Rust Foster, 1977



In the field of ceramic sculpture, California has consistently been in the vanguard. In the late 50's a small group of artists working in L.A., including Peter Voulkos, Billy Al Bengston, John Mason and Kenneth Price, developed a body of work that essentially redefined the function of the ceramic medium. In an effort to rediscover the essential characteristics of the medium, these artists rejected long-standing notions of beauty as being integrally related to craftsmanship and utility, exploiting the material for its purely expressive potential and creating what John Coplans has described in his seminal catalog Abstract Expressionist Ceramics as "the most ingenious regional adaptation of the spirit of Abstract Expressionism that has yet emerged." (University of California, Irvine, 1966). Both technically and aesthetically these artists have had a considerable influence-partly as a result of the adventurous publication of Craft Horizons--on hundreds of artists now working in the ceramic medium.

One of the most sophisticated sculptors to emerge on the West Coast in recent years is San Francisco artist Ron Nagle. A second generation contemporary of Voulkos, Bengston, Mason and Price, Nagle began working with clay in the early sixties. By that time Voulkos had moved to the Bay Area to teach on the Berkeley campus, hiring Nagle as his apprentice. Voulkos initially introduced Nagle to the possibilities of clay as a sculptural medium.

Nagle's work, however, is most closely associated with the works of Kenneth Price. Both artists share an interest in small scale, idiosyncratic color through low fire glazing, and highly considered, reductive forms. Nagle states, "Abstract Expressionism was being dominated by a tough-guy kind of attitude, and here's some guy (Price) making these little Grandma wares with bright colors on them. So I did take my cue from Price, particularly in terms of attitude and the cup format."

Nagle has applied a unique degree of technical and formal sophistication to the cup format. His most recent series of works, which make up this current MATRIX unit, take the form of distorted cylinders--now only vestigially related to cups--based on a diagonal axis. Entitled the "Yama Series," these works were inspired by Japanese Momoyama period (17th century) ceramics, while incorporating lush glazes based on contemporary American phenomena: custom car colors, stucco walls, speckled linoleum.

Nagle is clearly recognized as a master colorist and pioneer in the development of low-fire ceramics and multiple glazing techniques. He often applies twenty to thirty layers and firings to each work. He then overglazes each piece with successive layers of China paint applied with a toothbrush, pallette knife or airbrush. The results, as in the "Yama Series," are blushing undertones and overtones establishing an incredibly sensual translucence and unity of color and surface.

Ron Nagle was born in San Francisco in 1939, attending San Francisco State University (BA 1962). He has taught ceramic sculpture at the University of California,

Berkeley, the San Francisco Art Institute and currently teaches at the California College of Arts and Crafts. Since the mid-sixties, Nagle has been involved with music, as well as the visual arts. He has written and performed his own album, Bad Rice (Warner Bros., 1970), and his songs have since been recorded by Pablo Cruz, Sammy Hagar, the Jefferson Starship, Barbra Streisand and The Tubes. Recently, he produced special sound effects for the Exorcist.

This MATRIX unit is being presented in cooperation with the San Francisco Art Institute. The pieces were part of the Institute's recent 1978 Adaline Kent Award Exhibition, awarded annually to a talented, promising California artist in memory of the late sculptor Adaline Kent. We would like to thank Helene Fried, Director of the Institute's Gallery, for her assistance. We would also like to thank Rena Bransten of the Quay Ceramic Gallery, San Francisco for her help with the exhibition.

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... Although Ron Nagle pays homage to 17th century Japanese Momoyama ware in the titles of his new works, it would be clear to any future archeologist that their period is 20th century California. The turquoise of swimming pools, the salmon glow of sunsets, waxed enamel surfboards, candy-apple custom cars, stucco walls and sun-ripened oranges are all reflected in the lush glazes of these small sculptures. Through Nagle's sophisticated humour, the 50's pink-andblack decor of naugahyde and speckled linoleum co-exists with the 50's splattered drip paintings of the Abstract Expressionists; the thick, creamy glazes of Japanese ceramics seem to come in thirty-one flavours, and the structures of moderne architecture can be held in the palm of your hand.

The formal theme-andvariations of the series extends to a schematic color arrangement used throughout. The gestural line of the edge is echoed in the naturalistic dripping line of a thick glaze which flows over most of the piece. Both contrast with the hardedge geometry of a painted rectangle centered on the handle or step. The rectangle, of course, curves around the surface of the cylinder, emphasizing its contour and volume, while at the same time camouflaging to some extent the projecting element it covers. Four tiny square holes pierce the cylinder wall at each corner of the rectangle, pointing again to its fragile thinness, mocking the illusion of a massive volume.

From an essay by Sylvia Brown, Ron Nagle (San Francisco Art Institute, 1978). Works in MATRIX:

Solaryama, 1978, multi-fired earthenware, 4" x 4". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. John Jones, Stinson Beach, California.

Verdeyama, 1978, multi-fired earthenware, 4 1/4" x 3 1/4". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. David Robinson, Sausalito, California.

Aquayama, 1978, multi-fired earthenware, 4 1/2" x 3 1/4". Lent by Mr. and Mrs. James Newman, San Francisco, California.

Rust Foster, 1977, multifired earthenware, 6" x 7". Lent by Byron Meyer, San Francisco, California.

Selected one-person exhibitions: Dilexi Gallery, SF '68; Rolph Nelson Gallery, LA '68; Quay Ceramics Gallery, SF '75; San Francisco Art Institute '78. Selected group exhibitions: San Francisco Art Institute, Work in Clay by Six Artists '64; Museum of Contemporary Crafts, NY, New Ceramic Forms '65; University of CA, Irvine and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Abstract Expressionist Ceramics '66; Henry Gallery, Seattle, American Craftsmen Invitational '68; Smithsonian Institution, Washington, Objects U.S.A. '70; Museum of Contemporary Crafts, NY, Cup Show '71; San Francisco Museum of Art, A Decade of Ceramic Art: The Joseph Monsen Collection '72; Scripps College, Claremont, CA, Fred and Mary Marer Collection '74; Oakland Museum, CA, California Ceramics and

Glass '74; Quay Ceramics
Gallery, SF '74 & '75; Museum
of Contemporary Art, Chicago,
American Crafts, 1976 '76;
William Hayes Ackland Memorial
Art Center, University of
North Carolina, Chapel Hill,
Contemporary Ceramic Sculpture
'77; Los Angeles Institute of
Contemporary Art, Foundations
in Clay '77; Oakland Museum,
CA, A Sense of Scale '77.

Selected bibliography about Nagle:

Coplans, John. "Abstract Expressionist Ceramics,"

Artforum (Nov. '66) pp. 34-41.

Ward, Ed and Joe Pugliese.

"Ron Nagle," Craft Horizons
(June '71).

Pugliese, Joe. "The Decade: Ceramics, " Craft Horizons (Feb. '73).

Meisel, Alan. "Prizing and Apprizing the Cup: Ron Nagle," Craft Horizons (Dec. '75) pp. 37-39.

Albright, Thomas. San Francisco Chronicle (Nov. 8 '75).

Ballatore, Sandy. "The California Clay Rush," Art in America (July/Aug. '76) p. 86.

Ratcliff, Carter. "Notes on Small Sculpture," Artforum (April '76).

McDonald, Robert. "Ron Nagle's Ceramic Sculpture," Artweek, vol. 9 (Oct. '78) p.3.

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.