Thomas Dane exhibition in Naples explores the power and precarity of ceramics

Lynda Benglis and Magdalene Odundo join historical figures like Lucio Fontana in a group show that pushes at the limits of what clay can do.

Ceramics are all the art world rage at the moment, but a new exhibition at Thomas Dane’s Naples gallery is one apart. Postponed twice due to Covid, *A Matter of Life and Death*, bring together an international line up of 13 artists who have made works in clay.

Organised by curator Jenni Lomax, it feels more like an institutional show than a commercial one—although it features a formidable quartet of artists on the gallery’s roster: Magdalene Odundo, Lynda Benglis, Anya Gallaccio and the late Philip King. For 27 years, Lomax was the pioneering director of Camden Art Centre where, long before today’s upsurge in interest, she established a reputation for championing work in ceramics as well as the best in contemporary and 20th-century art. During her time at Camden she instigated a programme of ceramics fellowships and her departure was marked by the gallery’s establishment of The Freelands Lomax Ceramics Fellowship, which continues to offer residencies and exhibition opportunities to emerging artists working with clay.
This abiding commitment to the history and potential of ceramics is evident in Lomax’s choice of work for Thomas Dane, which spans generations and pushes at the limits of what clay can be made to say and do. A trio of sleek new burnished pots by Magdalene Odundo is offset by a pieced painted terracotta plaque by Lucio Fontana; Philip King sliced vessel sculptures cavort alongside two totemic perforated standing structures etched with English and Yoruba text by Lawson Oyekan; and in Keith Harrison’s film, clay is wrapped directly around the elements of his grandmother’s electric fire to potentially lethal effect.

Serena Korda’s grimacing, anthropomorphic pots are designed to be blown into while Anya Gallaccio’s amorphous forms have been recycled from an earlier work in which raw clay was robotically shaped using a 3D printer. Part bones, part intestines, these suggestive shapes are now given a new glazed, patinated lease of life by being ceremonially cremated in both industrial and outdoor, wood-fuelled kilns.

Artwork: Masaomi Yasunaga. Courtesy the artist, Thomas Dane Gallery and Nonoka Hill. Photo: Maurizio Esposito

More clay rituals are conjured up in the mysterious encrusted structures of Masaomi Yasunaga, which are fired by being buried in sand mixed with fragments of pebbles, glass and ash. (Once Yasunaga even added the ashes of his grandmother.) These bizarre forms, some resembling corals, others barnacled artefacts taken from the ocean floor, are here shown lined up along a funerary mound of the mineral detritus out of which they originally emerged. Phoebe Cummings’ took up residence in the gallery in order to create her intricate and impossibly delicate arrangements of flowers and fruit that resemble Flemish vanitas paintings, and which, being fashioned from unfired clay, are also destined to perish over time. Another memento mori is offered by Chiara Camoni’s vases, which are exuberantly adorned with the seductive but also malevolent forms of butterflies, and then filled with cut blooms which, rather than being replaced, are just allowed to wither and die.

The presiding genius of A Matter of Life and Death is the great Argentinian-Italian artist and theorist Lucio Fontana, whose perforated, gouged or vigorously modelled ceramic works are positioned throughout the exhibition, starting with a punctured egg-like terracotta sphere in first room. Fontana arrived in Italy as a small child at the beginning of the 20th century, just at the same time as a series of violent
earthquakes devastated the country. This eruptive quality fed directly into his ceramic work where he made piercings and slits into clay, as well as his better known holes and cuts into canvas. Fontana’s revelling in the properties and processes of clay sets the tone for this exhibition, and his description of his ceramic works as “terremotata ma firma” (earthquaked but motionless) could also have been its title.

Instead, A Matter of Life and Death is named after the classic 1946 Powell and Pressburger film in which a World War II fighter pilot, played by David Niven, bales out of his plane and finds himself neither alive nor dead. Suspended in a limbo place between these two states, he has to bargain for his life, in a place somewhere between heaven and hell. Similarly it is the uncertain status of clay, encompassing both fragility and strength, beauty and abjection, that is the central theme of the show. The stuff of the earth, ceramics are shaped, fashioned but also frequently destroyed by the water and fire that give them their form. Both resilient and delicate, works made from clay can survive in all climates for millennia, but also be shattered by a misfiring or a chance topple. At every stage, as everyone working with ceramics knows, the potential for catastrophe is never far away.

![Artwork](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Artwork: Andrew Lord.
Courtesy the artist, Gladstone Gallery and Thomas Dane Gallery. Photo: Maurizio Esposito

So what better setting for this exploration of elemental, existential precarity than Naples, a city stacked around a watery bay and presided over by a volcano? A place of beauty and resilience, it is redolent of death and drama: below the streets is a maze of underground catacombs piled with the bones of the dead and even the bollards are topped by skulls. Roofed with clay, floored with terracotta, Naples is also the home of Capodimonte porcelain. It bristles with archaeological, anthropological and ceramic wonders, and the drama, atmosphere and instability of this ancient and often violent city infuses every work in this exhibition.

This Neapolitan setting highlights the lava-like quality of Anya Gallaccio’s squirming lustrous forms, it gives Lynda Benglis’ shimmying strips and slabs of brilliantly glazed clay assume a baroque curvaceousness and accentuates the association of Philip King’s sculptures with classical vases, jugs and pitchers, at the same time as they strike human poses with their bulbous bellies, angular handles and protruding spouts. A more contained energy is to be found in the poised pots of Magdalene Odundo which also nod to the vessels exhumed from Pompeian ash as they hover perilously en pointe on their plinths, their surfaces smoked with the patterning of repeated firings.
Sometimes a sense of destruction is built into the work itself. Andrew Lord’s wall-mounted circle of sixteen soaring swallows flaunt the breakages to their wings and tails in golden seams of Japanese kintsugi repair; while the dusty pile of destroyed blooms lying below Phoebe Cummings’s sumptuous floral sconce is all that is left of the earlier version that unexpectedly fell to the floor, dramatically foretelling the ultimate fate of the current piece once the ambient temperature has caused all its unglazed leaves and petals to crumble into dust. Cummings’ works are not supposed to survive this show: another even more intricate unfired clay confection slowly oozes a trickle of water that will ultimately melt all its intricate detail into a muddy mass.

Thomas Dane Gallery overlooks the bay of Naples and this volatile watery ambience also makes its presence felt. Serena Korda makes direct reference to the dramatic vista in a gigantic ceramic necklace made especially for this show. Draped across doors and spilling onto the floor, it is strung with huge decorative baubles in the shape of exotic fruit, as well as sweeping, double-faced weeping mermaid’s head which apparently refers to the mythological sirens that tempted sailors from their boats. Breaking away from this chain are a series of grotesque severed ceramic hands and tentacled creatures that seem to be scuttling across the floor towards a lively pouting fish by Lucio Fontana.

The baroque grotesquery and ornament-overload of Naples finds more echoes in Korda’s other series of big-bellied ceramic and stoneware bottles which have bearded—and in one case vomiting—faces and surfaces that variously sprout multiple breasts, atom-bomb clouds and a vaginal gash. Contrary to their appearance, these excessive, suggestive vessels are designed to contain not liquids but air, and they sit, waiting to be blown into and activated as part of Korda’s “jug orchestra”.

But while this particular orchestra may be silenced there is no shortage of animation in this dynamic, vibrant exhibition. In Jenni Lomax’s hands, clay is yet again confirmed as both a timeless and a timely medium, and especially in this dramatic city which teems with both life and death. But whether in Naples or beyond, this parade of marvellous, multifarious ceramics offers a powerful and unsettling metaphor for our current volatile times where nothing is fixed, static or certain.

• A Matter of Life and Death, Thomas Dane Gallery, Naples, until 28 May
Air Mail
19 September 2020


Sterling Ruby & Masaomi Yasunaga
SEPTEMBER 19 – OCTOBER 31, 2020
NONAKA-HILL / LOS ANGELES / ART

California-based artist Sterling Ruby and Japan-based artist Masaomi Yasunaga are separated by the Pacific Ocean, but this show brings them together as two innovative masters of ceramics. Made of earthen matter, the basins, baskets, vessels, bowls, animals, shells, and flowers on display are fabulously delicate and otherworldly. And no wonder, both artists have been inspired by archaeology and excavation. Recalling his roots in Amish Pennsylvania, Ruby sees humility in the preservation and use of objects transformed by the earth. Yasunaga sees excavation as a way to understand and produce finished work. The idea of accretion—in terms of color, patina, and surface matter—is alive in this art. —E.C.

Nonaka-Hill
720 N Highland Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90038
Get Directions »
Review: Gravel, glass and glaze: The radical ceramics of Masaomi Yasunaga

By LEAH OLLMAN
JULY 5, 2019 10:54 AM PT

If Masaomi Yasunaga’s astonishing ceramic sculptures were parts of speech, they would be at once both nouns and verbs. They are extraordinary objects, tactile things with insistent, engrossing physicality. They are also so process-oriented, so action-driven, that they seem in some sort of continuous temporal motion, existing simultaneously in multiple tenses: present and past, conditional and subjunctive.

Some 30 vessels rest on a raised bed of gravel running the length of Nonaka-Hill gallery in L.A. The installation evokes a raised tomb, reinforcing an impression of the works as excavated, unearthed. Many have surfaces encrusted with stone bits. One large bowl appears entirely comprised of rubble, its walls a thick, white, rocky crust, pocked with voids and graced with passages of glassy jade and violet. Other pieces are more delicate — a little cup, for instance, with walls like a fine, crisp shell, nests within another, just slightly larger, to yield an intimate meditation in umber and taupe.
For every rugged and raw gesture, there are others with roots in refined tradition, jars with graceful silhouettes and finely shaped handles. Relics from ancient Rome come to mind — urns and oil lamps. Across a long shelf in the adjoining space parades a lyrical little menagerie: vessels in the form of birds, a turtle, perhaps a snail. Nearby sits a stunning, small cup of aqua glass with a white-rimmed lip and grit-barnacled base, suggesting oceanic salvage and organic decay. Yasunaga titles this piece, and several others, “Sai,” meaning to break or collapse. “Tokeru Utsuwa,” defined as melting vessel, is the name of a few other pieces. The forces of erosion act here as a kind of generative impulse, unmaking as inspiration to make.

Material transformation is fundamental to ceramics, but what Yasunaga does with clay, glaze, ash and glass is radically inventive as well as profuse in metaphorical resonance. Many pieces are identified as made only of glaze. Through a process involving burial in sand, soil or stone, Yasunaga turns what is conventionally used as a skin to sheathe a clay body into a body itself, both bone and flesh. Extracting the works from the kiln and placing them atop a bed of gravel furthers the notion of reciprocity between what is below ground and what is above, between archaeological time’s expansive breadth and the immediate now of touch, utility and sensual reverie. The work feels at once primal and urgent.
Yasunaga has exhibited extensively in his native Japan, but this is his first solo show in the U.S. In turns raw and elegant, it is never less than thrilling.

*Nonaka-Hill, 720 N. Highland Ave., L.A. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through July 20. (323) 450-9409, nonaka-hill.com*

"Empty Creature" by Masaomi Yasunaga, 2019. Glaze, 3-9/16 inches by 3-9/16 inches by 3-3/16 inches. (From Nonaka-Hill)
Art Viewer
9 July 2019

Art Viewer

Masaomi Yasunaga and Kunié Sugiura at Nonaka-Hill
July 9, 2019

Artists: Masaomi Yasunaga and Kunié Sugiura

Venue: Nonaka-Hill, Los Angeles, US

Date: June 1 – July 20, 2019

Photography: images copyright and courtesy of the artists and Nonaka-Hill, Los Angeles

Masaomi Yasunaga
(Born 1982, Osaka Japan. Living and working in Iga, Mie Prefecture, Japan)

In a gesture which has little precedence, Masaomi Yasunaga removed clay from his ceramic forms, and builds his sculptures using glaze as the primary structural element. At Nonaka-Hill, the artist's first solo exhibition outside of Asia, Yasunaga presents numerous recent sculptures expressing a variety of vessel forms, placed on a bed of common gravel.
Yasunaga studied ceramics under Satoru Hoshino, a second-generation proponent of the avant-garde ceramic group, Sodeisha (in kanji, 赤泥紬社, literally means, crawling through the mud). Founded in Kyoto in 1948, in the aftermath of WWII, Sodeisha broke away from long-established conventions of Japanese ceramics, resolving to create non-functional sculptural works. Continuing with this ethos, Yasunaga's sculptures of vessels may or may not be functional, and explore an unstable boundary between functional and fine arts.

By sculpting in glaze, Yasunaga's works reimagine the use of ceramics' conventional materials. Glaze, most commonly used to apply color, luster and finish onto the surface of clay-built ceramics, responds to different variables and often produces unexpected outcomes. Unlike clay objects which maintain their original form when fired in the kiln, Yasunaga's glaze objects melt, so they must be buried in trays of sand, soil or rocks to retain their form. Once inside the kiln, the viscous molten glaze adheres to the surrounding earthen material. After firing and cooling, Yasunaga unburies his objects in a studio process which parallels the surprises of archeological excavation, and painstakingly removes the excess sand and rocks from the interstices of the objects. The resulting artworks range from smooth to heavily encrusted.

Yasunaga's presentation, which verges on camouflage, resembles the beds of stone from which the works emerge after the kiln. It also embraces the narratives which his objects conjure for most viewers; that the sculptures resemble artifacts excavated from the bottom of the ocean floor or buried underground amongst ancient ruins. As such, these objects, imagined to have been lost for vast periods of time and now found, retain the global vessel styles and handiwork of imagined ceramics makers (other than Yasunaga) from eons before. Some objects seem whole, while others seem broken, arousing phenomenological thinking reflected in the artwork's titles, all which infer something that was, or is no longer; Sui (縦) means to break or collapse, Tokeru Utsuwa (流ける壺) translates to melting vessel, Dokkaku (掘掘) is defined as threshing, and Hako No Kokkoku (箱の骨格) signifies a skeleton.

Feeling that with new life or death, comes a moment when many things may change, Yasunaga responded to the passing of his grandmother ten years ago by incorporating her cremated bone remains into the glaze of his hand-crafted funerary urns. This gesture compelled him to appreciate the emotional and expressive potentials in ceramics. Three years ago, with the joy of the birth of his eldest son, Yasunaga began to hybridize his empty container forms with depictions of animals from around where he was born. Rendered in Yasunaga's earthen materials, these Empty creatures conjure associations to numerous histories and places, and collectively form an unlikely geologic menagerie.

Yasunaga's exploratory approach to ceramic making delves deeper than its experimentative application of materials, his sculptures give perspective to the human relationship to time.

Masaomi Yasunaga and Kunie Sugiuira, 2019, exhibition view, Nonaka-Hill, Los Angeles