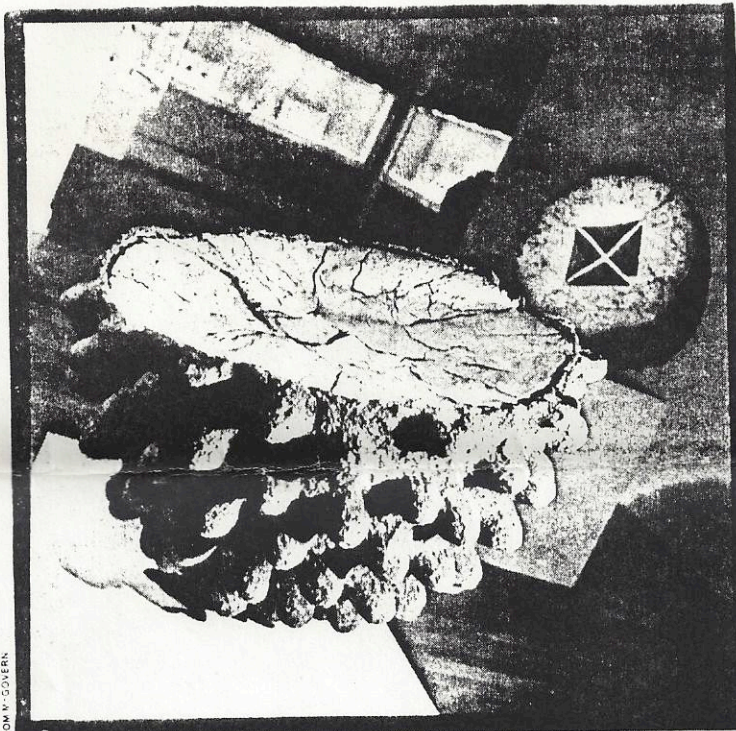


Pods From Inner Space

BY JOHN PÉRREAU



Graham Marks: all Untitled (1988)

GRAHAM MARKS. Helen Drutt Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue, through January 14.

In art, how something looks usually reflects how it was made. This, along with the material employed and the use intended, is basic. If we understand that process is message—containing evidence of time spent, care taken, decisions made—then worlds open up. We are at one with the artist at work, experiencing the pleasures of shaping matter, making it behave or allowing it to misbehave. More conceptual approaches are also valid: selecting, presenting, enumerating, and verbalizing (or using language as a material). The results, more often than not, still signify process, even if that process is a form of erasure.

Oddly enough, it was the Process Art of the late '60s (and not Greenbergian formalism, a more conservative predecessor) that opened my way to clay, that most traditional of process materials. If felt, rubber, rope, sand and earth, broken glass, and all manner of ordinary stuff could be valid art materials, each celebrated for its physical properties, then why not clay? The difference was that Process Art pretty much left its chosen materials as they were. Ceramic art, influenced by the peculiar qualities of clay, is about process as transformation: a kind of mud that is soft and pliable is shaped, then fixed and hardened by fire. But I did not let this distinction get in the way, such was my hunger for the physical. Lately that distinction is more clear to me than ever, and wonderfully

significant.

Graham Marks, who works in clay, is an important sculptor and has been for some time. All you have to do is walk into the Helen Drutt Gallery and look at his 14 new works, and if you have no silly prejudice against clay, I can't see how you can escape the impact of his vision. Eight big pieces, so bluntly textured that they look much bigger than they really are, sit on pedestals like meteorites or pods. These odd forms are characteristic of Marks's work and are similar to the pieces shown at the Sculpture Center last year. Six smaller works in a new ring format are lined up on the floor like prehistoric nests.

Marks's big earth-colored eggs, geodes, abandoned hives are always positioned straight up or resting on a side and made

to look as if there is a missing half. They are condensed Earth Art, and—horror of horrors—vessels, but vessels with spiral ramps inside, with slotted openings or curlicue cuts, vessels that have been sealed with cracked earth, "useless" vessels. The ovoid forms look sliced off or cracked open, suggesting both birth and science. Sometimes the highly tactile outside surfaces are embedded with straw, screws, and industrial debris; sometimes these curious shells are covered with equidistant demispheres, suggesting giant hand grenades or land mines.

And what of process? Marks uses an extruder to generate clay coils, which are then employed in a way that mimics pre-wheel pottery-making and insect architecture. The coils are hand-altered; the interior and exterior surfaces are hand-worked. The thickness of the walls and the inside closures is limited by the densities that can be fired and still hold up.

At this point one might ask, how is Marks's work significantly different from normal sculpture? Does sculpture have to be welded or machine-shop produced? Why is clay forbidden? Marks has achieved a certain level of recognition in the ceramics field and is presently head of the ceramics department at the prestigious Cranbrook Academy outside Detroit. Are these grounds for exclusion? Is it because a theme of his work is the dialogue between the inside and the outside of a vessel or container form? Is this alien to sculpture? (Think of Don Judd's boxes; look at "Enclosing the Void" at the Whitney Equitable.)

I have a theory: if ceramic vessels or ceramic sculptures that refer to the vessel were treated the same as other art forms, then the so-called innovation of much nonceramic three-dimensional art might be compromised. Contained space, objectness, process, matter-as-subject, appropriation, utility, and the dialogue between inside and outside surfaces are all traditional ceramics themes and have been for centuries. On the other hand, once we see the vessel as separate form, although equal to, both painting and sculpture, why should ceramic artists who use this form abandon support networks, an inspiring tradition, and their crafts idealism to climb aboard what may be a sinking "high art" ship?

Graham Marks's objects create a tension between nonutilitarian sculptural modes and the more overtly haptic vessel/container tradition. I think he does this brilliantly, producing works that are mysterious and more than a little ominous. You could not lift them, you should not touch them, but the lifting and the touching are all there.

CONRAD ATKINSON

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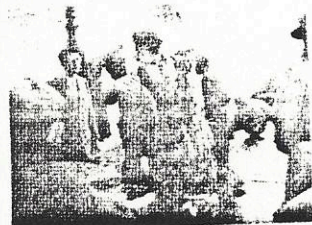
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