

young at art: ben jackel



Ben Jackel
Burial, 2007
stoneware and beeswax (2 elements)
Installed dimensions: 21 x 36 x 14 in.
Courtesy L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

Combining his talent for ceramics and a fascination with history, Los Angeles sculptor Ben Jackel wields his proficiency in clay with the steely focus of a Samurai swordsman. Gleaning from such arcane subjects as ironclad gunships, cannons, 18th century forts and Civil War era torpedoes, his slyly concise sculptures hover between abstraction and narrative, drawing in equal share off the legacy of post-minimalist sculpture and a complex, if boyish, love/hate relationship with the tools and toys of war. “The study of weapons has kind of become a mild obsession in the last few years,” Jackel admits. “There’s so much fantastic imagery to pull upon in man’s history of warfare, it’s such rich source material... If it’s really obscure, you can push it farther.”

In fact, Jackel’s sculptures do not glorify war, nor do they condemn it. Rather they use it as a source of both aesthetic and human wonder: finding the poetry and drama in the underlying forms while leaving the viewer with a sense of lingering dread. “I feel that warrior instinct inside me, it’s undeniable,” Jackel muses. “Yet the intellectual side allows me to present it in a way to see the horror within it. There is this weapons fetishism, that’s one side of my brain, and the other is how horrible it is. I’m just trying to reconcile that for myself through my work.”

Raised in Denver, Jackel came to UCLA to study under department head Adrian Saxe, who remains a friend and mentor. Since getting his MFA in 2005, he has been working as project manager for another prominent ex-teacher, sculptor Charles Ray. Says Saxe of his ex-student, “When he started, he was very literal... He’s made that leap to the poetic and metaphorical. Now it’s free-flowing. Now that passion informs his intuition.”

In 2007, Jackel was invited to participate in L.A. Louver’s trendy “Rogue Wave” show, where he displayed three works: a sinking battleship mounted on a wall, an adult elephant standing over its dead baby, and a coiled life-sized fire hose, expertly rendered in ceramic and inset neatly into the wall. The aura of incipient danger that infuses this piece is typical of the implicit sense of menace Jackel’s surprisingly elegant work exudes. The artist’s interest in fire extinguishers and other emergency gear feels particularly apt to L.A., where the threat of disaster is always looming just below the surface. “I want it to be relevant. People think of history as something in books... I want people to see these works and think about today.”

Signed by L.A. Louver after “Rogue Wave,” the 30-year old sculptor is already preparing for his first solo show at the prestigious gallery next winter. Among the vaguely martial subjects he will be interpreting are a phalanx of Greek warriors, a wrestling medal, destroyers from the WWII Battle of Leyte Gulf, and a Daniel Chester French statue commemorating the Massachusetts dead in WWI. “I’m not generally turned on by work that doesn’t have content outside itself,” Jackel says. “The world is too interesting.”

Ben Jackel is represented by L.A. Louver Gallery, 45 North Venice Blvd., Venice, CA. (310) 822-4955 www.lalouver.com

-George Melrod