

Review: ‘Ron Nagle: Five O’Clock Shadow,’ Delicacy and Tension on a Small Scale

By **ROBERTA SMITH** SEPT. 25, 2015

The bonsai-size art of Ron Nagle, whose chief medium is glazed clay, has been cherished in certain quarters of the art world for over 40 years. But lately the admiration has been spreading. In 2012, he was drafted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters; in 2013, 30 of his objects appeared in the Venice Biennale, prominently displayed with 36 anonymous Tantric paintings, also small, in a perfect harmony of intuitive shape and saturated color.

Now, Mr. Nagle, who had his first solo show in San Francisco, his hometown, in 1968, and his first in New York in 1981, is undergoing another rite of passage: the stunning, exquisitely installed rollout at a blue-chip gallery, Matthew Marks in Chelsea.

Not surprisingly “Ron Nagle: Five O’Clock Shadow” seems to be knocking off socks right and left. Half of the show’s nearly two dozen pieces radiate from individual vitrines; the remainder combust in Tiffany-window-style wall niches, finished with blond wood.

Never more than a few inches high, these pieces fill, figuratively speaking, three large spaces. Most are recent or finished this year, showing Mr. Nagle in top form. A few earlier ones remind us that this is only the tip of a very large iceberg that has yet to be examined in full. Four dark bronze vessels from 1991 allude to Mr. Nagle's obsession with the teacup, whose elements — bowl, volume, handle — he kept in abstract rotation for years. (You can see a vestige of a teacup handle in the whiplash strand of "New Blue LaRue," from 2008, which morphs into a central protagonist in several more recent works here.)

There are also nine drawings on sheets of brightly colored notebook paper. Their stacked shapes could be prototypes for gourmet desserts and make excellent use of a gold-leafing pen and the blazing white correction fluid once familiar to typists.

Mr. Nagle seems to have little truck with the terms ceramist, ceramic artist or ceramic sculptor. None encompass his wizardry. His bonsais are hybrids of exquisitely contrasting forms, surfaces, colors and sometimes materials, including styrene and roto-cast urethane. These works represent a hybrid life: Mr. Nagle has been from the start almost as serious about music as art. He has belonged to several Bay Area rock bands (the Mystery Trend, the Fast Bucks and the Durocs). Artists as diverse as Leo Kottke, Barbra Streisand and the Jefferson Airplane have either recorded songs by or with Mr. Nagle and often his longtime music collaborator Scott Mathews. And Mr. Nagle's 1970 solo album, "Bad Rice," has been followed this year by "Pre-Cooked/Converted: The Bad Rice Demos."

Mr. Nagle is primarily a lyricist, a talent that carries over into his art most directly in the titles of his objects — "Lamb Shank Redemption," "Centaur of Attention," and "Beirut Canal" — sometimes ludicrous puns that often illuminate their victims unexpectedly. "Centaur of Attention," for example, features one of the attenuated, modeled shapes, this one in pale gray and resembling an inverted tree branch, that recoils in alarm, like one of George Stubbs's hysterical horses encountering a lion.

Mr. Nagle's pieces have qualities that you feel — sometimes in the back of your throat — as much as see. The multiple associations include Japanese culture (sushi, netsuke, gardens, lacquer); weirdly upholstered daybeds; spindly succulents and vegetables; limbs or tentacles. Shining, oozing drips, depending upon color, conjure blood, chocolate or motor oil, as well as glaze run amok. Upright shapes referred to as wafers have rippling surfaces more akin to Carr's water crackers, and they intimate gravestones and sometimes even Neolithic hand axes.

Stucco is a highly favored texture; and human or maybe reptilian skin is evoked with frugal clusters of pore-like pin pricks. Sprinklings of these recur in both objects and drawings, signaled by the first work on view: the 2008 "Scrunchabunch." Its flat-topped forms and terra-cotta hue (dusted with light blue) suggest a pair of unusually tall, thin mesas in the American Southwest that are doing their best to look short and may be made of human flesh. This is a subtle association, devoid of creepiness. For that, there's the green, glandular growth of "Beirut Canal" or — less explicit but still scatological — the right-angle of coiled black ensconced on a throne of oozing orange and aqua. You don't know whether to reach for a pooper-scooper or an empty Dairy Queen cone.

Mr. Nagle, who was born in 1939, emerged in the mid-1960s, when he also worked as an assistant to Peter Voukos, known for large improvised pots and sculptures of the Abstract Expressionist kind. A close friend and surfing buddy was Ken Price, based in Los Angeles: another ceramic great whose public profile was considerably heightened by this gallery. Both artists siphoned some ideas from California Funk and Finish Fetish. Like Mr. Price, Mr. Nagle committed to working small by around 1960. His primary inspirations were Giorgio Morandi's small paintings and several forms of Japanese art, especially tea bowls. It took him a few more years to smooth things out and achieve the refined delicacy he has maintained ever since. This delicacy exceeds Mr. Price's (whose efforts can seem immense next to Mr.

Nagle's). It is also implicitly narrative and emotionally tense, thanks to all the contrasts Mr. Nagle builds into his work.

This tension is especially evident in "Ryder's Sky," a homage to Albert Pinkham Ryder, an American painter who also treasured smallness. A maroon-brown wafer shape dusted with white evokes nocturnal clouds from one end of a futonlike form. A great ooze of brown emanating from the wafer's base heads toward a green mound — wasabi with a twist — that suggests a distorted Buddha or perhaps an actor in a kimono about to sweep offstage. The arrangement seems contemplative, perfect and hilarious, but maybe tragic. The compressed size and emotional intensity greet your eyes with the intimacy of a letter. You don't know if someone is being driven away or implored to stay, and you're not supposed to.

"Ron Nagle: Five O'Clock Shadow" is on view through Oct. 24 at the Matthew Marks Gallery, Manhattan; 212-243-0200, matthewmarks.com.

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