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Tony Marsh's new untitled works on view at the Pit in Glendale are fired clay and ceramic vessels with a rough beauty. (Jeff McLane / From Tony Marsh and the Pit)

By LEAH OLLMAN NOV. 19, 2019

Tony Marsh, the high-idling engine of the remarkable ceramics program at Cal State Long Beach, has been an articulate and impassioned voice within the world of clay. He has received wide recognition for his work in the studio and classroom, but 10 years have passed since he's had a solo show in L.A. The 11 recent pieces in the show "Like Water Uphill" at the Glendale gallery the Pit, bring us, thrillingly, up to date.

Marsh is best known for his perforated vessels filled with objects distilled to archetypal simplicity: spheres, bones, rings, rods, pods. Contents and container have matching skins of eggshell-like glazed stoneware, punctuated at regular intervals with small holes. Elegant and delicate, the sculptures appear almost weightless, their permeable membranes shaped of air as much as clay.

While those perforated works from the 1990s into the 2000s are tangible objects passing as lyrical suggestion, the new pieces flaunt their physical nature with conviction. Each piece is a basic cylindrical vessel, 13 to 19 inches in height, with more-or-less straight walls, thick and impenetrable. Gone are the grace and restraint of the perforated vessels. These pieces are unleashed, primal.

One is lava black throughout, its exterior teeming with pitted bulges and extrusions, its inside walls cracked and veined. Another is a ghostly blue-black within, its bowl littered with an assortment of melded clay chips, its outer surface a fierce gold. One piece has a glossy, milky-aqua petaled pelt; another a volcanic crust in all the hues of heat.

# lora reynolds gallery



Tony Marsh's installation at the Pit in Glendale. (Jeff McLane / From Tony Marsh and the Pit)

Marsh is fearless in his explorations of texture and color, applying multiple glazes and mineral coatings. He subjects each piece to numerous firings, letting chemistry and chance have at it, over and over again.

He calls these recent works “Crucibles” and “Cauldrons,” after functional instruments of transformation, vessels designed for fire and for catalyzing change. Each title carries an apt metaphorical load in addition to its descriptive one: A crucible is a rigorous test, just as these works are trials, under severe conditions; and a cauldron stands for an unstable, tempestuous situation, again not unlike what these pieces face in the kiln, what Marsh generates in the process of making them.

The materiality of these vessels is riveting. What they do share with Marsh's earlier work is a kind of reduction to essence, and an exhilarating beauty, this time rugged rather than refined, improvisational instead of meticulously ordered. Each “Crucible” and “Cauldron” is a singular topography, earth inexhaustibly reinvented as earth.



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