

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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# ARTFORUM

## NEW YORK

### Ron Nagle

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Ron Nagle is something of a legend—a sculptor working in clay, an alumnus of the celebrated “pot shop” of Peter Voulkos, and as such a significant figure in the development of modern art in California. He is also a rock musician who has moved in the world of Jefferson Airplane, Jack Nitzsche, Ry Cooder, and others, and if you ever wondered who created the sound effects for William Friedkin’s 1973 film *The Exorcist*, now you know. Strange that he’s had enough time to make art, and to make it so well.

This show included mostly work from the last year or so, with drawings relating to it or from the same period, a scattering of somewhat older pieces, and a group of four bronze cups from 1991. As is usual with Nagle, none of the sculptures was more than a few inches high, with seven inches falling on the tall side. The new works deal programmatically with the principle of combination—of disparate colors, elements, surfaces—and a number have three basic parts: a flat base, its skin textured and its edges soft, so that it might be a bed or a pillow or a cake; a slicker, shinier element shaped to imply that it has flowed as a liquid over the base, dripped down its sides, and then hardened (let’s call it an icing, though a ceramist might call it a glaze); and some further piece of, oh, something—a shape or shapes thin or fat, rough or smooth, evocative or amorphous, appearing on these first two elements as on a stage. Both cake and icing are capable of bending upward into verticals, becoming backdrops to the action in front of them. In *Handsome Drifter* (all works cited 2015), for example, a pointed black spike, whorled like a unicorn’s horn, with an L-shaped angle that gives it a foot to support it, stands erect on a glossy red sheet that turns to rise behind it into a circular shape in whose center the red lightens toward yellow. The base below is a spongy blue. If the upright spike is seen as the “handsome drifter” of the title, the piece quickly comes to evoke one of those scenes in movie westerns where a lone horseman rides in silhouette before the setting sun. *Ryder’s Sky*, *Boston Scrambler*, *Quiet Wood*, and others follow the same or similar compositional principles to quite different associative effects.

While the older works appeared in conventional vitrines out on the floor, where they could be viewed in the round, the installation, designed in collaboration with Nagle, put most of the new pieces in glass-fronted niches cut into the gallery walls, with the consequence that they could be seen only from the front. The effect was to heighten



Ron Nagle, *Boston Scrambler*, 2015, ceramic, glaze, catalyzed polyurethane, epoxy resin, 2 × 4½ × 3".

their theatricality, the feeling that these were little stages set for some kind of action. But though some works feature spindly uprights suggesting trees, making them seem to want to be read as landscapes, they are never stable as such, and figurative references likewise refuse to resolve. The pasty limbs poking up from the base of *Boston Scrambler* might be the legs of a nymphet lying on a bed, or, following the cue of the title, the arms of a man reaching out threateningly toward a coral-like red lump that could be a woman’s head. Alternatively, they could also be a pair of parsnips—a lumpy, ungainly root vegetable, and as such in key with Nagle’s aesthetic. In their proportions and surfaces, these works embrace the ungraceful, the fleshy, and the swollen, the misshapen and the crooked. Were they larger, they might seem grotesque—but they are diminutive, and brilliantly colored, so that their nods toward cartoonists like Big Daddy Roth and Robert Crumb are offset by their gemlike delicacy and their equal awareness of Japanese ceramics and the paintings of Giorgio Morandi. It is a complicated fusion to pull off—but then, you always knew that the sound designer of *The Exorcist* was capable of great things.

—David Frankel