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Ron Nagle

Press Packet

Shire, Peter. "Ron Nagle." *apartamento magazine*, no. 24, Autumn/Winter 2019–20, pp. 358–76.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "Ron Nagle." *The New Yorker*, May 10, 2019.

Furman, Anna. "An Artist Who Makes Irreverent, and Pocket-Size, Sculptures." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, April 29, 2019.

Pagel, David. "Feel the risk of possibility." *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 2017, p. E3.

"Must See." *Artforum*, February 24, 2017.

Cohn, Hana. "Ron Nagle." *Contemporary Art Review LA*, March 22, 2017.

Pagel, David. "The Mind-Bending Poetry." *Gallery Magazine*, February 2017, pp. 18–25.

Tarasoff, Sabrina. "Ron Nagle." *Flash Art*, April 4, 2017.

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Michel, Karen. "Pottery Winner: An Artist's Dark, Funny Oeuvre Gets Major Show." *NPR*, October 24, 2015.

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## apartamento

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Imagine it's 1970. Being in Los Angeles, I was aware of a certain group of guys who were doing sculpture with clay. My girlfriend Waynna brought me this book, *Objects: USA*. It was more or less full of typical stoneware pots, some of them masterful and some of them adventurous within the typical stoneware deal. All of the artists in the book had a portrait, most of them dramatic, some of them a little casual. Then all of a sudden there was this picture of a guy who looked like he was run over by a bus. It looked like a prison mugshot that was left in the attic for 50 years. The accompanying photo of the artwork grabbed me and frankly was a relief among all those other things. It was hitting every mark: shape, form, volume, presentation, and the colour was outrageous. None of the brown, drips of stoneware; it was iridescent like a fantastic car paint job, only in ceramic. The colours even clashed, making the whole piece light up. The handle, you couldn't put your finger through.

# RON NAGLE

INTERVIEW BY PETER SHIRE  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAX FARAGO

The hole in the cup, you couldn't drink out of. Yet it was definitely a cup, definitely a sculpture. Who was this guy? Where in the hell did those shapes come from? The pieces had a compressed intensity and contained the power of some kind of time-release drug that kept exploding. This guy was cool; he was funny. His name, Ron Nagle. As I learned more about him, the funnier he got. Over the years the holes have got smaller and the handles have got slipperier, morphing into ice-cream sandwich landscapes with chewing-gum trees. In the artworld they often use the term 'having a moment', which implies a great success that could be temporal and out of nowhere. With multiple international gallery and museum shows all at once, Ron Nagle is busier than ever. He is not having a moment; we are looking at a diligent exploration of over 60 years that's matured into an exposition of the most astounding imagination. It's not a casual accident, it is an ongoing romance.

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What phrase do you most overuse?  
Motherfucker. I say it constantly.

Ceramics?

Well, as you probably have gathered, my roots are in there. Me, Jim Melchert, and Michael Frimkess are the only guys left from the original group. John Mason just died, and all the people that were a core of energy that started in LA and found its way up here are gone. With a few exceptions, I am not that interested in ceramics as such. My roots come from music and painting, both American and European, and from Japanese visual culture. There was still always a vessel format, for lack of a better word, from which stuff grew, and you could reconstruct that into something else. I still use clay. It's part of what I do, in one way or another. Sometimes it's for making models or I do slip-casting, but I combine it with other stuff because it's more conducive to arriving at the feeling I think I'm trying to get, or the vibe or the presence. It's more conducive because of its immediacy.

There's a lot of history. Where has the vessel sailed to now?

It wasn't a conscious fight; it was just something I believed in from the beginning. Part of the reason that ceramics became ghettoised, not only as a metaphor, is because it became incestuous; it draws from itself and not from other places. Kenny Price and I both kept our distance from the ceramic 'craft' crowd. The only thing that really pissed me off is that you can have something really creative, really interesting, really inventive, but you'd get a tenth of the price because it was a vessel, or it was made out of clay. I mean, we were hated on both sides: the craft people hated it and the art people hated it. That's changed for me now, and if I've contributed to making it more acceptable, that's fine, that's OK. Finally, now there is a show in New York of Peter

Voulkos. All of a sudden it's hot. What the fuck. What took so long?

Here's one that's opening the Pandora's box. The current interest in ceramics and where it might lead?

Finally, it's been recognised. All of a sudden, for reasons I can't explain, it became more fashionable. I thought ceramics peaked about five years ago, but it's just kept going. In terms of what's going to happen, it looks like maybe it's here to stay, but this is like the top 40. It's very fickle. Will it stay? I don't know. Stuff comes and goes, phases in music or style come and go faster.

Does skill and craftsmanship enter into this? The new word on the block is 'deskilled'.

Craftsmanship to most people in the field would be smooth, very slick, and what have you. Which I'm part of to a degree. But there's also the other side, where you've got Japanese stuff, which is based on nature, on another way of thinking and celebrating the imperfect, and that stuff is soulful, but you can't learn that. Either you understand it or you don't. When all these 'traditional potters' would take and throw 'beautifully'—I'm being somewhat sarcastic, if not totally—they would take their 'beautifully' thrown vases and then take a stick to it, so that it would look like Pete's work. They'd say, 'Oh well, if you want to be accepted you have to go mod on this now'. They couldn't do it. They didn't get it. This takes skill, and of a different kind. It takes finesse, it takes unassuming authority. Craftsmanship doesn't just mean slick; it means getting it to look like you want it to look. And there are varying degrees of fanaticism in that direction. Before Pete Voulkos, there were people like Joan Miró, Antoni Tàpies, and Lucio Fontana. They were working in clay and they were doing it funky style. And it wasn't because they didn't know



Top to bottom: Sensory Overload; Mr Rhumba; Lotta Watage; Chef's Discretion.

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how to handle the material. I think some better work is being done because a lot of the purism has disappeared, and in fact, in many cases, it's never been there. Truth to materials or developing good throwing skills—in most cases, it can fuck you up. Because you start to believe that these are the rules and you can't depart from them.

Of course, there's the other position that you need to know the rules to break them.

Well, yeah. And that's probably where I come in. I do it just to be ornery, but I also know what I want it to look like. I think people are getting away with stuff because of this new-found popularity of clay, and I can't figure out whether I'm benefiting from it or whether it's a mistake to be associated with it.

Didn't Groucho say something about that? 'I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would—'  
'That would have me as a member'. That's kind of how I feel.

One of the things that really peeled my eyeballs was Richard Shaw and Robert Hudson's show, 'Work in Porcelain', at the San Francisco Museum of Art. That show changed the face of ceramics for the next 15 or 20 years. I would take some degree of credit for that, because nobody was using slip-casting at the time. That was forbidden on all fronts—China painting, decals, and all that stuff, which was the exclusive territory of the hobbyists, which I learned from my mother. Not that she taught me, but it was just like, 'Oh yeah. You can do that'. You could mix oil and some acetone. It took me a few years to figure that out.

Were you mixing your own china paints for spraying?

I first got these little glass vials from my mother, who would mix powdered paints with oil, and then she would paint them on with a brush, for the Santa Claus or the angels or whatever they

painted in her ceramics club. Somewhere along the line I realised that the advantage of china paints is that they don't change colour in the firing. They pretty much adhere to the colour that they were before they went into the kiln. They come out even brighter and more intense. Right now, I only use it occasionally. I'm mainly using glaze, or I'm also using car paint. That is just to be more direct and more predictable in terms of the colour, and not to have to go through the firing process with all of the headaches—the cracking, the shivering, all of it.

Are you talented?

I hate false modesty, but I would have to say I just work real hard. You've got to put in your 10,000 hours. I think my work is getting better. I think it's getting more interesting.

When and where were you happiest?

I would say in the middle to late '70s. I went through a really, really bad time. I didn't have a job, I was a carpenter, and then all of a sudden Jack Nitzsche, who was like an idol said, 'Hey, we're making this movie called The Exorcist, would you be interested in doing some sound effects? We'll send you a portable tape recorder and you just go out and get anything you want'. I was in heaven, because I was in such bad shape and I was doing a lot of drugs, but I caught that peak, when, if you smoke a lot, you actually do feel euphoric. Where you get up in the morning and go, 'Whoa! What a fucking day! I think I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna write this, I'm gonna make that song, I'm gonna do this'. And I did everything.

Who do you miss?

Jane Dornacker was the funniest person I ever knew; she died too soon. The other person is Ken Price. He and I did a collaboration twice, actually. Once at Anderson Ranch, which was a workshop about cups and once at a porcelain factory in Buffalo





for an event called Super Mud. We had some of the most fun I've ever had at Super Mud. Richard Shaw, John Mason, Kenny, my wife Cindy, and myself and we were all shit-faced and loaded as a motherfucker. I had a stash of really good pot that I stuffed in my shoe. Except I took the wrong pair of shoes on the plane. And I tore the fucking airport apart looking for it. Fortunately, there was a dealer on hand, and I hadn't seen Kenny in quite a long time. We hit it off and stayed up all night telling stories and laughing. One of the highlights of my life. The kind of rapport that I wanted to have with him happened. It was just one of those magic moments; I don't know how else to put it.

the wall, and I thought this is my last chance. Then I became a pothead and then I got rid of that and now I just wring my hands. I work, that's how I remain relatively sane.

Do you feel comfortable talking about your addiction in the interview?

Yes, I do. It should just be made clear that I have been clean and sober for 33 years on my own, no program, no sponsor, nothing. I believed that there was something more important out there. I have my own brand of spiritual thinking; it changes from time to time. The idea of being creative and making something out of nothing and using your spirit to do that. I don't consciously say, 'I am



I wrote a song about it because he and I had both allegedly quit drinking and became pot heads. It's called 'It's Finally Sinking In'. The part that's sinking in is that we may not see each other again. Somebody could say it's about two theoretically reformed drunks. It's one of my favourite songs on a personal level. It sounds like a German drinking song, but it's very sad and melancholy at the same time. Kenny was one of the reasons I cleaned up, not because he quit drinking, but I realised that I had a chance at maybe being half as good as he is by getting my shit together. That and the fact that my wife was going to divorce me if I didn't clean up and my daughter was born. I just said, 'Fuck it', the writing was on

going to get sit down and get spiritual and make a brilliant sculpture'. It isn't like that at all. You make stuff and that's what I do. I am glad, I dodged a bullet. I dodged a lot of them actually.

Tell me about The Tubes a little bit. I don't think I know too much about them.

There were probably other groups that were doing theatrical skits or whatever you want to call it. The Tubes were the first in San Francisco to emerge from the psychedelic to the new glam mentality of the '70s, which made them great unto themselves. I would say that what they had going for them was that they had the music to back it up. It wasn't just that

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they were doing skits or riding a motorcycle on stage, which everybody thought was outrageous at the time.

How I met them was through Jane Dornacker, who was an old friend from way back in The Mystery Trend days. One day Jane said, 'I'm dancing with The Tubes now, you ought to give them some of your material', and I said, 'Well, I got this idea for a song, based on a title from a story I heard in high school about a guy who went down to Tijuana to party with some hookers. He put his hand on a hooker's ass and she threw him out of the room and said don't touch me there'. So that's how the whole thing started. She wrote the verse, which was very suggestive, narrative, speaking basically over chords, and then it goes into this big fanfare and the chorus: 'The smell of burning leather / As we hold each other tight / As our rivets rub together / Flashing sparks into the night / At this moment of surrender darling / If you really care / Don't touch me there'.

You were born in 1939. So you were 25, 26 in 1965. The summer of love. What do you remember about that, or what was funny?

I hated it. I thought it was bullshit, with all this hippie, dippy stuff. I had a great studio, a large storefront in the Haight-Ashbury, on Waller Street, which was the next street from Haight Street. I never once went down that fucking street. It was occupied by self-styled, individualists wearing tie-dye.

Slackerdom?

Every opportunity I have I will denounce it vehemently. A lot of it comes from art and music. I'm listening to Motown, to the music of Philadelphia, Gamble and Huff, all the great songwriters from Brill Building in New York and good LA stuff. My idols were Leiber and Stoller, Cynthia Weil with Barry Mann, Goffin and King, and Burt Bacharach. Everybody thought it was schmaltz

at the time. I had no interest in psychedelic music, 20-minute solos and gibberish. Anyway, culturally I was out of step. The summer of love and psychedelia also set up a visual culture that just made me sick aesthetically. Light shows, tie-dye, I detested them. I couldn't handle the music, I couldn't handle the visuals. Because of my art background, I was exposed to some of the greatest art ever done, with abstract expressionism. Why would I want to see some guy in a tie dye t-shirt when I can look at a De Kooning?

Did you ever get lured into the psychedelic scene in any way?

We weren't invited back to the Fillmore after the first couple of shows, because we wanted to do pop.

Which band was that?

The Mystery Trend. So we said, 'OK. Let's come up with something to fool these guys. We'll do a song, we'll make it psychedelic. It'll be in A minor'. We did this song called 'Keep Sleeping', and it was like a drone. We got up there and we start playing. The base player 'forgets' to tune, so he's out of tune. The guitar player puts the capo on the wrong fret, so he's on the wrong key completely. The strings on my Clavinet were breaking, you're just getting nothing but clatter when you play a chord. And I'm freaking out and thinking to myself, 'Do we stop?' We played all the way through. The promoter that put on the show comes up afterwards and says, 'That was the heaviest thing I ever heard. Mind-blowing. That was something else, man. I didn't think you guys could do that'. It was a train wreck and he was digging it.

So much for the Summer of Love.  
So much for the Summer of Love.  
I call it the Bummer of Love.

What do you wear when you go to sleep?

Nothing.



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You and Winston Churchill. Nothing?

Nothing, no. There's nothing on.

I notice that when I'm really ready to go to sleep, I find my hands in a certain position. What's your position?

I could say doggy style or missionary. Here's the deal. I have a few things which will probably come across in these questions. One thing is that I have sleeping disorder. I take medications that can cause certain things to happen when you're sleeping, and I would have these nightmares where I'd start throwing punches really bad. And the dog sleeps with us, and she's a sweet little dog, and my wife sleeps next to me, and I'm yelling and



throwing punches. Not at them, but whoever this adversary is in my dream, and I always have to qualify this by saying I never start any of these fights. But I've thrown punches so heavy that I've rolled over and thrown myself out of bed several times. So I try to sleep, first of all, on the left-hand side of the bed, and then I have pillows on the floor. It is a very conscious setup before I doze off, to avoid hurting anybody, including myself.

On what occasions do you lie?

Not very often, I'll tell you that. If I think it's going to hurt somebody's feelings, I might colour the story. I may try to put a positive spin. If I was teaching, we'll just use painting for

example, and I might not like it, or not think it's developed, or the direction's not quite right, I'd just look at the corner of the painting and say, 'See the corner of your painting? That's a much better painting than the whole painting'. And I would mean it, but I would just polish it. If you give them a little, I call it the 'Dumbo theory', Dumbo the elephant. Somebody told him, 'Hey, put this feather behind your ear and you'll be able to fly', and he believed it and he could fly. When I first saw Dumbo, that was the lesson I got out of it as a kid and I've thought about it more seriously as I've got older. You give someone a little bit of confidence and make them believe in themselves and get rid of the fear. All that most students need is that confidence. Fear is the killer.

The lie I remember the most, and I haven't told this story in fucking 40 years, is from when I was 16 and worked for a place that sold used cars. We had a yellow cab, which had been driven into the ground, and we took it to a place where you could get a brand-new paint job for \$19.99. The yellow was leaking through underneath this turquoise shit paint job. These guys come in and say, 'We are interested in that '55 Plymouth you have'. They said, 'Now the first thing we have to know is, was it a cab?' I said, 'Oh, no, no, no, it's not a cab, definitely not a cab'. And so this guy brought his buddy in, and he's trying to impress him, like he knows his shit about cars. The first thing the guy does is get down on his hands and knees and runs his finger around the exhaust pipe, looks at it, tastes it, kicks the tyres, the classic tyre kicking, goes in, pops the hood, puts his finger in the radiator, holds it up to the light, closes the radiator and the hood. There are fucking holes in the dashboard where obviously the meter for the cab had been, and the whole inside is beat to shit, and he goes, 'Joe, I've got something to tell you: it's definitely not a cab'. 'OK, I'll take it, close the deal'. I enjoyed the creative act of sales. I even took courses in salesmanship. I got a kind of high out of the creativity of persuasion. How to come in for the close, how to massage a situation.

Before music and ceramics, did you have other ambitions or fantasies about possible careers?

My father wanted me to go into business.

That wasn't a fantasy though.

No, that wasn't a fantasy. I thought, 'OK, my father wants me to go into business, I like

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clothes, I'm going to open up a clothing store'. So that was my goal for quite a while, until I got into college. I thought, 'I'll use my artistic taste to have the coolest clothing store in San Francisco'. That was the fantasy, but it was a fantasy born out of compromise. In college, I became a philosophy major for one semester, an English major for the next semester. Finally, I wound up in the art department and I said, 'OK, this is it. This is what I got to do'. Music all along was a big part of my life and moved me emotionally from a very early age. Anyway, so I was doing both from that point on, off and on.

What advice do you have for young artists?

My advice for anybody who aspires to be an artist is to work every single day so it's a part of your life. Even if you have a full-time job, never let it go out of your consciousness. Develop the ability, if you don't have it naturally, to look at anything as a potential for inspiration. It could be a splat on the street or the hull of a boat. Just be open to possibilities and how you might put these things together to create a hybrid of some kind. There is source material everywhere, you've just got to have the guts to pursue it and to see it.

A trait that you most deplore in others?

I hate liars, passive aggressive behaviour, condescending and patronising communication, and disingenuousness. The inability to perceive intangible things.

What do you consider the most overrated virtue?

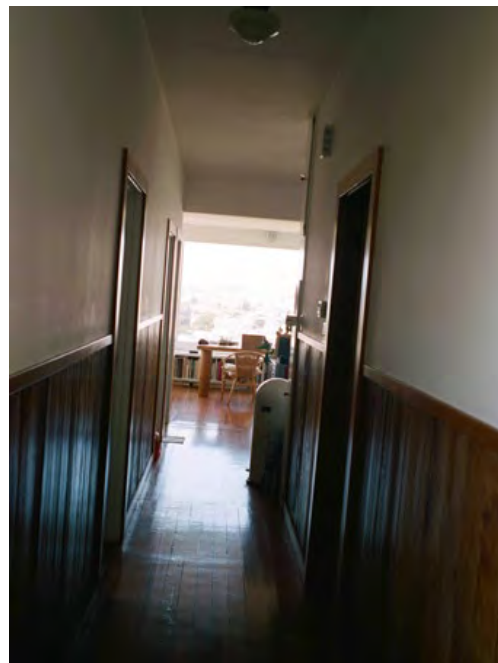
Virtuosity, and by virtuosity I'm talking about people like singers who use melisma to say one word, except they use 10 notes to do it. There are times when you certainly can bend notes, throw on flourishes, but most of the time it's used to cover up a lack of emotion. It's quasi-emotion.

Tell me a little bit about your mom and dad and your interactions with them.

I was the rebel and my sister was the pleaser. My father taught me a lot about making stuff; he could make anything and fix anything. He was very devoted to the family, but he was a complete homophobe, complete racist, complete chauvinist, and he was not at all ashamed to express his views. I wasn't particularly close to either of them. In retrospect, they were both intelligent people. I think my father particularly had a great sense of humour. My bedroom was in the basement and he had a one-way

intercom, where he could listen to me. Also, unbeknownst to me, on two separate occasions, he put a tape recorder under my bed in the middle of the night, once to teach me Spanish and once to teach me how to be a better person. I woke up in the middle of the night and I heard someone saying, 'Habla usted español?' He was very big on subconscious learning and hypnosis, too. On a separate occasion, I woke up to the voice of a self-help guru saying, 'You have a fine mind. You can do it if you try'. This was his way of trying to tame the rebel.

From your repressive upbringing how did you find your way to art? What romantic symbols led you there?



I probably didn't know what to call it at the time, but I was a complete fanatic. If I heard or saw something that caught my attention and made me feel something that I hadn't felt before, I was in. It was that simple. I found my way to art through rebellion. From seeing and hearing stuff I'd never heard before. It gave me my own secret life and I loved that idea. This was the year that Time magazine or Life did an article on abstract expressionism and Jackson Pollock, and everybody would say, 'What is this shit. My kid could do that'. I was rebelling against that kind of mentality. In college, we were having an art sale and playing Thelonious Monk, and some guy who was an art educator stuck his head out the window

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and said, 'Turn off that cacophonous racket!' To which we replied, 'That's not cacophonous, that's Thelonious!' I just didn't want to be like my parents. I wanted to be a beatnik; there was something very exotic about that. But there were all kinds of other things going on culturally. There was Zen Buddhism; Improvisation was becoming big.

Greatest achievement?

Oh god. I don't know, man, I just do stuff that I enjoy doing, I couldn't say one was greater than the other. I could say that I got to work on movies, I have hit records. What I enjoy most is sitting in my studio and working away slowly and just trying to be calmer. I've writ-

most peace of mind. Just working on stuff, or drawing while I'm watching Charlie Chan, because I'm not thinking. I call this 'peripheral cognition', where you have that going on in the background. You already know the story, because you've seen the movie 50 times and you draw. You're not thinking too hard about the drawing. Your right brain is going off wherever it wants to go.

You're going to start someone on Charlie Chan. You're going to intrigue them. What's the one, what's the grabber?

Oh fuck, that's hard. Maybe Castle in the Desert. It's a little more complex; most of the time is spent in a room trying to figure something



ten so many songs about the guy that I'd like to be, and one is called 'It's Cool'. It's about a guy I wish I was. He's got all the qualities that a cool guy has, nothing bothers him, he dresses cool, is articulate, etc.

Well, we're talking about another thing too, which is our illusions, and what these questions are a little bit about is who we think we're supposed to be.

Yes. As time goes by, you only got so many hours in the day, you want to balance things out between your family, some degree of social life, which I don't have much of—because I don't drink probably is the main reason. Just being in my studio, that's where I get the

out. This is like way out west, and then they'll go out to the desert, then go over to LA or wherever he was, and upstage all of the cops. The cops would be saying, 'Who's this guy?' and then he would say some pearls of wisdom and completely level them. Those pearls of wisdom were on the side of some of my cups, and I called them Chan-o-grams. I loved the character; Charlie Chan was a hero to me. He was cool, he dressed cool, smarter than anybody else on the screen, always had the right answer. He was wise. He floated in and floated out and solved the crime, every time. More than that, it's the environment of the deco period and film noir of the '30s, '40s, and '50s. There is something about the vibe

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of that era, and they're all in black and white. There's a certain feeling I get, very serene, when I'm watching those. It also had a great deal of nostalgic value because I would see his movies every Saturday when I went to the *matinée* as a kid.

What is your most treasured possession?

I got a cup from the '60s of Kenny's. It had definitely been used, which is great. There are coffee stains on the inside. Before I pass on to the great wherever, I've got to have a cup of joe out of that.

What is your most marked characteristic?

I would say my sense of humour.

Do you identify with any historical figures?

I don't know if you ever saw this announcement card that I did for a show. You know that famous Picasso photo—it shows him sitting at a table facing you. The photographer placed two pieces of bread, shaped like hands, on the edge of the table so they looked like they were Picasso's hands. For my announcement card, I took that photo and Photoshopped out his face and put my head at the right scale, the rest is all Pablo. It was fun to do. I am not implying for a second that I have any other qualities like him, good or bad, but the picture itself is sort of iconic and people say I kind of look like him, so I thought I'm just going to stick my mug on top of his.

Everybody identifies with that fucker. Because he was top.

Right. That's what I get out of it. So anyway, I'll say Picasso.

And we know who your hero of fiction is: Mr Chan. You want to add to that?

No, let's have Chan with all the cheese. Full cheese for Chan. Cheese means all good things in one's lifetime.

And we know 'cheese now' is your motto.

Cheese now is my motto, and I'm grateful as hell that I'm getting cheese before I die. I made T-shirts that say 'Cheese Now', which means success before you die. That could be spiritual, emotional, or financial success, getting recognition. When I pull up and find parking right in front of the restaurant and someone says, 'Oh man, you got rock star parking', I'll say, 'Not rock star parking. I got

cheese parking'. The hip-hop guys talk about cheddar, which to them means money. For me it means success. There are so many people—look at Kenny Price: he has this great show in LA and at the Metropolitan, he couldn't make it, because he was gone. He was the guy when he was living, but if there was a symbolic moment of, 'OK, you finally made it', he wasn't there to enjoy it. The whole thing about cheese started with my dogs. The only way that I could get them to come back into the car and not get run over on the street was to drive around my neighbourhood, and we called the dogs 'boys', so we'd drive around and call out to them, 'Boys, cheese! Cheese, boys!' and they'd jump right into the car. The only thing that worked.

What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?

Unjustified anger.

Greatest fear?

The great unknown.

What's your greatest extravagance?

Shopping and sugar.

Perfect happiness?

I don't know if that's ever achievable.

At least for a minute?

I'll tell you my perfect happiness would be relaxation and peace of mind. I'm a worrier. Marrying my wife, Cindy, we've been together for 50 years. No two people could be more different than one another; it's crazy we're so close. My granddaughter. My daughter said she was never going to have kids. All of a sudden there's this beautiful 10-month-old child that I am just crazy, crazy, crazy about. I am happy working. When I am working, it's like my salvation.

apartamento - Ron Nagle





Shire, Peter. "Ron Nagle." *apartamento magazine*, no. 24, Autumn/Winter 2019–20, pp. 358–76.



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## THE NEW YORKER

ART

### Ron Nagle

Like his starry contemporary the late Ken Price, this veteran of the California ceramic-sculpture renaissance of six decades ago studied with Peter Voulkos and developed surreal or abstract variations on the cup form, which is to ceramics roughly what the nude is to painting. Unlike Price, Nagle has stayed true to cup scale through the years, while expunging any hint of utility. No two of his works are alike, and they're rarely more than six inches high. But, at close range, they become monumental, conjoining clay, polyurethane, and epoxy resin to create textures—smooth or nubbly, shiny or matte—in such chromatic chords as yellow, black, and pale blue or gray, pink, and oxblood. One resembles a pink ice-cream sandwich, with two boxy green chunks of something atop it at one end and a glossy black handlebar mustache at the other.

— *Peter Schjeldahl*

Through June 15.

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## T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

### An Artist Who Makes Irreverent, and Pocket-Size, Sculptures

Ron Nagle helped pave the way for clay artists to be taken seriously — but he still has a sense of humor. Ahead of a new solo show, he discusses his work, his dog and his TV habits.



"My fascination with lobsters is based on an old 'Seinfeld' episode, 'Man Hands,'" says the artist Ron Nagle, photographed here outside of his San Francisco home, where he has lobster-print towels and doormats.

Damien Maloney

By Anna Furman

April 29, 2019

Like the confectioners that craft Japanese wagashi, traditional tea-ceremony treats, the artist Ron Nagle, 80, creates miniature, meticulously rendered objects that are ripe with dual meaning. In his otherworldly ceramic sculptures, which are small enough to fit in the palm of your hand, pastel stucco planes converge with glossy half-moon shapes, suggesting animal tails, chewed-up wads of gum, bare tree limbs, erect genitalia or excrement — sometimes all at once.

Furman, Anna. "An Artist Who Makes Irreverent, and Pocket-Size, Sculptures." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, April 29, 2019.



Next month, some 30 of Nagle's provocative sculptures and drawings will go on view at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York in the exhibition "Getting to No," a significant showcase of his recent work. While Nagle is an established artist — in 2013, his sculptures were featured in the 55th Venice Biennale, and he has works in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art — and though he played an important role in forming the California Clay Movement, which helped elevate the status of ceramic art, he is still something of a cult figure within a few relatively contained communities. Outside of the visual art world, though, he is also known as a prolific songwriter and composer; he's credited for writing iconic songs on albums by Jefferson Airplane, Sammy Hagar and Barbra Streisand, as well as for creating many of the sound effects in "The Exorcist."

Born and raised in San Francisco, Nagle apprenticed with the Berkeley-based ceramist Peter Voulkos in the '60s and helped carve out a niche for ceramics to be understood as rigorous and conceptual sculptures, rather than simply decorative objects. He went on to teach ceramics at Mills College in Oakland for over three decades before retiring in 2010 and returning full-time to his practice. Throughout his life, Nagle has tried to make three-dimensional forms appear flat, while still evoking rich, microcosmic landscapes, taking cues from the Italian artists Giorgio Morandi and Lucio Fontana, who challenged the dimensional constraints of painting on canvas in the '50s. Often installed in peep-hole-style wall recesses or gleaming glass vitrines, like specimens dropped down from another planet, his works mix elements of allure and repulsion to enigmatic effect. Named with tongue-in-cheek puns like "Pastafarian," "Urinetrouble" and "Karma Gouda," they are also extensions of his irreverent sense of humor.



Ron Nagle, "Borderline Happy," (2018). © Ron Nagle, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery



Ron Nagle, "New Collusion," (2018). © Ron Nagle, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

On a recent visit to the artist's sunlit Bernal Heights home in San Francisco, which gleamed white like a freshly painted spaceship, there was a speckling of lilacs and golden poppies that lead through the garden to his next-door studio, which Nagle affectionately calls his "cocoon." Seated there, sporting an all-white outfit, with a book on Korean ceramics in hand, Nagle answered T's Artist's Questionnaire.

**What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what's your work schedule like?**

I get up, have breakfast, take the dog for a walk. In the old days, it was close to a 9-to-5 in the studio. Now, with increased success — I hate these words — I'm busier. My main part of the day, my peace of mind, my "this is what I do because I gotta do it" is being in the studio as much as I can.

I usually order dinner out because my wife and I don't like cooking. And then around 6 o'clock we watch MSNBC — to see if Trump's still in office. Scary times, man. I hope you're not a Republican. She'll want to watch Rachel Maddow for the second time and I'll move into the bedroom and watch "The Voice" or "True Detective" or "Ray Donovan." If nothing's on, I've been known to watch "MacGyver" or "Hawaii Five-O." They're reviving all these old shows. I'm a big nostalgia and trivia freak.

**How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?**

Other things take up space in my head, but the work never leaves my mind. I'm always looking, thinking, taking pictures with my phone — of a splat on the street or a ship bow down at Mission Bay. I pretty much remember everything — or I'll bark it into my recorder. But if we're talking hands-on-the-material, drawing or whatever the case, I'd say six hours.

**What's the first piece of art you ever made?**

I made a bust in high school. I put it in the kiln and it blew the side of its head off. I was going to throw it away and a friend of mine said, "Oh no man, that's really cool." I've been making stuff since I was a kid. My mother told me I had no talent, she was like, "What do you want to do that for?"

**What's the worst studio you ever had?**

Probably the basement of the building next door, where my daughter lives now. Dirt floor. Funky.

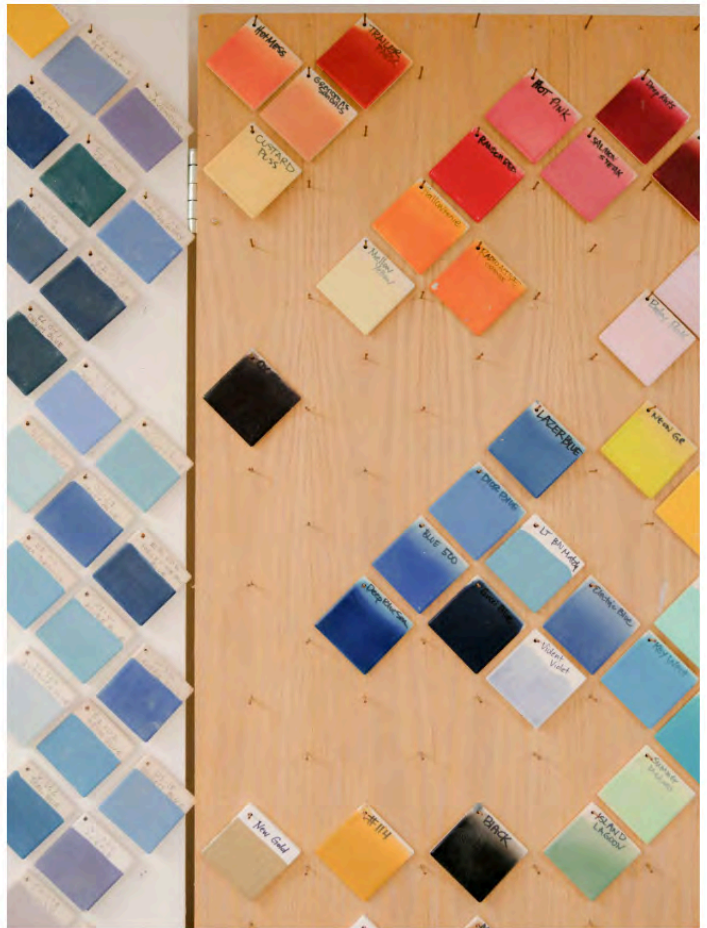
**What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?**

There's a sculpture from 1958 that Scripps College owns, "Perfume Bottle." It's a big jar with a kind of tombstone stopper. Peter Voulkos brought over a collector who was a math teacher at Scripps and he bought it for \$100.





Nagle coats his sculptures with a mix of epoxy resins, stucco, clay and glossy automotive paints. Damien Maloney



"We have a color conference to come up with different color combinations, like gold and red," says Nagle, referring to his studio assistant. "I like gold. It can be cheesy, but if you're walking the line the right way it could be really elegant, too." Damien Maloney

## When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What's the first step?

I draw a lot, that's really the beginning of it all. I draw in bed, usually watching a Charlie Chan movie. The drawings are very small. I'll put them on a copier and blow them up to get a general picture of what they'll look like at a certain scale. And then I start building the models at full scale, at six inches max. I can envision things, to a degree, three-dimensionally. I'm not saying I have visions, but some little idea will come popping into my head. It might be based on something I've seen, and subconsciously it finds its way onto paper.

## How do you know when you're done?

When it feels right. I'm a big advocate for letting the works sit. I look at them, leave them around for a while.

## How many assistants do you have?

My assistant, Whitney, is the only person that gets in here. And she does all the stuff business-wise and is also great in the studio.

## What music do you play when you're making art?

R&B, Motown, music of Philadelphia from the '70s, like Gamble and Huff. I try to keep current with pop music, most of which I hate. But I'm into electronic dance music and people like James Blake, Frank Ocean, Kendrick Lamar. I like sad music. I don't like to feel sad — I hate it, in fact, it's awful — but I'm drawn to melancholy music.

## When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

I've never used the word "professional," although that's what I am. To a large degree, it's too much. I know there's a certain amount of allure or pretense — depending on where you're coming from — when you say that. When you say "professional artist," people automatically assume it's painting. Then I say, "I make small sculptures." I'm very reluctant to use the word "ceramics" because ceramics for years had such a bad reputation. The best people working in clay do not declare themselves clay artists.



"I'm kind of a clothes whore," Nagle says. "I like looking good and I have my own style." This T-shirt was a gift from his daughter, who lives next door to his studio. Damien Maloney

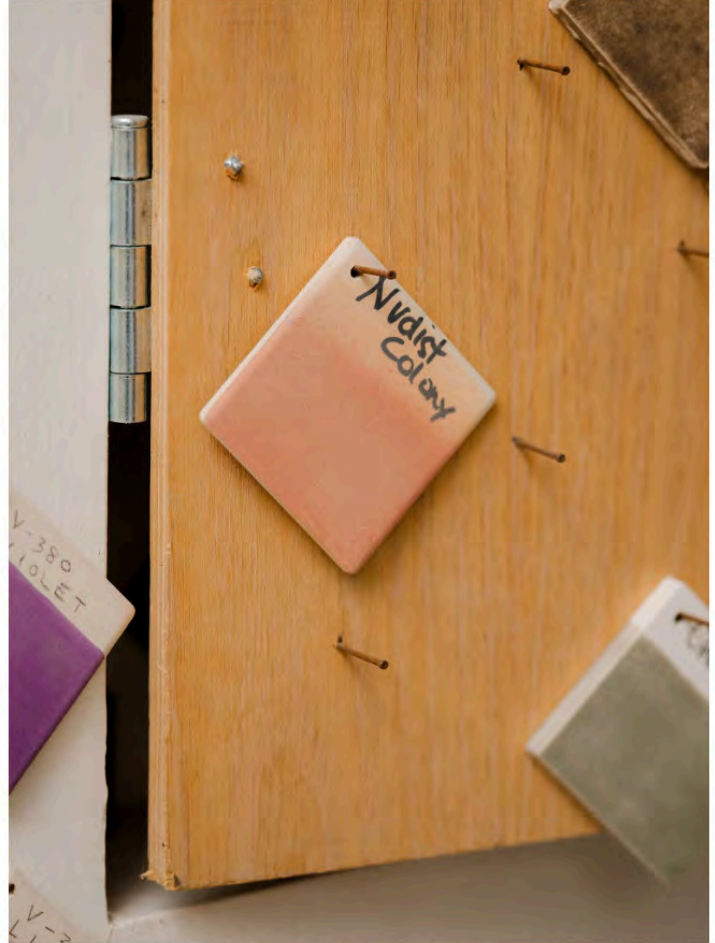


## What's the weirdest object in your studio?

A picture of Bill Cullen, who was a '50s, '60s and '70s radio and TV host. There's also a picture of a woman surrounded by cheese.



After teaching ceramics at Mills College in Oakland for 32 years, Nagle retired in 2010 and returned to his practice full time. Damien Maloney



Nagle and his assistant give paint chips colorful names, including Nudist Colony (pictured here), Don't Ask Don't Tell (muddy gray), Dior Blue (soft azure) and One Night Stan (sickly sweet purple). Damien Maloney

## What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I don't think I know how to procrastinate. It's not a matter of principle. I would love to, *love to*, but I can't do it. I always feel like I gotta make something.

## What's the last thing that made you cry?

I just had major surgery, about four weeks ago. I won't offer to show you my scar. The worst part of the experience was something I hadn't heard of before: postoperative delirium. I was so scared. It was like a dream, everything going in and out of focus. I was in two different worlds. I was on the phone bawling my eyes out. My wife and I were declaring our love.



A framed picture of the radio and TV host Bill Cullen in Nagle's studio. Damien Maloney



Nagle's studio is also dotted with works by other artists. Here, Ken Price's "California Cup" (1991). Damien Maloney

### **What do you usually wear when you work?**

I've got overalls like Willem de Kooning used to wear in the '50s. I saw a picture and thought, I gotta wear that, it'd make me a better artist.

### **Which artists have influenced your work?**

Later Morandi. A simpler Philip Guston. Cy Twombly's sculpture. Kenny Price. Peter Voulkos. Lucio Fontana.

### **What are you reading right now?**

I just finished reading David Sedaris's last book.

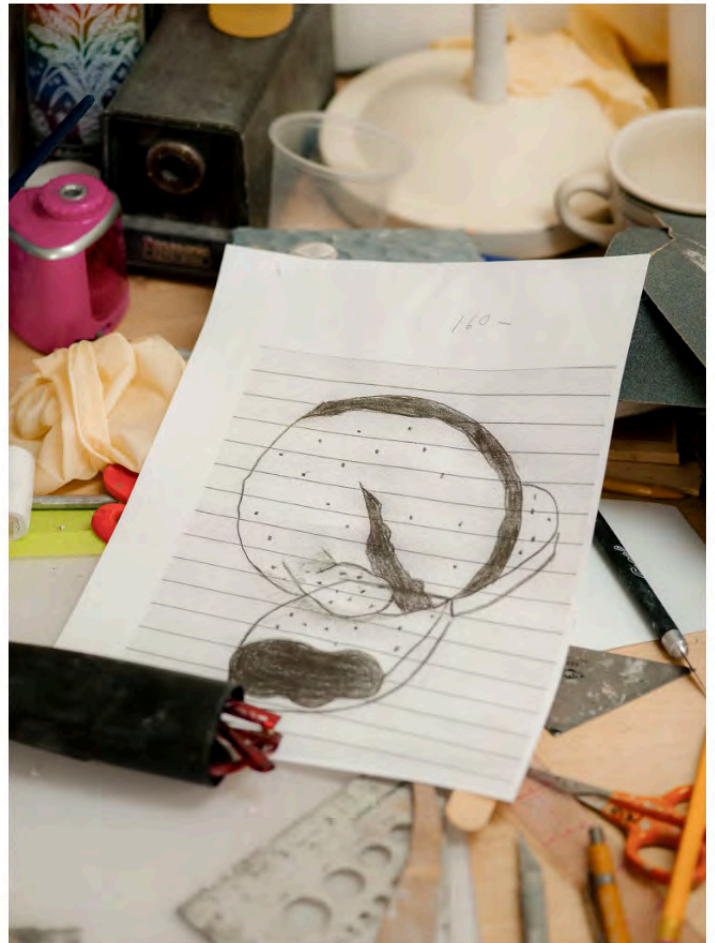
### **What embarrasses you?**

I could do a whole thing on losing my hair — you got 15 minutes?





Inspired by Japanese Momoyama ceramics from the 17th century, Nagle's sculptures are meticulously produced and possess a wabi-sabi sensibility. Damien Maloney



Every work begins with a basic drawing, which is then copied, enlarged and, with the help of his assistant, translated into a clay model. Damien Maloney

## What do your studio windows look out on?

I have skylights all over the place, so I could say the sky. The new studio looks out over my garden. I have a piece of quasi-Japanese garden sculpture I made with topiary and a slab of rock.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

"Ron Nagle: Getting to No" is on view from May 2 through June 15, 2019, at Matthew Marks Gallery, 522 West 22nd Street, New York.

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## Los Angeles Times



IN "MESSAGE TO RAPHAEL" at Matthew Marks, artist Ron Nagle recalls the drama of a cell dividing.

ART REVIEW

# Feel the risk of possibility

Ron Nagle teases and toys in his pint-sized pieces

BY DAVID PAGEL

A lot has happened in the world since Ron Nagle's last L.A. solo show in 2005.

A lot more has happened in his work, which is still intimate, whimsical and sensual yet now asks big existential questions without suggesting that the answers might be simple, direct or logical. Titled "Ice

Breaker," Nagle's mind-bending exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery takes visitors to the heart of what it means to be alive to life's ups and downs.

Risk and possibility are Nagle's stock in trade. He serves them up in abundance at the gallery, where 15 pint-size pieces are enshrined inside 15 glass cubes, each perched atop its own pedestal. Four more similarly



scaled sculptures stand in four space-saving cubbyholes, each of which has been cut into the middle of each of the four walls.

Reliquaries come to mind. So do stashes.

The combination of religious veneration and illicit substances, or spiritual enlightenment and surreptitious bliss, takes stunning shape in Nagle's subtly subversive works. The form of their presentation amplifies the content of individual sculptures.

That cooperative synergy flies in the face of the idea that abstract art is a high-minded affair that has nothing to do with the animal impulses of flesh and blood reality. The two colude beautifully in Nagle's pieces of

movie still, a thin slice of an animated cartoon, a documentary about microorganisms or a thriller in which something dreadful has just happened. Or is about to. Or both.

Sometimes the drama recalls that of a cell dividing in two ("Message to Raphael") or a cell having second thoughts about splitting ("French Stickler"). More often, it involves a solitary being venturing, cautiously and curiously, into unknown territory ("Sandmandia" and "Penniman").

"Historical Land Mind," "Witzelsucht" and "Cult Classic" include two components or characters that approach each other, tentatively and gingerly. The sense of anticipation



**"HISTORICAL LAND MIND"** is among Nagle's works that have two components approaching each other, creating anticipation.

3-D poetry. Each appeals to the lizard brain without overlooking the more sophisticated machinations of our cognitive hardware.

All sorts of stories can be read from the 77-year-old artist's work. Many resemble landscapes, their super-saturated palettes, exquisitely textured surfaces and unnaturally streamlined formations recalling aquariums customized by connoisseurs of beauty. Others seem to be bookends that have evolved so radically and idiosyncratically that they no longer have partners that look anything like them.

None of Nagle's sculptures sits still. Each occupies time as if it were a

toys with the mind.

Without stating anything explicitly, these pieces paint a vivid picture of the world today, when charged questions fly about how individuals interact with neighbors and strangers.

---

## Ron Nagle

**Where:** Matthew Marks Gallery, 1062 N. Orange Grove Ave., L.A.

**When:** Through April 8; closed Sundays and Mondays

**Info:** (323) 654-1830,  
[www.matthewmarks.com](http://www.matthewmarks.com)

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# ARTFORUM

ALL NEW YORK LONDON BERLIN **LOS ANGELES** PARIS MILAN BEIJING MEXICO CITY

**must see**

ENDS APRIL 8TH 2017



*Nineteen new sculptures along with an array of drawings are featured here for Nagle's largest exhibition in Los Angeles to date. Best known for his ceramics, the artist's sculptures here employ traditional glaze techniques that mix it up with newer elements like epoxy resin, catalyzed polyurethane, and high-gloss automotive paint. Their energetic Pop colors latch onto paper-weight-sized forms that, encased on top of pedestals, seem constellated to recall relics, but resemble nothing so much as exclamations from some other, better, world.*

**Ron Nagle Ice Breaker**

Jan 21 - Apr 8, 2017

Matthew Marks Gallery | 1062 N Orange Grove  
1062 N Orange Grove / +13236541830 / matthewmarks.com  
Tue - Sat 10am to 6pm

"Must See." *Artforum*, February 24, 2017.



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Contemporary  
Art Review  
**.la**

## Ron Nagle at Matthew Marks

March 22, 2017  
Text by Hana Cohn



Ron Nagle, *Don and Juan* (2016).  
Ceramic, catalyzed  
polyurethane, and epoxy resin,  
3.9 x 4.4 x 5.75 inches. Image  
courtesy of the artist and  
Matthew Marks Gallery.

In 15 glass cubes, and four glazed niches, frozen theaters are in in various states of action; drips, stretches, slips, peels, hovers, leans, and kisses. With Ron Nagle, chroma finds volume, texture, and personality. *Ice Breaker*, currently on view at Los Angeles' Matthew Marks gallery, is Nagle's largest exhibition in the city to date. Of the 19 sculptural works featured in the exhibition (all made in 2016), many nod to traditional pottery finishes, with their lacquered or crackled glazes, and flourishes of the ornate, as in *Glorious Assemblage*. Nagle's combination of ceramic, polyurethane, epoxy resin, and acrylic transform familiar forms of the decorative, the natural, and the uncannily familiar, into something utterly and delightfully foreign.

Cohn, Hana. "Ron Nagle." *Contemporary Art Review LA*, March 22, 2017.



Ron Nagle, *Ice Breaker*  
(Installation view). Image  
courtesy of the artist and  
Matthew Marks Gallery.

Nagle's keen material contrast animates these small-scale works. Metallic blobs hover with extra-terrestrial ease in *Historical Land Mind*, while a slick patch of red inches up (or down?) the cragged, grey surface of *Elusive Combinations*. But what is truly satisfying about these works is the Nagle's spatial sensitivity. He makes delicious the tenuous moment before certainty; the work sits frozen—is it coming? Going? A lumpy white pillar pouts (or purses) its gilded lips in *Message to Raphael*. Each work is so fanciful in its finishes and textures that it flirts with being vapid material experiment. But it is the *Littlest Murmur*—two blocks with the soft sheen of plasticine, huddled on a shelf of fluorescent orange froth, their edges a breath's width apart—that catalyzes these abstract shapes into emotive actors. Each element is self-conscious and sentient; in each, Nagle creates the potential to see ourselves.

Ron Nagle: *Ice Breaker* runs January 21st–April 8th, 2017 at Matthew Marks (1062 N Orange Grove Avenue, West Hollywood, CA 90046).





Ron Nagle, *Sandmandia* (2016).  
Ceramic, glaze, catalyzed  
polyurethane, epoxy resin, ink  
and acrylic, 3.9 x 9 x 2.1 inches.  
Image courtesy of the artist and  
Matthew Marks Gallery.



Ron Nagle, *Message to Raphael*  
(2016). Ceramic, glaze,  
porcelain, catalyzed  
polyurethane, epoxy resin and  
acrylic, 5.5 x 4.5 x 2.5 inches.  
Image courtesy of the artist and  
Matthew Marks Gallery.



**Ron Nagle, *Ice Breaker*  
(Installation view). Image  
courtesy of the artist and  
Matthew Marks Gallery.**



**Ron Nagle, *Ice Breaker*  
(Installation view). Image  
courtesy of the artist and  
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THE MIND-BENDING POETRY

## 超越诗意的律动



*Intangible Assets* 陶瓷、催化聚氨酯和环氧树脂  
INTANGIBLE ASSETS 11cm×17cm×8cm  
ceramic, catalyzed polyurethane, and epoxy resin 2016

Written by David Pagel ( Professor of Art Theory and History, Claremont Graduate University;  
regular contributor to the *Los Angeles Times* )

A lot has happened in the world since Ron Nagle's last solo show in Los Angeles, which was in 2005. Barak Obama has come and gone as the first African-American President of the United States. The Great Recession has also come and gone. The U.S. military withdrew most of its troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, but continued its war on terrorism with drone attacks in Syria, Yemen, and Pakistan, among many other countries in the Middle East, as well as its execution of Osama bin Laden. The United Kingdom left the European Union and a reality television actor became the 45th President of the United States.

A lot more has happened in Nagle's work, which is still intimate, whimsical, and sensual, yet now asks big existential questions without ever suggesting that the answers might be simple, direct, or logical. Titled *Ice Breaker*, Nagle's mind-bending exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery takes visitors to the heart of what it means to be alive—to life's ups and downs, its wild twists and turns, its illogical ins and outs. He

Pagel, David. "The Mind-Bending Poetry." *Gallery Magazine*, February 2017, pp. 18–25.





*Cult Classic* 催化聚氨酯、环氧树脂和丙烯酸  
CULT CLASSIC 9cm×8cm×11cm  
catalyzed polyurethane, epoxy resin, and acrylic 2016



*Oeuvre Removal* 陶瓷、瓷器釉、催化聚氨酯和环氧树脂  
OEUVRE REMOVAL 10cm×9cm×13cm  
ceramic, porcelain, glaze, catalyzed polyurethane, and epoxy resin 2016



*Curried Favor* 陶瓷、催化聚氨酯和环氧树脂  
CURRIED FAVOR 11cm×8cm×11cm  
ceramic, catalyzed polyurethane, and epoxy resin 2016

does so without telling viewers what we should be thinking or how we should be responding, preferring, instead, that we figure things out for ourselves.

Born in 1939 in San Francisco, California, Nagle came of age of just before the social radicalism of the 1960s swept the nation, bringing sex, drugs, and rock-'n'-roll to the forefront of an era of self-discovery, self-exploration, and self-definition. All of that countercultural rebellion was better, for Nagle, than the lemming-like regimentation of 1950s America, but it was still too group-oriented, clingy, and touchy-feely for the young artist, whose independent-mindedness had been forged in the days of radical independence and go-it-alone individuality. That is what he was after in his art. And he found it in small, cup-size ceramics, even if few viewers understood what he up to. Working in clay, at that scale, in a hot-rod palette, with exquisite finishes, and funny titles, was just about the most uncool thing an artist could do. For Nagle, however, being ignored and excluded went hand-in-hand with being authentic. If doing your own thing looked anything like what anyone else was doing, there was, for the maverick artist, no point in doing it. At the same time, being a misfit was not the point of making art. It was the



展览现场  
at the exhibition

starting point of making something that others might eventually come to understand. Eye-opening insight—and spine-tingling revelation—were, from the very beginning, Nagle’s Holy Grail.

For more than a half century he has made hundreds of diabolically beautiful sculptures, almost none bigger than a teacup and all meant to be seen in profile, their wickedly splendid textures and palettes turning them into three-dimensional paintings humming with more lively vitality and jaunty insouciance than works hundreds of times their size. Centimeter for centimeter, there is no better artist than Nagle, who loads more power and pleasure into every speck of every work—and then leaves viewers enough room to enjoy it on our own. As an artist, Nagle is a gift-giver. Coming from a place, a time, and a social class in which it was considered *déclassé* to call attention to oneself, he has never made art to express his self, to reveal his inner sentiments, or to





*Copporal Shunt* 陶瓷、催化聚氨酯、环氧树脂和丙烯酸  
CORPORAL SHUNT 8cm × 12cm × 10cm  
ceramic, catalyzed polyurethane, epoxy resin,  
and acrylic 2016



*Glorious Assemblage* 陶瓷、釉、催化聚氨酯、油墨和环氧树脂  
GLORIOUS ASSEMBLAGE 9cm × 12cm × 8cm  
ceramic, glaze, catalyzed polyurethane, ink,  
and epoxy resin 2016



*Don and Juan* 陶瓷、催化聚氨酯和环氧树脂  
DON AND JUAN 10cm × 11cm × 15cm  
ceramic, catalyzed polyurethane,  
and epoxy resin 2016

make a show of his feelings and beliefs. Radically self-effacing, Nagle pours loads of labor into his works to take himself out of the picture so that viewers might be free to discover things for ourselves. Eventually, if we really get into the wild stuff he is up to in his powerfully original works, we will come to understand what Nagle stands for and who he is as a person. But that is never the reason he makes anything. Deeply distrusting chummy comforts, he makes works that are elusive from start to finish.

Nagle's abstract pieces of participatory intimacy are not opposed to meaning. They are only opposed to the ham-fisted idea that meaning travels directly from the mind of the artist to the mind of the viewer, without the intercession of material reality. Giving reality its due is Nagle's specialty. And he does it like no one else. In his hands, reality is more splendid than usual: complex, confounding, and charged, it sizzles with mystery and rivets your attention to every detail. Ultimately, his works make you need more of something you never knew you wanted. That's magic. Or simply paying attention to the best parts of being alive. In either case, it's what Nagle does—magnificently.

Over the last ten years, he has introduced new materials to his work, including catalyzed polyurethane, epoxy resin, and ink. This has allowed him to create new forms, nearly all of which have moved away from what had been his go-to format for decades: the cup. Until now, Nagle's sculptures have been vestigial vessels: playful mutations of the age-old format or madcap revisions of its basic features, always one step away from the limits of functionality and often leaping, with both feet, into the mind-bending high jinx of dysfunctionality. Having fallen into the background, cups have given way to more diverse formats, including ash trays,



*Simlak Child* 陶瓷，釉，瓷器，催化聚氨酯和环氧树脂  
SIMILAK CHILD 10cm × 12cm × 7cm  
ceramic, glaze, porcelain, catalyzed polyurethane,  
and epoxy resin 2016



*Ice Breaker* 陶瓷，釉，青铜，催化聚氨酯和环氧树脂  
ICE BREAKER 15cm × 6cm × 15cm  
ceramic, glaze, bronze, catalyzed polyurethane, and epoxy resin  
2016



*Turkish Hairlines* 环氧树脂和催化聚氨酯  
TURKISH HAIRLINES 16cm × 11cm × 16cm  
epoxy resin and catalyzed polyurethane  
2016

bookends, bonsai trees, aquariums, jewelry boxes, and keyholes.

Risk and possibility are Nagle's stock in trade. He serves them up in abundance in his smartly installed exhibition, where 15 pint-size masterpieces are enshrined inside 15 glass cubes, each perched atop its own pedestal. Four more similarly scaled sculptures stand in four space-saving cubbyholes, each of which has been cut into the middle of each of the four walls. Religious reliquaries come to mind. So do stashes, where drug-users hide their drugs. The combination of religious veneration and illicit substances, or spiritual enlightenment and surreptitious bliss, takes stunning shape in Nagle's subtly subversive works.

The form of their presentation amplifies the content of individual sculptures. That synergy flies in the face of the idea that abstract art is a high-minded affair that has nothing to do with the animal impulses of flesh and blood reality. The two collude beautifully in Nagle's pieces of 3-D poetry. Each appeals to the lizard brain without overlooking the more sophisticated machinations of our cognitive machinery. All sorts of stories can be read from Nagle's seasoned pieces. Many resemble landscapes, their super-saturated palettes, exquisitely textured surfaces, and unnaturally streamlined formations recalling aquariums customized by connoisseurs of preposterous beauty. Others seem to be bookends that have evolved so radically and idiosyncratically that they no longer have partners that look anything like them.

Many of Nagle's newest works are also more pictorial than anything he has made previously. In some, like *Turkish Hairlines* and *Ice Breaker*, you get the sense that you are looking at a diorama that has been enhanced with a kind of one-point perspective built into its structure. By lining up various elements, and suggesting that some recede, quasi-illusionistically,



展览现场  
at the exhibition

Nagle stretches space, both in your imagination and in the modest dimensions with which he works. To walk around these pieces is to feel their elasticity, the ways they make a mess of logic to make room for more emotionally engaged relationships to time and space.

*Curried Favor* and *Elusive Combinations* do something similar. Their circular openings function both as compositional elements—like dark moons in the night sky—and gaps in the space-time continuum, opening, like black holes, onto utter nothingness. That back-and-forth, between presence and absence, pleasure and dread, sensation and the yawning emptiness of the void, is at the heart of Nagle’s art. All of his works make the here-and-now matter more because they begin with the wisdom that everything can disappear in an instant. Mortality and its meaning rarely take more powerful shape in contemporary art.

None of Nagle’s sculptures sits still. Each occupies time as if it were a movie still, a thin slice of an animated cartoon, a documentary about microorganisms, or a thriller in which something tragic has just happened. Or is about to. Or both. Sometimes the drama recalls that of a cell dividing in two (*Message to Raphael*) or a cell having second thoughts about splitting





*French Stickler* 陶瓷、釉料、催化聚氨酯和环氧树脂  
FRENCH STICKLER 4cm×12cm×12cm  
ceramic, glaze, catalyzed polyurethane,  
and epoxy resin 2016



*Ghosting* 陶瓷、催化聚氨酯、环氧树脂和丙烯酸  
GHOSTING 14cm×10cm×10cm  
ceramic, catalyzed polyurethane, epoxy resin,  
and acrylic 2016



*Sandmandia* 陶瓷、釉、催化聚氨酯、环氧树脂、油墨、丙烯酸  
SANDMANDIA 10cm×23cm×5cm  
ceramic, glaze, catalyzed polyurethane,  
epoxy resin, ink, and acrylic 2016

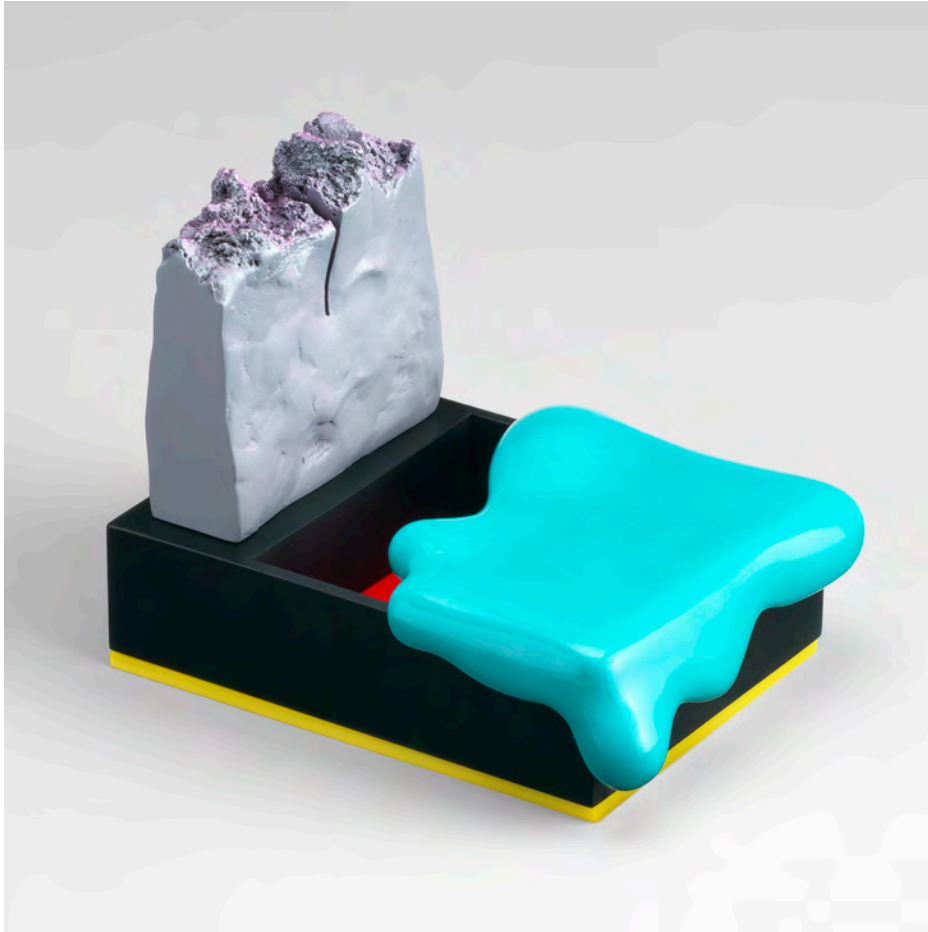
(*French Stickler*). More often, it involves a solitary being venturing, cautiously and curiously, into unknown territory (*Sandmandia* and *Penniman*). *Historical Land Mind*, *Witzelsucht*, *Cult Classic* and *Intangible Assets* include two components or characters that approach each other, tentatively and gingerly. The sense of anticipation they embody tingles the spine and toys with mind. Without stating anything explicitly, these pieces paint a pretty vivid picture of the world today, when questions about how individuals interact with neighbors and strangers are as loaded as they have been in a long time.

“Ghosting” is exemplary. To understand this piece you must look at it from both sides. More than once. Incrementally, you piece together your perceptions, gradually discovering that the smoky black plastic backdrop is more of a mirror than a translucent membrane. Seeing through to the other side is a mirage, a fiction, a fantasy. Space shrinks as your experience intensifies. All sorts of stories, each laced with its own combination of anxiety and delight, spill from Nagle’s small stage set. Others, like *Don and Juan*, *Similak Child*, *Corporal Shunt*, *Intangible Assets*, and *Oeuvre Removal* use cartoon shapes and colors to bring big existential questions down to earth, where people have been dealing with them for centuries, and, hopefully, will continue to do so. 🇺🇸

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## Flash Art



 1 / 5 Ron Nagle, "Cult Classic" (2016). Courtesy the Artist and Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles.

[Review](#) / April 5, 2017

### Ron Nagle *Matthew Marks Gallery / Los Angeles*

Ron Nagle's landscapes float beautifully atop plinths in "Ice Breaker," the artist's current exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in Los Angeles. Each scenic vista sits in its own display case under glassed circumspection, wherein the miniature ceramic-epoxy-paint sites can be flipped through as brochures for exotic vacations.

Just as glossy images in magazines can become one's only contact with the outside world — the beguiling, foreign lands of Diana Vreeland's editorials are a case in point — Nagle's maquettes grant the fantasy of far-off Lilliputian blue holes and Japanese tea rooms, ectoplasmic Kleenexes and stumps imbued with all the Romantic symbolism of

Germanic forests. What happens on these atolls is left to the mind's unexpected movements and, from there, it's just one fantasy after another, like so:

One looks over a girl skinny-dipping in a man-made pool in Texas, her pink, pear-shaped bottom seen floating with dead leaves amid barren land (*Intangible Assets*, 2016). Another sees pearl-clad Japanese professionals in Real World Tokyo being served with “maybe a little zinger of Shibui.”<sup>1</sup> The scene is colored in the cracker beige, barely blue and berry tones of tearooms filled with politely screaming twentysomethings (*Glorious Assemblage*, 2016.) Elsewhere, a subtle landscape suggests a Morandi green come true (*Witzelsucht*, 2016), its colors mirrored in *Don and Juan* (2016.) The latter is nice to think of as a tableau of Roquefort-sur-Soulzon in which a young man is eating a sandwich of ewe's cheese upon a mountain pass. Across the way, a woman with flaxen hair passes by. Enamored, he follows her with a rosy blush, but not without first stashing his lunch in a cave. Months go by until the man returns; by then, his cheese is a moldy, growing green.

The aforementioned stump could be a vision of Caspar David Friedrich waiting for Caroline to text him back (*Ghosting*, 2016.) *Littlest Murmur* (2016) is a set perfect for two shoplifting teens hiding behind pink ottomans shaped like Turkish delights; two security guards search for them, threatening to call the police, unless the girls do them some wanton favors. Accidentally, they snicker from behind the confections and are caught. This work shares a sinful plushness with *Message to Raphael* (2016), which nods to its High Renaissance namesake. Seen from a particular angle, the eye sinks into pale décolletage, undeniably a picturesque landscape with cleavage cut in gold.

There are more, but overall, the colors and verbal forms, flights of fancy and odd exchanges, are what foster giggles, lewd thoughts and unexpected encounters with one's own mind. As promised, the tension is broken between a visitor feeling foreign in a familiar context and Nagle's native language.

by Sabrina Tarasoff

<sup>1</sup> Ron Nagle interviewed by Bill Berkson, July 8–9, 2003, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



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# KALEIDOSCOPE

**INTERVIEW BY**

**STERLING RUBY**

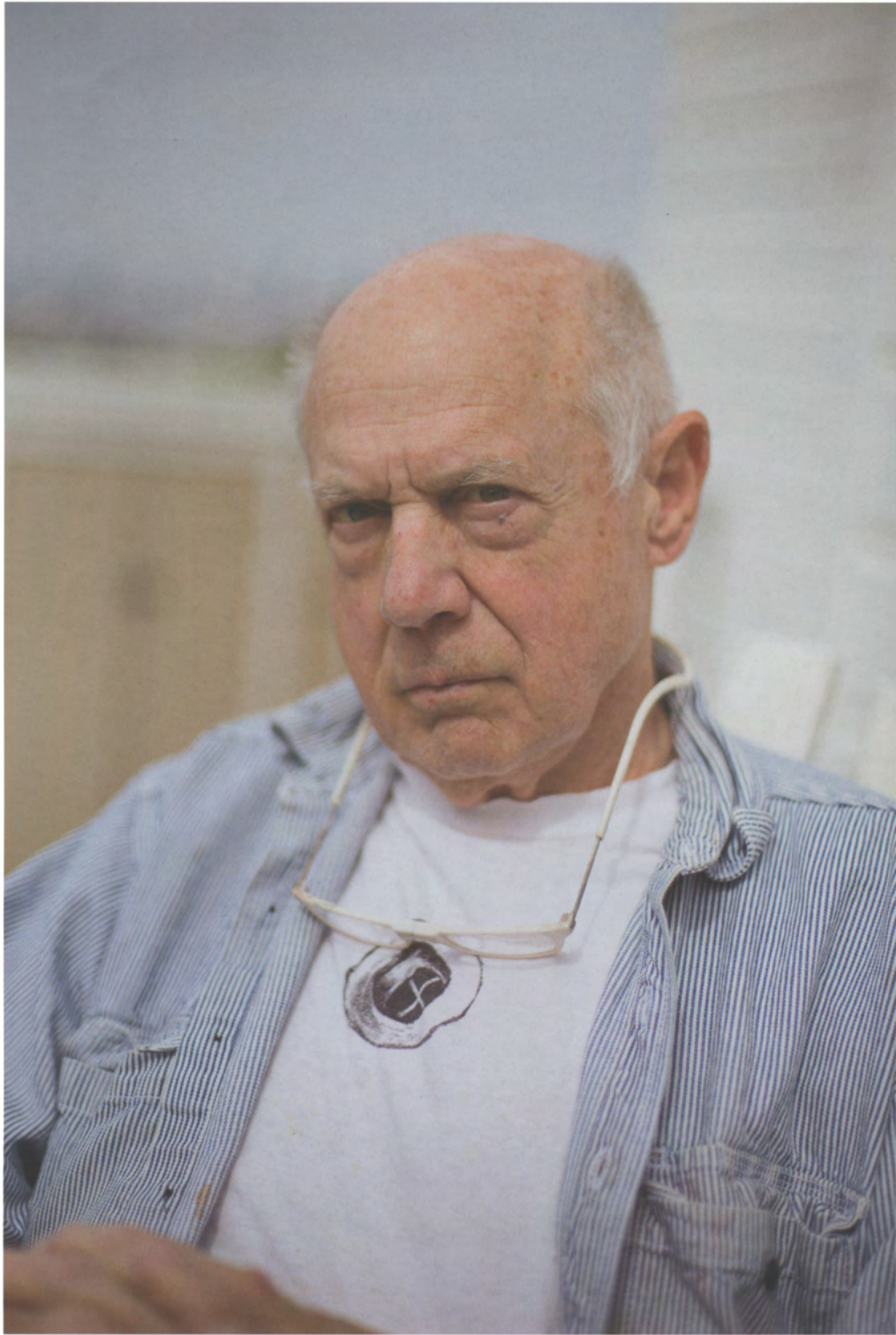
**RON NAGLE**

**THE ARTIST'S AMBIGUOUS CERAMICS**

**EXPRESS A RIGHT-BRAINED SENSE**

**OF CRAFT, COLOR AND SURFACE, AND**

**A SUBTLE DARK HUMOR.**



**Photo by Whitney "Whitey" Irvin**

Ruby, Sterling. "Interview: Ron Nagle." *Kaleidoscope*, Summer 2016, pp. 190–97.



Ruby, Sterling. "Interview: Ron Nagle." *Kaleidoscope*, Summer 2016, pp. 190–97.



**STERLING RUBY** I am sitting here looking at a yellow work of yours that I own called *Wall Street Gerbil*. It has had a place in our house for a few years now, and I enjoy it quite a bit. There has been a lot of debate over whether the small hanging protrusion in the middle is a nose or a dick. I was wondering if, as a personal favor, you could shed some light on this...

**RON NAGLE** I wasn't thinking of that particular protrusion as a nose or a dick. My intention is to make images as ambiguous as possible so that viewers can create their own story. But for your own peace of mind, the protrusion has nothing to do with a nose. I would think of it as some kind of growth coming off of a field. I think the main influences on this kind of image, which occurs occasionally, are warts, skin tabs or moles, but I never make things too specific.

**SR** Since we're on the topic of titles, I keep thinking that a lot of your titling is directed toward naming or giving a kind of subjectivity to your objects.

**RN** You are correct in thinking that my titles are often an attempt to vaguely personify the inanimate. My assistants and I usually have an ongoing list of titles. We then put these against a group of pieces until we find one that makes some sort of sense at a vague associative level. Wordplay, non sequiturs and free association of imagery all come into play in the titles, but don't actually affect what I make. I name my pieces like you would name your kids. I particularly love the way some words fit together phonically, which must come from my background as a songwriter. Without being too heavy-handed, most of my titles have an element of humor and, frequently, darkness. I will often hear a phrase that catches my attention and I'll write it down because it struck some humorous note for me. For example, there was a guy from the utility company who, after performing various services, asked me to fill out a form evaluating his performance. He instructed me to "circle 'excellent.'" This cracked me up, so there will be a piece coming soon called *Circle Excellent*.

**SR** Your sensibility for '50s post-war aesthetics seems more in line with artists such as H.C. Westermann or Billy Al Bengston as opposed to Peter Voulkos or John Mason. What are your thoughts regarding the interactions between Abstract Expressionism and things like the hot rod or Kustom Kulture movements during the early stages of the California Clay Revolution?

**RN** Even though I am strongly associated with the California Clay Revolution, the majority of my influences come from sources other than ceramic artists. I first delved into the well-crafted object when making

model airplanes as a kid. I saw these guys at the rec center making Japanese fighter planes out of orange crates, sanding the wood down to a fine finish, sealing off the surface, painting the planes with Testors Dope hobby paint, and then meticulously gluing the components together. That same mentality still exists in my work. When I was making model airplanes with my father, he would always tell me two things: "Sand with the grain" and "Never do a job half-assed." As much as I rebelled against the majority of his teachings and opinions, those two seemed to stick. After this, I was fully engaged in the hot rod culture in San Francisco and had a '48 Ford Coupe, which had forty coats of British racing green lacquer, sanded with fine sandpaper between each coat to create a richness and depth that couldn't be achieved without that kind of fanaticism and attention to detail. I still think that there are cars from the past, both custom and production, that are more interesting than most sculpture.

I came from San Francisco, but I couldn't relate to the Bay Area figurative school, so I made pilgrimages to LA to see shows at the Ferus Gallery as often as I could. There was an aesthetic, in scale and execution and surface, to which I could relate quite strongly. You mentioned Billy Al Bengston; I was unquestionably greatly influenced not only by his use of the airbrush to apply paint, but by the incredible sense of color in his paintings of the mid-'50s. Of all the California Clay "Revolutionaries," my main influence was Kenny Price, whose discipline, sense of craft and integrity have been major influences on my work.

With a few exceptions, I have a great deal of disdain for the "ceramic world" and its preoccupation with material, process and trite humor. I am much more drawn to painting. In my younger days, I looked a lot at Tàpies, Morandi, Albers, de Kooning, Rothko and Twombly. I always felt the aesthetic aspirations of painters were on a much higher level than those of the ceramic crowd. That being said, I am crazy about almost all ceramics from the Momoyama period in Japan (in the late sixteenth century) and American 1940s restaurant ware, because of its lack of pretense.

**SR** I'm not sure if you are tired of talking about this, but I just found out that you did all of the sound effects for *The Exorcist* (1973). What were some of your favorite scenes and your techniques for producing the sound for them?

**RN** I'm never tired of talking about this, because its one of the best jobs I ever had. I was working with brilliant professionals in a rarified environment where I could do anything I wanted and get paid for it. The film's director, William Friedkin, wanted the sound to be "bigger than life," so that even the smallest details



Ruby, Sterling. "Interview: Ron Nagle." *Kaleidoscope*, Summer 2016, pp. 190–97.





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were magnified. I was given a portable tape recorder to record anything that popped into my head that could potentially be used in the film. The sounds for the beginning of the movie were organic, such as the sound of a single bee in a jar tuned a hundred times to create a threatening din. That was combined with the sound of pigs being slaughtered along with some ambient machine noise that leaked into the recording. I had no idea what I was going to do with this combination of sounds once it was assembled on multi-track tape, but when it was played against the opening scenes, it seemed to work. The director flipped for it and I got the job.

One scene that stands out is when the priest goes through the window. The sound was created by smashing many, many window props and recording the smashing at various distances, as well as extending the tinkling and falling of the glass to just a little more than real time. That one window crash consisted of about forty one-inch pieces of tape spliced together to make one long crash. Later on, it occurred to me that much of the stacking or layering used in the recording process is not that dissimilar to my approach for glazing sculpture: I fire my ceramics many times and use layer after layer of glaze, underglaze or china paint to create the color. At least that is what I did until very recently. I am now using auto paint that has been matted out to paint on bisque ware. This usually requires fewer layers for the same effect, and it is a much more direct way of working. It is very satisfying to see how certain color combinations come alive immediately, before my very eyes, without having to wait to open the kiln every morning. It is just more like painting, which is something I've been trying for all along. I am seriously considering making my next group of work out of hollow cast plastic, using clay only to create the first immediate image and taking a mold from that.

**SR** I am always amazed at your generation's craftsmanship skills. Do you think that this comes from a time when everyone learned how to fix and make things properly? You first learned ceramics from your mother, and then moved into jewelry making. What were the gender associations at this time for someone working in ceramics and jewelry?

**RN** My father was a businessman by profession, but he could make or fix almost anything, so the idea of making objects was instilled in me early. My mother was also a very skilled seamstress. I am like many people of my generation, whose parents made or fixed stuff because they came out of the Depression.

Craftsmanship, for me, does not only represent slick or finished work. It is any technique that makes the finished piece believable. I started off as a jeweler because it was considered a very hip thing to do during

the Beatnik period. During that time, the majority of contemporary jewelers were men, whereas ceramics was still thought of as something that little old ladies did. It wasn't until the studio pottery movement, and then Voulkos, that ceramics took on a macho image. When I started using things like store-bought glazes, china paints and decals and began slip casting, it ran contrary to this macho image. Let's not forget that it was Kenny Price who took these small cup and vessel forms and started bringing bright color and subtlety to contemporary ceramics.

**SR** Can you explain what you mean when you call yourself a "White Devil Formalist"? Is this the same as being a "Precious Asshole"?

**RN** Being a "White Devil Formalist" and a "Precious Asshole" are two separate, but similarly glib, responses to classifying myself. "White Devil Formalist" is a sarcastic way of saying that I am a white male whose work doesn't necessarily have literal meaning. "Precious Asshole" means that I am drawn to small-scale, intimate work by artists such as Morandi, Vermeer, Price, Cornell, Albers and Albert Ryder. Having taught at the college level for fifty years, I've become very cynical and, in fact, resentful of political correctness, French theory and the what-does-it-mean crowd. By and large, I learned to detest academia and its left-brained approach to the arts. People forget that all of the aforementioned issues are matters of fashion and not necessarily the truth.

I come from a music background, and I apply the same sensibility to both making and experiencing art. It all comes down to what it feels like, what it conjures, what associations a great piece of work can have on a vaguely, dare I say, magical level. I make no separation between high or low, pop music or oil-painted masterpieces. I would just as soon hear "River Deep, Mountain High" as look at Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*. They both do the same thing for me. I told my daughter to go to the Met and see the Turner show. She said, "Ike Turner?"

Previously published in KALEIDOSCOPE #12 – Fall 2011

Images in order of appearance:

Scrunchabunch, 2008  
Bronze 8, 1991  
Handsome Drifter  
Beirut Canal, 2009

Courtesy of the artist  
and Matthew Marks Gallery, New York/Los Angeles

Ron Nagle (American, b. 1939) is an artist who lives and works in San Francisco. He is represented by Matthew Marks Gallery, New York/Los Angeles; Ferrin Contemporary, North Adams, MA; and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco. Nagle's work is featured in the current group show at Matthew Marks in Los Angeles, on view through 25 June.



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# ARTFORUM

## NEW YORK

### Ron Nagle

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Ron Nagle is something of a legend—a sculptor working in clay, an alumnus of the celebrated “pot shop” of Peter Voulkos, and as such a significant figure in the development of modern art in California. He is also a rock musician who has moved in the world of Jefferson Airplane, Jack Nitzsche, Ry Cooder, and others, and if you ever wondered who created the sound effects for William Friedkin’s 1973 film *The Exorcist*, now you know. Strange that he’s had enough time to make art, and to make it so well.

This show included mostly work from the last year or so, with drawings relating to it or from the same period, a scattering of somewhat older pieces, and a group of four bronze cups from 1991. As is usual with Nagle, none of the sculptures was more than a few inches high, with seven inches falling on the tall side. The new works deal programmatically with the principle of combination—of disparate colors, elements, surfaces—and a number have three basic parts: a flat base, its skin textured and its edges soft, so that it might be a bed or a pillow or a cake; a slicker, shinier element shaped to imply that it has flowed as a liquid over the base, dripped down its sides, and then hardened (let’s call it an icing, though a ceramist might call it a glaze); and some further piece of, oh, something—a shape or shapes thin or fat, rough or smooth, evocative or amorphous, appearing on these first two elements as on a stage. Both cake and icing are capable of bending upward into verticals, becoming backdrops to the action in front of them. In *Handsome Drifter* (all works cited 2015), for example, a pointed black spike, whorled like a unicorn’s horn, with an L-shaped angle that gives it a foot to support it, stands erect on a glossy red sheet that turns to rise behind it into a circular shape in whose center the red lightens toward yellow. The base below is a spongy blue. If the upright spike is seen as the “handsome drifter” of the title, the piece quickly comes to evoke one of those scenes in movie westerns where a lone horseman rides in silhouette before the setting sun. *Ryder’s Sky*, *Boston Scrambler*, *Quiet Wood*, and others follow the same or similar compositional principles to quite different associative effects.

While the older works appeared in conventional vitrines out on the floor, where they could be viewed in the round, the installation, designed in collaboration with Nagle, put most of the new pieces in glass-fronted niches cut into the gallery walls, with the consequence that they could be seen only from the front. The effect was to heighten



Ron Nagle, *Boston Scrambler*, 2015, ceramic, glaze, catalyzed polyurethane, epoxy resin, 2 × 4½ × 3".

their theatricality, the feeling that these were little stages set for some kind of action. But though some works feature spindly uprights suggesting trees, making them seem to want to be read as landscapes, they are never stable as such, and figurative references likewise refuse to resolve. The pasty limbs poking up from the base of *Boston Scrambler* might be the legs of a nymphet lying on a bed, or, following the cue of the title, the arms of a man reaching out threateningly toward a coral-like red lump that could be a woman’s head. Alternatively, they could also be a pair of parsnips—a lumpy, ungainly root vegetable, and as such in key with Nagle’s aesthetic. In their proportions and surfaces, these works embrace the ungraceful, the fleshy, and the swollen, the misshapen and the crooked. Were they larger, they might seem grotesque—but they are diminutive, and brilliantly colored, so that their nods toward cartoonists like Big Daddy Roth and Robert Crumb are offset by their gemlike delicacy and their equal awareness of Japanese ceramics and the paintings of Giorgio Morandi. It is a complicated fusion to pull off—but then, you always knew that the sound designer of *The Exorcist* was capable of great things.

—David Frankel



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# The New York Times

## Delicacy and Tension on a Very Small Scale

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.

**ROBERTA  
SMITH**

**ART  
REVIEW**

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.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY AGATON STROM FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

“Ryder’s Sky,” above, a ceramic sculpture by Ron Nagle, is a homage to the painter Albert Pinkham Ryder.

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 crack-



## Ron Nagle

Five O'Clock Shadow  
Matthew Marks Gallery

ers, 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

Above, from left, Mr. Nagle's "Lotta Wattage," "New Blue LaRue" and "Beirut Canal." Left, "Centaur of Attention."

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 Voulkos, 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.



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While the older works appeared in conventional vitrines out on the floor, where they could be viewed in the round, the installation, designed in collaboration with Nagle, put most of the new pieces in glass-fronted niches cut into the gallery walls, with the consequence that they could be seen only from the front. The effect was to heighten



Ron Nagle, *Boston Scrambler*, 2015, ceramic, glaze, catalyzed polyurethane, epoxy resin, 2 × 4½ × 3".

their theatricality, the feeling that these were little stages set for some kind of action. But though some works feature spindly uprights suggesting trees, making them seem to want to be read as landscapes, they are never stable as such, and figurative references likewise refuse to resolve. The pasty limbs poking up from the base of *Boston Scrambler* might be the legs of a nymphet lying on a bed, or, following the cue of the title, the arms of a man reaching out threateningly toward a coral-like red lump that could be a woman’s head. Alternatively, they could also be a pair of parsnips—a lumpy, ungainly root vegetable, and as such in key with Nagle’s aesthetic. In their proportions and surfaces, these works embrace the ungraceful, the fleshy, and the swollen, the misshapen and the crooked. Were they larger, they might seem grotesque—but they are diminutive, and brilliantly colored, so that their nods toward cartoonists like Big Daddy Roth and Robert Crumb are offset by their gemlike delicacy and their equal awareness of Japanese ceramics and the paintings of Giorgio Morandi. It is a complicated fusion to pull off—but then, you always knew that the sound designer of *The Exorcist* was capable of great things.

—David Frankel



# Art in America

## NEW YORK

### RON NAGLE

Matthew Marks

Ron Nagle is among those artists working in ceramics who understand the propensity of human imagination to take flight at the humblest cue. "The minuscule, a narrow gate," wrote Gaston Bachelard, "opens up an entire world." One thinks of Kathy Butterly, George Ohr and others—not to mention Ken Price, who was Nagle's friend and sometime collaborator. Nagle took on small scale at the beginning of his career (in the late '50s, when he was still a student at San Francisco State) and has, for the most part, stuck to small scale over a half-century of numerous exhibitions and wide acclaim. In an equally vivid rock music career juggled over the same period, Nagle became a master of song, packing emotional resonance into mere minutes. Of the 27 sculptures and 15 drawings in "Ron Nagle: Five O'Clock Shadow," the artist's largest-ever showing in New York, more than half dated to 2015, demonstrating his continuing vitality. Each work occupied and commanded its own little universe, effecting outsize encounters with viewers who seemed to drop contentedly into a profound absorption.

A dozen colorful, mixed-medium ceramics were exhibited in the first large room of the gallery in niches set into the walls. This meant viewers saw just one side of each piece—the "A-side," presumably, as Nagle refers to the ideal prospect. Nagle was never a purist. Here, his polychrome objects combine glazed ceramic, catalyzed polyurethane and epoxy resin. In lurid hot rod colors, the shiny plastics pool and drip over edges, leaving wavy bottom margins. The sculptures are never monolithic; built of multiple parts, they generate dynamism from internal encounters. Often very funny titles promote a degree of unembarrassed association. *Urinetrouble* (2015) has a pee-colored pool leaking over a flat platform on which a long brown curving line of clay stands against a low orange backdrop, as if discovered behind a wall. A twin-peaked form—a familiar shape in Nagle's work, originally inspired by dog poop but by now much metamorphosed—rests on a tiny purple stand, which in turn sits on a black pour. Titled *Long Good Friday*, the work fosters ecclesiastical associations, the twin-peaked component evoking a miter and its support an altar.

The remaining sculptures were placed within plexi boxes on eye-level plinths, so that they could be seen from all sides. They included a group of four bronzes from 1991, dysfunctional cups with gestural surfaces, and more mixed-medium ceram-



Ron Nagle:  
*Urinetrouble*,  
2015, ceramic,  
glaze, catalyzed  
polyurethane  
and epoxy resin,  
5½ by 5 by 2¼  
inches; at Matthew  
Marks.

ics. Circumambulating the fin-shaped, pink-hued *Minimetti* of 2008 permits the discovery of a ribbon-candy-like fold in its narrow flank. Downright sexy are *Mutha Fakir* (2015), with a pink wedge rising between twinned, shiny, buttock-like forms, and *Cinnamon Girl* (2010), which seems to stick a tiny tongue out of a triangular opening in a pocked surface that looks as though it has been dusted with the spice. On the base is a little curl of blue, like a minuscule tip jar. In another mood altogether, *Grim Trimmings* (2011) resembles a stone funeral slab and cenotaph; out of a small pink-ringed hole leaks a black pool, conjuring some horrible post-mortem fluid.

The drawings, all recent, included nine executed in ink, graphite, gold-leafing pen and correction fluid. Somewhat Guston-like, cartoonish forms relate more or less obviously to the various sculptures. They sit isolated in the center of each sheet, alive and substantial, often casting shadows as if in three dimensions. No less personages than the objects, they are similarly brimming with contradictions of pathos and good humor.

—Faye Hirsch

# frieze

## RON NAGLE

Matthew Marks Gallery,  
New York

I can't pinpoint when, exactly, nor why, but at some point in the last couple of years, ceramics became cool again. You'd start to notice a few of them on gallery visits or in art fair booths: perhaps two or three lined up along a little shelf fixed to the wall. Then, within a year or two, they were enjoying entire trestle tables in the middle of the space. They might be roughly moulded rock-like forms, say, or smoothly finished and sleek vessels.

Perhaps the return of ceramics has something to do with a desire to really feel something with your hands, rather than push buttons on a screen. Maybe it's to do with a romantic longing for the simple life, or for a 1970s crunchy-granola idea of the simple life. Or it could be that one too many photographs of a ceramicists studio circa 1950 might have pushed artists back into the pottery workshop again – the sort of archival imagery seen in books and shows about early modernism and how, deep down, we were into that jazz all along. Who knows?

I bet Ron Nagle knows. Because as far as Nagle is concerned, clay's always been cool. 'Cool' in that older California sense of the word: laid back, laconic and modern. Effortlessly polished and stoned immaculate. Coming out of the radical 1950s and '60s art and ceramics scene that also produced Ken Price and John Mason, Nagle describes his work as part of the 'precious asshole' school of ceramics, influenced by ab ex painting, John Cage, Shōji Hamada, Bernard Leach and – specifically in Nagle's case – Giorgio Morandi, whose work he first saw at Los Angeles's influential Ferus



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Gallery. Referred to as 'Thin Fins', 'Neo Knobs', 'Hairo Ware' and 'Smooove Ware', Nagle's terracotta pieces ('Like panna cotta, except it's clay,' says the artist) are made using a low-fire kiln technique and multi-layer glazing and airbrushing process (no paint or lacquer here) to produce eye-popping, acid-drenched surface effects and beguilingly bizarro forms. Diminutive and precious they may be but, as Dave Hickey writes in *Nagle, Ron*, a new monograph on the ceramicist's work: 'Nagle's trick is false modesty. He makes tiny things invested with the majesty of the Taj Mahal.'

If any outing of Nagle's work proved Hickey's point about tiny things invested with awe, it was 'Five O'Clock Shadow', his recent solo exhibition at Matthew Marks. In the central space of the gallery, each piece was shown in individual vitrines recessed into the wall. Their forms look like mausolea for psychedelic gurus that have been put through a mad professor's shrinking machine, or like exquisite cakes and confectionaries in a Tokyo department store. *Long Good Friday* (2015), for instance, has a gravelly textured base and central column, both coloured lavender: a shiny gloop of black spills across the base and the column wears a grey hat that looks like a crumpled bishop's mitre. It seems almost edible, as if made from marzipan and treacle. *Handsome Drifter* (2015) uses a similar base-rectangle-with-gloopy-pour, this one in gloriously warm colours like the cherry sunburst finish on a Les Paul guitar. A shiny black finger worms its way across the base then points upwards to the sky. Behind it is a circular 'thin fin', like an open clamshell. In *Urinetrouble* (2015) a similar black worm dominates a chemical-mustard base and towers over the object's tobacco-coloured back panel – as the punning title suggests, if this black form is something nasty lurking in your body's urinary tract, you're in trouble.

The back gallery featured preparatory drawings alongside slightly larger ceramics, shown on plinths in the centre of the space. Amongst stiff competition, the most stunning of these was *Lotta Wottage* (2012), a ball covered in a molten, contrasting, yellow and orange dusting, topped off with a transparent fin and deep, black drip across the ball's front hemisphere. It looked like the melted helmet of a starship captain who's flown too close to an exploding star.

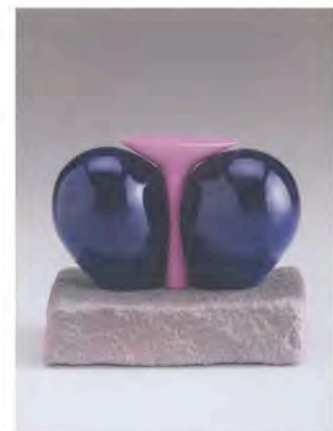
If these objects, with their contrasting colour combinations that look more like they've been produced in Photoshop than a kiln, seem almost *sui generis* it's possibly because Nagle did not spend his career immersed entirely in the art-world echo chamber of influence. A parallel career in music seems to have kept the work liberated from intellectual fashion, free to walk its own path. In 1960s San Francisco he played in the band The Mystery Trend, and in 1970 released a solo album, *Bad Rice*, recorded with legendary producer Jack Nitzsche. Nagle worked on the soundtrack to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and made all the sound effects for *The Exorcist* (1973). With Scott Matthews, he wrote songs for Jefferson Airplane, Pablo Cruise, Leo Kottke and Barbra Streisand, amongst others. According to Joel Selvin's entertaining and informative biographical essay in the Nagle monograph, his ceramics process was 'like overdubbing a guitar solo [...] Nagle saw comparisons between his two vocations: one fed the other.'

'Five O'Clock Shadow' was one of the most talked-about exhibitions in New York this season. Why? Because ceramics are cool again? No. Even in 2015, you can see folk twitch when you mention that your favourite show in Chelsea is a ceramics show. For all that art institutions love to talk about inter-disciplinary interests, ceramics – one of the most ancient forms of human artistry – are still largely confined to museum design departments or condescended to as 'craft' objects. Yet these works look like nothing else around right now. They nag the mind because they can't be filed away in the drawer marked 'Reassuringly Familiar'. They delight the eye and derange the mind. Here's to Nagle's next overdub.

DAN FOX



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# ARTFORUM

## The Artists' Artists

TO TAKE STOCK OF THE PAST YEAR, *ARTFORUM* ASKED AN INTERNATIONAL GROUP OF ARTISTS TO SELECT A SINGLE IMAGE, EXHIBITION, OR EVENT THAT MOST MEMORABLY CAPTURED THEIR EYE IN 2015.



**RON NAGLE** *This picture was taken along the waterfront in San Francisco's Mission Bay area. This area is extremely scenic, with old battleships and boats. I go there frequently to walk my dog, relax, and enjoy the fantastic views. The pier is used to store various components for seasonal parades or events. This grouping of floats for the Pride Parade spoke to me: It was a clustered assemblage of colors and shapes that appeared enigmatic from a distance.*

Nagle, Ron. "The Artists' Artists." *Artforum*, December 2015, p. 104.



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## Pottery Winner: An Artist's Dark, Funny Oeuvre Gets Major Show

OCTOBER 24, 2015

KAREN MICHEL



Ceramics artist Ron Nagle says his greatest gift is his sense of humor -- "basically because I'm a melancholy person," he says.

*William Pruyr/Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery*

Ron Nagle is a lot like his ceramics: compact, tidy, quirky — and colorful.

The artist, who has helped take clay to the heights of the contemporary art world, recently sported black pants, a blue-and-white striped T-shirt, white shoes, red socks and a rose-colored hat.

Around his neck hangs a long silver chain, filled with charms. There's a heart, signifying Valentine's day, the date he was married decades ago; an R for his first name; a skull representing death; a hare, Nagle's sign in Chinese astrology.



Ron Nagle, *Handsome Drifter*, 2015. Ceramic, glaze, catalyzed polyurethane, epoxy resin. 3 3/4 x 4 x 3 inches; 10 x 10 x 8 cm. Copyright Ron Nagle, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

*Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery*

"This is the most important," he says, showing a slice of cheese. "It just means — well, you'll get it later."

Nagle, 76, has pieces in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Detroit Institute of the Arts.

He's also got a major New York show — the biggest solo exhibition ever at New York City's blue chip Mathew Marks Gallery — and he's part of a show at the Yale University Art Gallery.

On top of all that, Nagle is seeing a CD reissue of his 1970 solo record.

In one song, he laments, "Cheese now, there's no time like the present — do I have to die to get it?" Now, his wait may be over.

Michel, Karen. "Pottery Winner: An Artist's Dark, Funny Oeuvre Gets Major Show." *NPR*, October 24, 2015.

Nagle's band The Mystery Trend was an early part of the San Francisco rock scene in the mid-1960s. By the time Nagle recorded "Cheese Now," the band had already broken up — Nagle wasn't too keen on touring.

"I'd get homesick, even as a kid," he says. "I've got a few neurotic quirks."

Fortunately, he'd been interested in ceramics since he was a kid. He had received a degree in ceramics from San Francisco state, but knew there was more than the program offered.

"My mother had a ceramic club in the basement," he says. "So all of those hobbyist techniques I eventually incorporated into my own work."

Nagle's distinctive work still uses the molds that he saw in his mom's basement, and a bright palette like the paints he and his father used on model planes and cars.

Much like those models, the scale of Nagle's work his scale is also small, as if they're tiny, non-functional containers for bigger ideas.

"[They're] kind of like bonsai, but with a kind of distinctive weirdness about it," says Roberta Smith, a chief art critic at the *New York Times*. "There's all kinds of building. There's different kinds of crafts and there's different kinds of allusions to the body and its functions."

Of the three dozen pieces in Nagle's current exhibition at the Matthew Marks gallery in Manhattan, all are under 8 inches in any direction. The sculptures — no cups, no bowls — are multi-colored and multi textured: one pebbled, the other smooth, one mottled, the other slick. Thin, coral-like branches tilt atop a slab.

Nagle also combines clay with other materials, including something used by model makers: Magic Sculp, which doesn't need to be fired.

"It's more about the idea now," Nagle says.

It's definitely not his mother's ceramics, says Roberta Smith.

"It's very complicated what he does," she says. "Sex ... illusions ... body ... remember that piece, 'Lotta Wattage'?"



Ron Nagle, *Last Temptation of Ming*, 2015. Ceramic, catalyzed polyurethane, epoxy resin. 5 1/2 x 3 3/4 x 5 1/4 inches; 14 x 10 x 13 cm. Copyright Ron Nagle, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

*Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery*





Ron Nagle, *Boston Scrambler*, 2015. Ceramic, glaze, catalyzed polyurethane, epoxy resin. 2 x 4 1/2 x 3 inches; 5 x 11 x 8 cm.

Copyright Ron Nagle, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Nagle is big on titles — not just "Lotta Wattage" but "Centaur Of Attention," "Skin Grift," "Lamb Shank Redemption."

"I don't see this in any egotistical way but I would say my greatest gift, more than music ... is my sense of humor — basically because I'm a melancholy person," he says.

That humor with a tinge of latent menace is also true of the music Nagle's continued to make during his career. He's also written songs for other artists, like Barbra Streisand, The Tubes and Michelle Phillips of the Mamas and the Papas.

But it's Nagle's sculptures that have earned him his widest audience, and now, a show in a major gallery — displaying the objects in special vitrines as if they were works of ancient pottery in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"This is the big deal, the top of the bucket list," Nagle says. "What I've always wanted."

After decades of work, Nagle's gotten his cheese.

Michel, Karen. "Pottery Winner: An Artist's Dark, Funny Oeuvre Gets Major Show." *NPR*, October 24, 2015.

# sculpture

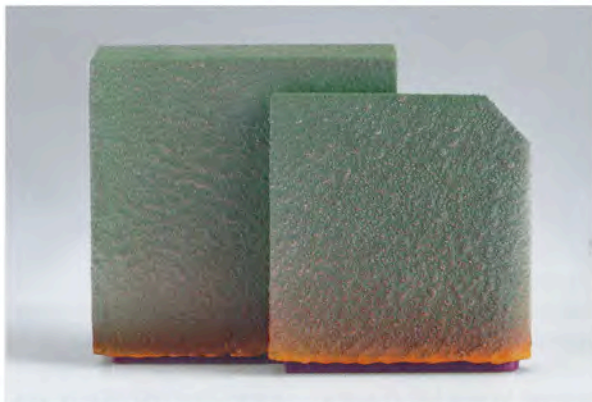
## reviews

### SAN DIEGO

#### Ron Nagle

##### San Diego Museum of Art

Ceramic sculptor and musician Ron Nagle is a master of intimate scale. For the past 50 years, he has been making highly refined objects, often no larger than several inches, which are notable for their irreverence, allusive form, and extreme attention to detail. The title of his recent show, "Peripheral Cognition," hints at his love for verbal play. Nagle defines peripheral cognition as "something that just happens when you're doing something you do well." Though his work has been exhibited around the world, this was his first show in a major museum, and it featured 11 drawings and 19 ceramic sculptures spanning 30 years. The objects were contained within long, rectangular vitrines designed by Nagle and displayed in small, dimly lit rooms. The vitrines produced an eye-level stage, with each spot-lit sculpture occupying its own separate space. The presentation underscored several of the most prominent features of Nagle's work: its small scale, punning titles, and use of extreme color.



Ron Nagle, *Trick Tracy*, 1998. Ceramic, 5.5 x 3.75 x 2.75 in.

Nagle started with vessel forms, and his sculptures have always been made at a small scale, with meticulous attention paid to detail and surface. He has used an air-brush to apply glazes for years, producing slick and shiny effects as well as thickly textured, stucco-like surfaces. The paired rectangles in *Trick Tracy*, one of the earliest pieces in the show, demonstrate his love of high contrast, hot colors, and ingeniously glazed surfaces. The more recent *Centaur of Attention* explores natural imagery. The contrast of geometric shape against sensual

biomorphic form is typical of Nagle's recent interests. His current work has moved far away from its origins in the vessel.

Even though Nagle is associated with the California "clay revolution" through artists like Ken Price and Peter Voulkos, he's been far more drawn to painting than sculpture, particularly the paintings of Bengtson and Morandi. "Peripheral Cognition" made clear the extent to which Nagle's influences and interests extend beyond the confines of the art world to include pop elements like graffiti, hot rod culture, and cartoons. Although his objects are exquisitely and precisely crafted, he says, "Craftsmanship does not only represent...finished work. It is any technique that makes the finished piece believable." Although his work is part of the ceramic canon, recognized and celebrated for more than 40 years, he feels that the label "sculptor" suits him better than "ceramicist." Nagle considers himself a rebel, calling himself a "White Devil Formalist" (because, as he says, "I am a white male whose work doesn't necessarily have literal meaning") and "Precious Asshole" (because of his attraction to making extremely small-scale objects). The product of a unique, instantly recognizable sensibility, his work goes against any grain, past or present.

—Kathleen Whitney



Ron Nagle, *Centaur of Attention*, 2014. Mixed media, 6 x 5.5 x 3.5 in.

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## Los Angeles Times

# Review Three art shows in San Diego recall abstraction's prominence

**Christopher Knight**

LOS ANGELES TIMES



Ron Nagle's "The Bad Clown," 2003, is part of Nagle's solo show at the San Diego Museum of Art.

DECEMBER 22, 2014, 7:50 PM | REPORTING FROM SAN DIEGO

**A**bstract paintings and sculptures were once the gold standard of Modern art. They spoke of adventurous aesthetic expeditions into hitherto unexplored visual realms.

Since the 1950s the figurative banner was held high by marvelous painters such as David Park in San Francisco, Jane Freilicher in New York and many others, but abstraction, nonetheless, ruled. By the late 1970s, though, change was underway.

Alternatives to the industrial forms of Minimalist art were emerging. Figures started to turn up in the most critically lauded paintings and sculptures. The secondary status of image-laden Pop art saw embryonic reevaluation. Even painting itself, considered moribund by many, began a resurgence.

Abstraction as a radical, early 20th century benchmark was finally broken nearly two generations ago. Disruptive exhibitions like "New Image Painting" at the Whitney Museum of American Art and "Bad

Knight, Christopher. "Three Art Shows In San Diego Recall Abstraction's Prominence." *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 2014.



Painting" at the New Museum were mounted in New York, both in 1978.

Three museum exhibitions currently in San Diego recall the shifting status of abstraction in painting and sculpture. Serendipitous rather than planned, the simultaneous shows — one group, two solos — of course do not offer a thorough accounting. No case is being made. But all three do include exceptional individual works that raise provocative questions.

Finally, a very small but handsome installation of 19 equally small painted sculptures, most from the 2000s, by Bay Area artist Ron Nagle is at the entry to the San Diego Museum's grand Albright-Knox show. Nagle's weird and eloquent abstractions look to one of art's most ancient sources, decorated clay, to conjure exquisite little objects whose acute refinement is shot through with pain.

Take "Lobster Boy" (1999), a radiant crimson sculpture just over 3½ inches high. In profile it looks like a deformed demitasse, a dainty china cup whose handle curves around and warps into a sea monster's tentacle. But the cup is flat, like a painting, and seems to have a chip sliced out of the top. Its seemingly flocked surface is velvety, not slick, with a chrome-yellow underglaze that gives the red surface the passionate crackle of fire.

Like the work of Ken Price, plainly one of Nagle's heroes, the traditional ceramic cup is remade into something riveting and strange. "Lobster Boy" refers to the tawdry tale of circus sideshow performer Grady Stiles, an abusive alcoholic whose fingers and toes were fused into claw-like deformities.

Stiles murdered his daughter's fiancé, his stepson later murdered him and his story became a tabloid sensation. Nagle's abstract sculpture shows none of the gruesome narrative, but its formal perfection and intimate scale convey an aura at once tender, odd and sinister. It's like an exquisite hand grenade.

So is "Grim Trimmings," a rectangular, moss-green tufted shape like a comfortable Victorian sofa, from which a slick black puddle oozes — a psychological oil spill. Elsewhere, a jaunty pair of swelling, bulbous shapes that flank a little red-topped cylinder turns "Bad Clown" into a dismally comic, sexualized nightmare — a John Wayne Gacy abstraction whose all-American palette of red, white and blue couldn't be more pointed.

All of Nagle's marvelous sculptures are tiny. They reverse the common trajectory of postwar American abstract sculpture, where bigger has typically been thought to be better. A full Nagle retrospective is warranted, since preindustrial ceramics turn out to be an ideal foundation for abstract sculpture in a postindustrial age.

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# Art in America

INTERVIEWS MAY 30, 2013

## Crossing Over: An Interview with Ron Nagle

by Zoe Larkins



"This is my big crossover," Ron Nagle told *A.I.A.* on the phone from his studio in San Francisco last week. The threshold to which the artist was referring is the 55th Venice Biennale-specifically Massimiliano Gioni's exhibition, "The Encyclopedic Palace," that opened in the Central Pavilion of the Giardini and the Arsenale to VIP visitors today and in which Nagle has 30 pieces.

On the phone, Nagle joked about his career as a ceramist, describing himself and those of his contemporaries who also worked in clay as second-class citizens of the art world. Nagle first experimented with ceramics as a high school student in San Francisco, and it was less than a decade later that he was showing with Peter Voulkos, Ken

Larkins, Zoe. "Crossing Over: An Interview with Ron Nagle." *Art in America*, May 30, 2013.

Price, and John Mason, among others known for their unorthodox methods of working with clay in postwar California. Curators and critics at the time celebrated ceramics, but in medium-specific shows that isolated artists like Nagle from their peers who worked in other media, namely paint. Inclusion with the 157 other artists in Gioni's global exhibition is "just thrilling" for Nagle.

Nagle approached ceramics with refreshed interest when he was a student at San Francisco State University, after becoming familiar with the large abstract vessels that Voulkos was making in Los Angeles. Nagle entered college as an English major, making jewelry and small objects in metal as a hobby, before switching to the school's BFA program. By the early 1960s, he was teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute and, not long after, at Berkeley, with Voulkos. (Nagle returned to the Art Institute in the '70s.) At the same time, his work was included in seminal group shows with other ceramists at museums and galleries in California and around the world; he had his first solo exhibition in 1968 at San Francisco's Dilexi Gallery.

Gioni's show is based on an idea that self-taught artist Marino Auriti, who emigrated to Pennsylvania from Italy in the 1930s, had for a museum to showcase "all the works of man in whatever field, discoveries made and those which may follow," which he called Il Enciclopedico Palazzo del Mondo, or the Encyclopedic Museum of the World. Gioni has adopted Auriti's title for his exhibition, which he has described as a display of "artworks and figurative expressions that reveal approaches to visualizing knowledge through representations of abstract concepts and manifestations of supernatural phenomena."

"How what I do relates to that," Nagle joked with *A.i.A.*, "I have no idea." But in this context, one could imagine that Nagle's small biomorphic forms and bizarre miniature landscapes (most of the works measure less than half a foot squared), glazed or painted in bright colors, might be imagined renderings of the extraterrestrial. Of the 30 pieces at the Biennale, some seem to model fantastical terrains; others could be talismans or renditions of alien life forms.

Each of his ceramic pieces begins as a drawing, Nagle said, and he tries to maintain an element of two-dimensionality once he begins



modeling a drawing in three dimensions. "I have an obsession with profiles because I really want [the figures] to feel like drawings," he said, and described his admiration of the way Giorgio Morandi and Philip Guston represent three-dimensional objects in two dimensions. "Everything is done, even subconsciously, from a flat point of view," he said.

Nagle mentioned the recent commercial popularity of his work in Europe-his work is selling well at Brussels' Galerie Pierre Marie Giraud, he told *A.i.A.*-hypothesizing that there is "less of a distinction between high and low" across the Atlantic. At the same time, he said that younger artists in the U.S., like Sterling Ruby, have begun paying him more attention, too, and buying his work.

Part of Nagle's pleasure at being included in the Biennale, he said, is simply because the show does not ghettoize ceramics, craft and decorative arts. "There was always this marginalization of ceramics," he said, citing titles of exhibitions in which he has been included, such as "Abstract Expressionist Ceramics" (University of California at Irvine and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1966) and "Clay Into Art" (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1998) that qualify the works on display. In reference to the 1966 show, he asked, "Why not just 'Abstract Expressionism'?"

Stateside audiences will be able to view his work this summer in his home city. His work will be on view at Los Angeles's David Kordansky in the group show "Grapevine" (July 13-Aug. 17), curated by Ricky Swallow, which will also include work by Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, Michael Frimkess, John Mason and Peter Shire.

# ARTFORUM

## REVIEWS



Ron Nagle, *U.F.O. Cup*, 1993, cast porcelain, glaze, china paint, and fired decals, 3 1/2 x 2 1/2".

SAN FRANCISCO

RON NAGLE

MILLS COLLEGE ART  
GALLERY

Ron Nagle is widely known for his small, brightly glazed porcelain adaptations of the cup form, which are obsessively stylized and hyperrefined. Because they are generally smaller than regular cups the interplays of shape, surface texture, and color seem magnified to a microarchitectural scale. Indeed, they refer equally to the mid-century Deco shapes and surfaces of California architecture, to furniture and interior decor, to the "strange rocks" of Chinese and Japanese gardens, to the visual "statements" of fashion design, to parts of the human anatomy, and to the enamel surfaces of '50s hot rods. Over the years—as his three-decade retrospective exhibition at the Mills College Art Gallery demonstrated—the capacity of Nagle's cups to

synthesize and reflect the visual intensities of the modern world has been remarkable.

At the heart of this performance is a keen eye and a vulnerable, almost fragile sensibility. Perhaps because his initial influences included the slip casting and china painting techniques associated with turn-of-the-century women's clubs, Nagle tended to resist the formalist machismo that was part of the ceramic sculptural scene of the late '50s. Though as interested in abstract painting as in ceramics, he was less an expressionist than a Modern classicist whose heroes were Josef Albers and Giorgio Morandi, artists for whom variations on a theme were of paramount importance, and in whose work (for Nagle) the visual intensity of color and the subtle modulation of still-life "vessels" came together. Indeed, his cups can be characterized as three-dimensional still lifes suspended in an imaginary zone where all their references from the worlds of art and popular culture come together in a pastiche of intensified visual phenomena—what the artist himself calls "an eclectic combo plate."

There is a subtle irony to Nagle's cups that springs from the incongruity of their references: as when a piece called *Blue Two-Step*, 1983, synthesizes elements from Modernist painting, Memphis furniture design, and post-Modern architecture. Over the years this eclecticism has often stretched the cups into forms of abstraction that court unrecognizability. With his more recent works, however, the cup has returned in perhaps its most feminine form, referring again to his early interest in slip casting and china painting, but mostly to the fragile poetics of childhood.

Cast as wafer-thin, almost luminous porcelain, the new cups tend to be muted shades of pink and white, with delicate dustings of powder blue and occasional

drips of darker glazes along their bases. Less stylistic pastiches than the previous works, they are like "vessels" for the emergence of a kind of narrative play (new for Nagle) in which decals of such images as spider webs, hand shadows, birds and twigs, Chinese characters, a young Chinese girl, open windows, and a drawing by his daughter in which a human head looks up at a UFO are glazed onto the surfaces of the cups. As a suite of images, they conjure a sense of childlike wonder, of a secret vocabulary of signs and riddles through which children articulate their inner lives. Nagle has crossed a threshold here: from an obsessive reflection of the visual world around him to a softer reflection upon his interior lives—those inside himself, inside his family, and inside the web of memories and friendships that keep us young.

—Jeff Kelly