

Of Fire, Slippage, and Tender Edges: the ceramic art of Tony Marsh, Nancy Selvin, and Linda Sormin

Written by Julia Couzens



Crusty, clotted, stacked, stamped, skewered and pinched, the ceramic art of Tony Marsh, Nancy Selvin, and Linda Sormin demonstrates clay's power to defy expectations, to pick apart genre hierarchies, and to vehemently advocate for sensual exuberance. As a repository of touch, clay is unparalleled. As a medium for

excavating social constructs, identity, and multiple references to artistic traditions it stands on center stage.

Literally born of fire, Tony Marsh's ceramic crucibles invoke metaphors of preservation, commemoration, and spiritual embodiment. Marsh's lumpish vessels conjure the time-wizened appearance of moss-laden, lichen covered tree trunks or asphalt gouged from a boiling earth. Encrusted with globules of clay and glaze, split, pitted and pock marked by multiple firings, their primal simplicity is a soul-nourishing synthesis of matter and spirit. The spewing secretions of glaze are an implicit protestation against perfection and "mastery," and possess the deeper, feminist strength of elastic ooze signifying the borderline and formless nature of the sublime.

Nancy Selvin's plainspoken jars or vases possess a kind of prairie aesthetic. As figurative evocations, they are an interrogation of the conditional self, filtered through poignant narratives of a disappearing American West. Her hand and slab-built porcelain urns speak to the homespun notions of quality as knowing the value of what you have, that elegance bests luxury, and that the gleaming patina of use is a visceral touch clock, an indelible record of time. With linear loops, jerky handles akimbo, and considered edges, Selvin pays close attention to gesture and line, drawing scraps of text and irregular seams into nuanced, poetic conceits.

On the brink, on the edge, on the verge, Linda Sormin grafts scraps of found pottery onto dense ceramic thickets. Embedding artifacts scavenged from global cultures into her intricate constructions, Sormin creates entangled, muttering odes to submerged histories and provisional identities. Evoking the crystalline structure of coral, Sormin's complex globules seem plucked from a subterranean reef. The work's oceanic architecture points to a sea change in the nature of ceramic sculpture. Pinch

by pinch she is reshaping its language, harvesting gesture into spectacles of possibility and loss, strength and fragility, and even ruinous enchantment.

JULIA COUZENS is an artist who also writes about contemporary art. Her drawings and textile-based sculpture have been widely shown and are held in numerous public and private collections including the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, Berkeley Art Museum, Crocker Art Museum, Donna Beam Fine Art Museum, Oakland Art Museum, Weatherspoon Art Museum, and Yale University.

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