze, and placed them within finely made ebony cabinets. Though the hose looked if it had been used and then returned to storage, all four sculptures seem like the object's Platonic ideal—suggesting a world of perfect readiness, only to be revered.

Lording over the show was Jackel's sculpted stoneware interpretation of Daniel Chester French's 1922 bronze *Benediction*, a shrouded, winged female figure with outstretched arms that was conceived as a memorial to World War I dead. But while French's figure has a mysteriousness about it—a subtly ominous implication of the tragic enfolded within its uplift—the angel's arched wings, stretched arms, and rising, radiant fingers nonetheless suggest mercy and grace. In Jackel's version, however, the wings slump, the shoulders hunch, the arms hang heavy, and the fingers go slightly limp—a subtle *détournement* hinting at reaper and zombie. Of course, a similar critique of war's glorification courses through the artist's rendering of other militaristic icons: the soldiers and boats that look like tiny toys, and the ax and helmet inflated to absurd Oldenburgian proportions. But amid all Jackel's play, there is gravitas.

—Christopher Miles