
INTERLOCUTOR

STEVEN MONTGOMERY

Tyler Nesler
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Born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, Steven Montgomery describes himself as having, “...an affinity for the esthetics of damage, destruction or any evidence of the passage of time.” His earthenware creations pay homage to the once thriving industrial capital, its degradation and subsequent resurgence. Incorporating elements that honor the regality of Detroit’s auto industry and its machinery and recognize its more recent issues with the safety of its water supply, Montgomery creates vessels that look more like futuristic Bronze Age sculptures than pottery.

Steven currently has several pieces up at New York’s C24 Gallery for their group show “Earthen Delights,” running through July 1, 2021.



Steven Montgomery's works on display for the "Earthen Delights" group show at New York's C24 Gallery

In the late seventies you studied with porcelain innovator Rudolf Staffel. In what key ways did he change your overall thinking and approach to ceramic sculpture?

My alternative approach to ceramic sculpture was well underway before I arrived at the Tyler School of Art, but Rudy Staffel was both attentive and very supportive. At that time, my work included unfired clay slathered onto architectonic wooden structures, burned latex housepaint surfaces, fired geometric forms that were wrapped in clear packing tape and lightly scorched with a blowtorch. Both Rudy and Italo Scanga, another instrumental teacher, fully understood that even though I was well versed in the conventional ceramic methodologies I was more preoccupied with the prevailing post minimal trends in sculpture than anything in the contemporary ceramic landscape. My MFA thesis show was mostly unfired clay and wood, intentionally ephemeral and with few exceptions the work was destroyed shortly thereafter.

Early in your career when you first began experimenting in mixed media ceramic construction, what was the field like? Were there orthodoxies resistant to innovation in the field, or did you encounter a new openness to using different techniques?

Prevailing orthodoxies are inherent in any creative medium and I've always welcomed any critical push or pull that affords me a clear view of the field of battle. In the mid-to-late 1990's there were only a handful of galleries in New York showing anything in ceramic and I was fortunate enough to have the support of one of them. I find it very gratifying to see the degree to which the art world has more recently embraced the ceramic medium even if that acceptance falls largely within the parameters of a more purist definition of ceramic.



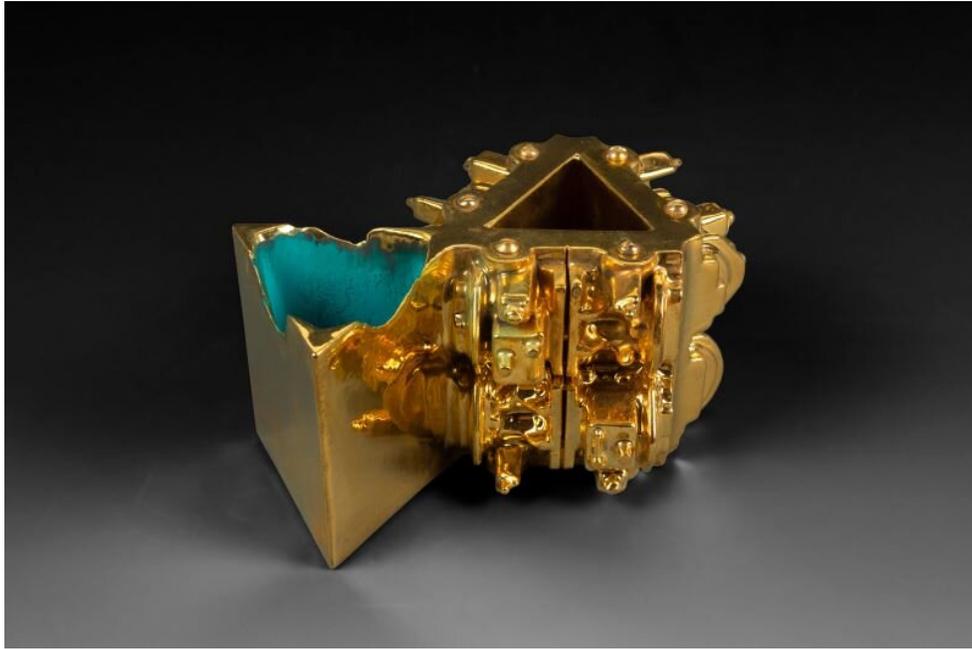
"Euclidean Cup with Drip," 2020, Gold Luster Glaze, Oil Painted Earthenware - 6 x 6.5 x 4in. (15.2 x 16.5 x 10.2cm)

You are from Detroit, and your work largely focuses on industrial objects and industrial decay. Growing up in such a heavily industrialized city, did you feel a sense of unique aesthetics about industrial objects (especially decayed) from an early age? Why do you think you found a type of beauty in these objects whereas for many they were simply seen as functional (or at least once functional)?

I've always believed that my beloved but beleaguered hometown afforded me an aesthetic birthright that identified only a fine line between a creative action and a street fight. I was always proud that my hometown was a centerpiece in the evolution of industrialization while simultaneously hyper-conscious of its escalating demise. Early on I fell in love with the geometry and hard edges of the industrial landscape and took for granted that those edges were frequently jagged, corroded, cutting and brutally honest. Any real awareness of the social-economic and environmental complexity that accompanied the evolution of the "rust-belt" came later but remains an ongoing preoccupation for me.

Most of your works have been made on a large scale, however, you significantly scaled back for the works that are currently up at the group show "Earthen Delights" at C24 Gallery in New York. Have you ever before created complete pieces on such a small scale? What was both a challenge and an unexpected positive for you working on a smaller scale?

My "Euclidean Series" now at C24 began last spring as we were all in lockdown. I simply ran out of clay as supply chains were severely compromised everywhere. I was left with only a small container of casting slip. Consolidating my principal interests into a scale I could hold in the palm of my hand had always seemed like a potentially monumental achievement and the pandemic afforded me sufficient solace to make it possible. The major challenge was the suspension of a long-held affinity, almost an addiction, for the theatricality of large scale in favor of an approach that would demand that the viewer come toward, forward and into the art.



"Euclidean Cup with Triangulation," 2021, Gold Luster Glaze, Oil Painted Earthenware - 3.5 x 6 x 4in. (8.9 x 15.2 x 10.2cm)

What was your conceptual approach to the pieces you created for the "Earthen Delights" show? Many of the titles are variations on "Euclidean Cup." What significance does this have?

I invoke Euclid as a point of reference to the geometric complexity at the heart of this particular series. Here is a more personal backstory: My working knowledge of anything mathematic is actually quite nonexistent. Abysmal failures as a student on any level of math led to my eventual banishment to a ceramics class. Even though I was very active in drawing and painting at that time I had never heard of ceramics or seen clay in any form, and I assumed I was being sent to ceramics as a punitive measure and fully expected the class to be kind of a holding pen for the academically challenged or the chronically misbehaved. I was wrong of course and what I discovered there was completely transformative.

Beyond that narrative though, each piece is a composite of individually cast, carved, wheel-thrown or hand-built components derived primarily from toy automobile engines, particularly carburetors. Each piece though is carefully composed to avoid referencing any specific device. In that intentional obfuscation the work then opens up to more varied and nuanced interpretation. These could include overlaying suggestions of mechanization as well as engineering, architecture or micro-technologies. Even while obsessed with the aesthetics of these areas I readily admit to having no working understanding of any of them. This is the beauty of art!



"Ewer #1," 2017, Platinum Luster Glaze, Oil Painted and Glazed Earthenware - 12 x 14 x 6in. (30.5 x 35.6 x 15.2cm)

"Displaced Cup, Saucer," 2021, Platinum Luster Glaze, Earthenware - 4.5 x 8 x 8in. (11.4 x 20.3 x 20.3cm)

Many of your "Earthen Delights" pieces are glazed in gold luster with some of the surfaces often also covered in a dark textured blue or an almost radioactive-looking cyan. Describe some of your ideas or intents with the use of the gold mixed with these other shades.

Gold occupies a uniquely complex place in history that ranges from commodity to social hierarchies. Ceramic gold luster glaze is closer to the process of gilding, which suggests an overlay or coating. Aside from the extraordinary applications of gold throughout art history, gilding implies a superficial process subject to the influence of a variety much less glamorous substrates such as copper. The cyan or other colorative effects are intended to suggest oxidation, weathering or possible decay. While gold is certainly vulnerable to tarnish it is the physical vulnerability of gilding, and its somewhat diminished status that I find infinitely more appealing.

Whereas the "Euclidean Cups" is essentially a series, other pieces in the show are different, notably "Displaced Cup, Saucer," and "Ewer #1," which to my eye both take on more traditional forms of earthenware. Could you speak your intents with these works and to how they also fit into the overall group show?

The exterior of "Ewer #1" alludes to the cultural history of blue and white in ceramics with an interior core of elements of mechanization. The resulting tension of opposites in a singular object are specific to my approach to ceramic sculpture over the entirety of my career.

Like the Euclidean Cups, "Displaced Cup, Saucer" was born during the spring 2020 Covid lockdown in New York. The piece differs though in that it is singular and not a part of any series. Its "off-center" twist was a specific attempt at locating my emotional center at the same time that I was personally recovering from Covid-19.

<https://interlocutorinterviews.com/new-blog/2021/5/18/steven-montgomery-interview-c24-earthen-delights>