

frieze

RON NAGLE

Matthew Marks Gallery,
New York

I can't pinpoint when, exactly, nor why, but at some point in the last couple of years, ceramics became cool again. You'd start to notice a few of them on gallery visits or in art fair booths: perhaps two or three lined up along a little shelf fixed to the wall. Then, within a year or two, they were enjoying entire trestle tables in the middle of the space. They might be roughly moulded rock-like forms, say, or smoothly finished and sleek vessels.

Perhaps the return of ceramics has something to do with a desire to really feel something with your hands, rather than push buttons on a screen. Maybe it's to do with a romantic longing for the simple life, or for a 1970s crunchy-granola idea of the simple life. Or it could be that one too many photographs of a ceramicists studio circa 1950 might have pushed artists back into the pottery workshop again – the sort of archival imagery seen in books and shows about early modernism and how, deep down, we were into that jazz all along. Who knows?

I bet Ron Nagle knows. Because as far as Nagle is concerned, clay's always been cool. 'Cool' in that older California sense of the word: laid back, laconic and modern. Effortlessly polished and stoned immaculate. Coming out of the radical 1950s and '60s art and ceramics scene that also produced Ken Price and John Mason, Nagle describes his work as part of the 'precious asshole' school of ceramics, influenced by ab ex painting, John Cage, Shōji Hamada, Bernard Leach and – specifically in Nagle's case – Giorgio Morandi, whose work he first saw at Los Angeles's influential Ferus



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Gallery. Referred to as 'Thin Fins', 'Neo Knobs', 'Hairdo Ware' and 'Smooove Ware', Nagle's terracotta pieces ('Like panna cotta, except it's clay,' says the artist) are made using a low-fire kiln technique and multi-layer glazing and airbrushing process (no paint or lacquer here) to produce eye-popping, acid-drenched surface effects and beguilingly bizarro forms. Diminutive and precious they may be but, as Dave Hickey writes in *Nagle, Ron*, a new monograph on the ceramicist's work: 'Nagle's trick is false modesty. He makes tiny things invested with the majesty of the Taj Mahal.'

If any outing of Nagle's work proved Hickey's point about tiny things invested with awe, it was 'Five O'Clock Shadow', his recent solo exhibition at Matthew Marks. In the central space of the gallery, each piece was shown in individual vitrines recessed into the wall. Their forms look like mausolea for psychedelic gurus that have been put through a mad professor's shrinking machine, or like exquisite cakes and confectionaries in a Tokyo department store. *Long Good Friday* (2015), for instance, has a gravelly textured base and central column, both coloured lavender: a shiny gloop of black spills across the base and the column wears a grey hat that looks like a crumpled bishop's mitre. It seems almost edible, as if made from marzipan and treacle. *Handsome Drifter* (2015) uses a similar base-rectangle-with-gloopy-pour, this one in gloriously warm colours like the cherry sunburst finish on a Les Paul guitar. A shiny black finger worms its way across the base then points upwards to the sky. Behind it is a circular 'thin fin', like an open clamshell. In *Urinetrouble* (2015) a similar black worm dominates a chemical-mustard base and towers over the object's tobacco-coloured back panel – as the punning title suggests, if this black form is something nasty lurking in your body's urinary tract, you're in trouble.

The back gallery featured preparatory drawings alongside slightly larger ceramics, shown on plinths in the centre of the space. Amongst stiff competition, the most stunning of these was *Lotta Wattage* (2012), a ball covered in a molten, contrasting, yellow and orange dusting, topped off with a transparent fin and deep, black drip across the ball's front hemisphere. It looked like the melted helmet of a starship captain who's flown too close to an exploding star.

If these objects, with their contrasting colour combinations that look more like they've been produced in Photoshop than a kiln, seem almost *sui generis* it's possibly because Nagle did not spend his career immersed entirely in the art-world echo chamber of influence. A parallel career in music seems to have kept the work liberated from intellectual fashion, free to walk its own path. In 1960s San Francisco he played in the band The Mystery Trend, and in 1970 released a solo album, *Bad Rice*, recorded with legendary producer Jack Nitzsche. Nagle worked on the soundtrack to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and made all the sound effects for *The Exorcist* (1973). With Scott Matthews, he wrote songs for Jefferson Airplane, Pablo Cruise, Leo Kottke and Barbra Streisand, amongst others. According to Joel Selvin's entertaining and informative biographical essay in the Nagle monograph, his ceramics process was 'like overdubbing a guitar solo [...] Nagle saw comparisons between his two vocations: one fed the other.'

'Five O'Clock Shadow' was one of the most talked-about exhibitions in New York this season. Why? Because ceramics are cool again? No. Even in 2015, you can see folk twitch when you mention that your favourite show in Chelsea is a ceramics show. For all that art institutions love to talk about inter-disciplinary interests, ceramics – one of the most ancient forms of human artistry – are still largely confined to museum design departments or condescended to as 'craft' objects. Yet these works look like nothing else around right now. They nag the mind because they can't be filed away in the drawer marked 'Reassuringly Familiar'. They delight the eye and derange the mind. Here's to Nagle's next overdub.

DAN FOX



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