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Artifacts | Feats of Clay



Courtesy of Salon 94 Gallery "Fabric Girls" by Betty Woodman.

Move over, concrete jungle! New York is suddenly a city of ceramics. By some odd coincidence, restless aggregations of fired clay are popping up in galleries all over town. Don't expect the stuff of any potter's wheel in any of them. These are unique, handworked forms that constitute some of the most radical experiments in art today.

Modest they are not. Among the more suggestive works are Ron Nagle's diminutive sculptures in "Paul Clay," the punning title of a cramped but exhilarating group show of ceramic objects at Salon 94 Bowery. "Phil Tilt," for example, looks like a paddle cactus with a slit along one edge and a nubby ochre glaze powdered in pink. Another Nagle, a kind of pink bootie, has a protuberant pink tongue emerging from its surface.

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery
NEW YORK



Courtesy of Salon 94 Gallery "Tracy's Tab" by Ron Nagle.

The variety of color, form and texture in the rest of the upstairs reception area can be mind-expanding, while the gallery's lower level offers a garden of molded and tortured earthenware delights that veer between figurative and abstract, extravagant and primitive, polished and cutesy.

Betty Woodman dresses a hand-on-hip chorus line of brilliantly glazed ceramic torsos in patterned fabrics from India. Arlene Shechet's clay stands up to manipulations that create a spaghetti-like black vase and a squat blue gnome of a teapot worthy of the Mad Hatter. Jonathan Meese's phallic terra cotta missiles tower over Hope Atherton's fallen hawks and Francesca DiMattio's cracked porcelain jugs. Julia Kunin's gnarly "Janus of Flowers" has an amazing pink, purple, gold and turquoise glaze. And Jessica Jackson Hutchins throws all caution to the wind by setting three irregularly shaped pots amid the black, bulbous papier-mâché forms enveloping an old blue couch like some latter-day "Rape of the Sabine Women."



Courtesy of Salon 94 Gallery "Symposion" by Jessica Jackson Hutchins.

More theatrics are on display at Hauser & Wirth on the Upper East Side, where the Peruvian-German-Chinese artist David Zink Yi is making his New York debut with a giant ceramic squid that lies on the floor in an inky pool of corn syrup, as if it had just emerged from the deep and expired on the spot. To make it, Zink Yi threw an armful of soft clay to the floor and fired it three times

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through a Belgian kiln large enough to cope with it. The process produced a fleshy glaze with streaks of rich color, and an object as astonishing as it is bizarre.

At the other end of the scale, two impish little vessels by the ceramic artist Kathy Butterly stand out in "Contemporary Clay," a back-room show at TriBeCa's RH Gallery that also includes an inchoate porcelain Buddha by Shinique Smith that is glazed in 14-karat gold.

Another show at the same gallery features work by the Korean-born artists Lee Ufan and Young Sook Park. A pair of wall-mounted terra cotta squares by Lee have deep, apostrophe-like depressions that reminded me of Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases, though Lee seems to have put his thumbs to work rather than a knife. And Young's two, huge and gleaming white Moon Jars in the gallery's windows take a traditional practice to its ultimate limit.



Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth "Untitled (Architeuthis)" by David Zink Yi.

More muted and thrown ceramic pots and odd, birdhouse-like constructions that float in a spectacular reflecting pond of black honey at Gavin Brown's South Village gallery represent Peter Nadin's return to the New York exhibition scene after a 20-year hiatus. In a separate room, Nadin has erected a veritable forest of terra cotta noses and dark, abstract figures that bedeck soaring hemlock plinths.

In Chelsea, Casey Kaplan Gallery has become a supermarket of ceramics with "Everything Must Go!" — an amusing show of more than 80 artist-designed domestic objects. They include not just coffee cups and collectibles but skateboards, lamps, games, footstools and a toilet, all commissioned by Cerámica Suro, a small factory in Tiaquepaque, Mexico, that normally does custom work for hotels and casinos.

Nowhere in any of these shows is there a "readymade" found object or an industrial-strength fabrication where the seams don't show. Clay is a sensitive, visceral medium that betrays every pinch, twist and wink of its artists' process, and it says "touch me" like nothing else. **LINDA YABLONSKY**