



"A THING OF THE PAST" 2013, **Tim Berg & Rebekah Myers**
CUSTOM WALNUT TABLE, EPOXY COATED FOAM, AUTOMOTIVE URETHANE, CERAMIC, GLASS & HARDWARE
66" x 70" x 70" INSTALLATION VIEW

CLAREMONT, CA
"2014 Scripps College
70th Ceramic Annual"
at the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery

When did ceramics turn into sculpture? It's hard to say exactly. The 2012 PST exhibition titled "Clay's Tectonic Shift" at the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery at Scripps College addressed that question head-on, through the work of ceramic pioneers Peter Voukos, John Mason and Ken Price, demonstrating how these three Southern California compatriots irrevocably shifted the dynamics of the medium in the late 1950s and the '60s. Yet while no one would dispute the revolutionary impact of their work, the dynamic and ongoing evolution in Southern California ceramics has been charted for an even longer period by the Scripps Ceramic Annual. This year, amazingly, marked the 70th iteration of the Scripps survey, and the current exhibition, on view through April 6—also held in the compact space of the Williamson Gallery—is as diverse and pleasurable as any in memory. Indeed, for all its history, the show amply proves that "venerable" need not mean "stodgy." In this case, the wide spectrum of works on view, sprawling both conceptually and physically—rising literally up into the rafters—gives wonderful testimony to the flexibility, versatility and, well, edginess, of this most traditional of mediums.

Co-curated by the gallery's collections manager Kirk Delman and director Mary MacNaughton, this year's edition of the show was also a first, in that the artists were all guest curators of the show's previous incarnations, spanning back to 1996, with those of previous years mixed in. The result was an

unusually accomplished gathering of contemporary SoCal ceramic artists, running the gamut from traditional to conceptual and often integrating both. Given the diversity of voices presented, the exhibition's incisive layout was particularly welcome, setting out intuitive connections and appealing juxtapositions between works of kindred themes.

Upon entering the gallery, the first works one encountered were, aptly, more historical and made by the show's earliest curators. Richard Petterson, the show's curator from 1947-1958, set the stage with a "samovar" made of glazed stoneware (circa 1950s), with inscribed figurative scenes and a metal spout affixed at its front, suggestive of an institutional coffee urn. Standing nearby, at nearly three feet high, was a *Floor Pot* (1956) by the renowned Paul Soldner, who curated the show from 1959-1992. With multiple stalks rising from its top, it seemed at once anatomical and vegetative, and, though grounded in the form and functionality of a vessel, also richly sculptural.

From that starting point, the show opened up in various directions. Any aura of reverence to the vessel was drolly shattered by Douglas Humble's broken and abstractly re-configured souvenir coffee mugs, and perforated by Karen Koblit's three-legged, patterned pots and graphite mappings, which gamely blended fascination with decoration and ethnographic history. Toward the left corner, a more conceptual and scientific aesthetic seemed to reign, as evidenced by the evocative mixed-media installation by Nobuo Nagasawa, that included what looked like pine cones made of ceramic strewn across tatami mats; nearby, a series of tiny hourglasses set

into wood measured out events from vastly astronomical to minutely human. On the back wall, Wayne Higby's 7-foot long set of dark red stoneware panels pitted with white flecks, exploding outward, suggested dynamic micro- or macro-cosmos. Around it, several works by Tony Marsh laid out bowls with elegant, cryptic offerings that could read as inorganic molecules or primitive life forms, tools or toys. With their stark, meditative beauty, and richly textured physicality, Marsh's works affect the viewer on a number of levels, embracing their own inherited history as vessels while clearly reveling in their status as objects that are assertively, joyously, sculptural.

One of the more inspired groupings set out a circle of colorful, lamp-like abstractions by Virginia Scotchie, arrayed in clocklike formation, on individual wall mounts, with Adrian Saxe's sumptuous *Untitled Antelope Jar* (1980) set in the foreground at its center. Whether or not the viewer is familiar with Saxe's wry, postmodern playfulness, the contrast of textures and styles was at once memorable and exquisite. Just in front of Saxe's urn, one of the most adventurous works in the show, an installation by Adam Davis, echoed the raw/elegant animal fetishism of Saxe's work, by placing faux taxidermy birds atop what appeared to be giant, corroded spherical lead weights, wrapped with rope and colored twine suspended from the ceiling: the viewer that took an extra moment to glance upward was rewarded with a view of several other faux avian perched among the gridded ceiling bars. Where do the ceramics begin and where do they end? It's impossible to tell. No doubt, that's partially the point.

While many of the works on display hinted at biological references, the far right corner of the exhibition seemed to adopt the spirit of a natural history museum. Kathleen Royster's flowerlike bowls and teapot, made of porcelain stoneware, presented elegantly rendered petals, curving back to reveal thick black weaves of thorns or slugs: either way, a disturbing counterpoint. While Cindy Kolodziej's wall of small framed visions of various shapes and sizes—from individual framed human nipples, to eerie, hand-shadow animal heads, to old-timey drugstore lettering—mixed hints of lowbrow symbology with a vaguely sinister, sensual/sexual playfulness. *a thing of the past* (2013), the show-stopping, mixed-media contribution by 2011 co-curators Tim Berg and Rebekah Myers, dramatically presented what looked like an abstracted, upside-down triceratops skull, coated an unctuous, shiny, smooth black, and set atop a circular wooden table. Nestled in the tabletop, beneath, is a circular tableau of a dinosaur in a forlorn landscape. As an allegory of evolutionary obsolescence, the work is startling and quite haunting. As evidence of the evolution—and potential—of the medium on display, it is effusively hopeful.

—GEORGE MELROD