

Visual Arts

By Charles Donelan | Wed Aug 07, 2019 | 11:14am

MCASB Presents Brian Rochefort's 'Absorption by the Sun'

Artists Offers Radical Transformations in Ceramic Art



Brian Rochefort's ceramic sculptures are fired in a kiln up to five times, changing the shape and texture of the piece with each re-firing.

Photo: Courtesy

You might be able to count the colors used in any single work by Brian Rochefort, but it would take a long time. The hybrid ceramic sculptures coming out of this young artist's downtown Los Angeles studio that currently fill the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB) gallery space offer a vision that's so charged with shifting textures and bright hues that it demands a visceral response. It's not just that these unruly vessels have so clearly progressed beyond all practical considerations of form and function; it's that they force certain questions, such as, "What's that growing there?" and, "How did that surface happen?" In an era that's often dependent on contexts and concepts for the perception of aesthetic value, these spectacular works assert the primacy of the object, imbued with power and energy through direct perception. In other words, they don't need words to work. They just are.

Operating at a generational remove from the tradition of kiln-fired sculpture that's often associated with California thanks to artists like Ron Nagle, Ken Price, and Peter Voulkos, Rochefort's prolific oeuvre endows the medium with palpable fresh momentum. He's harnessing a sense of freedom derived from intervening chapters in the history of contemporary art, particularly those that include makers of the ugly and abject, such as Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, and he's doing so in a way that blurs the distinctions that created those categories of value in the first place.

To make his work, Rochefort has devised a process that involves repeated firings. Beginning with big hunks of raw clay, he puts each piece through multiple phases of development that may involve mud, sand, molten glass, and any number of dazzling glazes. Some of these objects have seen the inside of the kiln as many as five times in order to arrive at their current state of revelatory overstimulation. The artist's popular and fascinating Instagram account is named "energygloop," but to a newcomer, it might be more accurate to call the work "supergloop," after the saturated experience of endlessly mutating color, shape, and texture it offers.

Although an intense work ethic and years of study and experimentation in the studio form the foundation of his achievement, there's another dimension to Rochefort's project that has to do with the natural world. In recent years he has gone on a series of expeditions to threatened ecosystems in Central and South America and in East Africa. Inspired by an initial trip to the Galapagos Islands on which he encountered volcanic craters, Rochefort has sought out other locations where he can examine what he calls "big holes in the earth." It's easy to see the influence of lava flows on the work, but the deeper connection may be to more complex issues of growth and decay raised by climate change.

For MCASB Associate Curator Alexandra Terry, who organized the show, *Absorption by the Sun* represents a new chapter for the museum's Bloom Projects program. What began as an idea for using the relatively small space near the museum's entrance as a miniature gallery in which to show the work of emerging artists has been ramped up by new director Abaseh Mirvali into an enviably comprehensive invasion of the main space. Visitors are likely to be stunned by the sheer volume of exciting work in this show, and artists of Rochefort's generation will certainly take note of this compelling new option available in Santa Barbara. Although he has had many gallery shows and his work has been purchased by some of the world's most discerning collectors, this is Rochefort's first solo museum show. If it's any indication, the future of the MCASB Bloom Projects program is bright — and colorful.

4•1•1 | Brian Rochefort's *Absorption by the Sun* shows through September 8 at the MCASB, 653 Paseo Nuevo. See mcasantabarbara.org.