

# Art in America

## NEW YORK

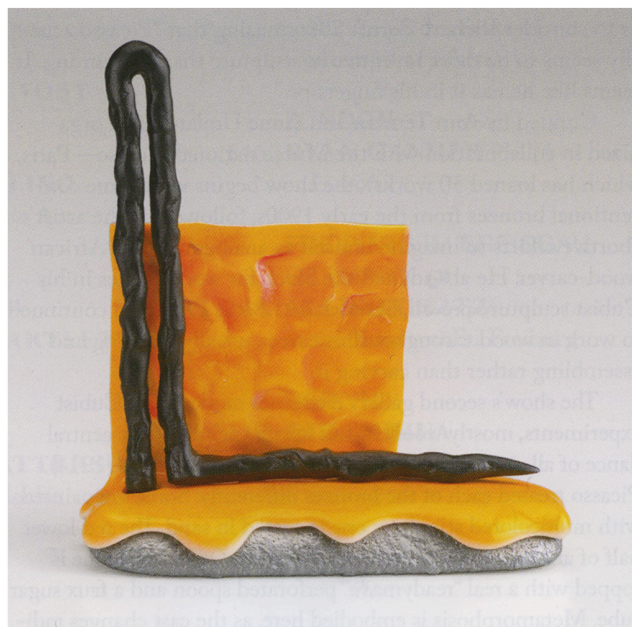
### RON NAGLE

Matthew Marks

Ron Nagle is among those artists working in ceramics who understand the propensity of human imagination to take flight at the humblest cue. “The minuscule, a narrow gate,” wrote Gaston Bachelard, “opens up an entire world.” One thinks of Kathy Butterly, George Ohr and others—not to mention Ken Price, who was Nagle’s friend and sometime collaborator. Nagle took on small scale at the beginning of his career (in the late ’50s, when he was still a student at San Francisco State) and has, for the most part, stuck to small scale over a half-century of numerous exhibitions and wide acclaim. In an equally vivid rock music career juggled over the same period, Nagle became a master of song, packing emotional resonance into mere minutes. Of the 27 sculptures and 15 drawings in “Ron Nagle: Five O’Clock Shadow,” the artist’s largest-ever showing in New York, more than half dated to 2015, demonstrating his continuing vitality. Each work occupied and commanded its own little universe, effecting outsize encounters with viewers who seemed to drop contentedly into a profound absorption.

A dozen colorful, mixed-medium ceramics were exhibited in the first large room of the gallery in niches set into the walls. This meant viewers saw just one side of each piece—the “A-side,” presumably, as Nagle refers to the ideal prospect. Nagle was never a purist. Here, his polychrome objects combine glazed ceramic, catalyzed polyurethane and epoxy resin. In lurid hot rod colors, the shiny plastics pool and drip over edges, leaving wavy bottom margins. The sculptures are never monolithic; built of multiple parts, they generate dynamism from internal encounters. Often very funny titles promote a degree of unembarrassed association. *Urinetrouble* (2015) has a pee-colored pool leaking over a flat platform on which a long brown curving line of clay stands against a low orange backdrop, as if discovered behind a wall. A twin-peaked form—a familiar shape in Nagle’s work, originally inspired by dog poop but by now much metamorphosed—rests on a tiny purple stand, which in turn sits on a black pour. Titled *Long Good Friday*, the work fosters ecclesiastical associations, the twin-peaked component evoking a miter and its support an altar.

The remaining sculptures were placed within plexi boxes on eye-level plinths, so that they could be seen from all sides. They included a group of four bronzes from 1991, dysfunctional cups with gestural surfaces, and more mixed-medium ceram-



Ron Nagle:  
*Urinetrouble*,  
2015, ceramic,  
glaze, catalyzed  
polyurethane  
and epoxy resin,  
5½ by 5 by 2¼  
inches; at Matthew  
Marks.

ics. Circumambulating the fin-shaped, pink-hued *Minimetti* of 2008 permits the discovery of a ribbon-candy-like fold in its narrow flank. Downright sexy are *Mutha Fakir* (2015), with a pink wedge rising between twinned, shiny, buttock-like forms, and *Cinnamon Girl* (2010), which seems to stick a tiny tongue out of a triangular opening in a pocked surface that looks as though it has been dusted with the spice. On the base is a little curl of blue, like a minuscule tip jar. In another mood altogether, *Grim Trimmings* (2011) resembles a stone funeral slab and cenotaph; out of a small pink-ringed hole leaks a black pool, conjuring some horrible post-mortem fluid.

The drawings, all recent, included nine executed in ink, graphite, gold-leafing pen and correction fluid. Somewhat Guston-like, cartoonish forms relate more or less obviously to the various sculptures. They sit isolated in the center of each sheet, alive and substantial, often casting shadows as if in three dimensions. No less personages than the objects, they are similarly brimming with contradictions of pathos and good humor.

—Faye Hirsch