

art ltd.

MATT WEDEL

KIM DAVENPORT

SF EARLY GALLERIES

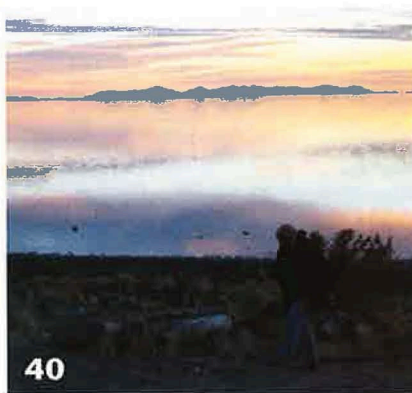
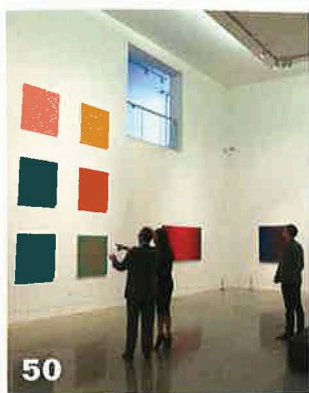
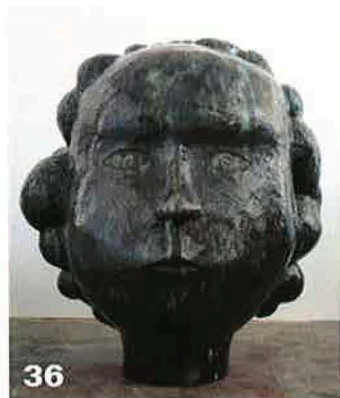
CURATOR STRATEGIES

LAND ART PIONEERS



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Few jobs in the art world demand so much footwork, elbow grease, and sheer observational exertion as that of curator. Today, the job of "curator" encompasses numerous roles, from director to producer, from coordinator to communicator to collaborator. For a few decades, curators seemed to be the high priests and priestesses of the art world; arguably, that era has peaked. Rather than preaching to the converted, museum curators are now expending more and more energy gathering their flock. In the 2012 volume "Thinking Contemporary Curating"—the first in a planned series by Independent Curators International—writer Terry Smith methodically weighs the challenges facing contemporary curators. Near the opening, Smith quotes from a notebook by Australian curator Nick Waterlow, director of several Sydney Biennales, who died in 2009. Under the title "A Curator's Last Will and Testament," Waterlow enumerates curatorial traits: "1. Passion; 2. An eye of discernment; 3. An empty vessel; 4. An ability to be uncertain; 5. Belief in the necessity of art and artists; 6. A medium—bringing a passionate and informed understanding of works of art to an audience in ways that will stimulate, inspire, question; 7. Making possible the altering of perception." Smith then adds, "Values such as these resonate within more programmatic efforts by curators to reimagine museums; write the history of curating; innovate within exhibition formats; extend curating into educational activity... These impulses are reshaping modern curatorial thinking." What I like about them is their utter lack of theoretical pretention—the values Waterlow cites emphasize engaging the artwork and valorize uncertainty; they encourage passion, interaction and questioning over illustrating a thesis.

For this issue of *art ltd.*, I spoke with four leading California museum curators, from a diverse range of institutions. Though their comments on the state of curatorial practice touch on various issues, from the role of new technologies to the way those technologies have impacted the potential audiences, and roles, of their institutions, each of them ultimately returned to the central issue of viewership. Ironically, while curators, artists, and other art world denizens have become ever more self-conscious, museum curators are being forced to widen the reach of their shows to less informed audiences and to maintain their relevance to their communities. It's a tricky balancing act, trying to keep their practice at once populist and substantial. With an expanding emphasis on communication, and on reaching out to viewers through disparate means, it's no surprise these curators are so articulate in their response.

The truth is, I think in talking with them I felt a shudder of empathy. From the outset, the magazine has likewise been a balancing act, between our urge to present material in lucid, non-academic language, while still focusing on significant issues and artists. Our mantra has always been "smart but accessible," eagerly expanded to include "lively and engaging." Ideally, we too should be presenting art in a way so as to "stimulate, inspire, and question." To that end, in this issue, we also examine the sensuous, subversive ceramic sculpture of California-Ohio artist Matt Wedel, and look back at three very different Land Art pioneers, who've each advanced the field in very different ways. We also present an oral history of the SF gallery scene in its nascence, in the 1960s and '70s, at a time when conceptualism was newly ascendant. Their stories, and struggles, remind us that the artworld is always changing, and in flux. As well it should be.

—GEORGE MELROD

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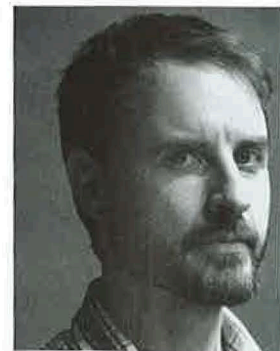
In olden days, that is, the 1990s, **George Melrod** wrote regularly about contemporary art and culture for a wide range of magazines, including *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, *Art & Antiques*, *American Ceramics*, *Sculpture*, *World Art*, *Los Angeles*, *Details*, and *VOGUE*. He moved from New York to Los Angeles in 1998. Since 2006, he can be found humbly plying his trade as the editor of *art ltd.*

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"FLOWER TREE," 2012
Matt Wedel
CERAMIC
38" x 34" x 35"
©MATT WEDEL
PHOTO: COURTESY OF LA LOUVER, VENICE, CA

cover

MATT WEDEL:

Blending respect for tradition with his own subversive personal mythology, the LA-trained sculptor is taking clay on his own terms.

by Shana Nys Dambrot

"There's no one single reason to love clay. It's an ordinary, common, familiar material. It's natural, dug out of the earth; it retains that primal resonance." That's Peter Held, longtime curator at the Arizona State University Art Museum, discussing the gallery's current exhibition (and his last at the helm), "MUCK: Accumulations, Accretions and Aggregations," devoted to artists who share an appreciation for the essential physicality and malleability of clay. Among the most fascinating voices included in the show is Matt Wedel, who at 30 is rather a wunderkind in the world of ceramic sculpture, and indeed, sculpture generally. Like many, Held became enamored of Wedel's approach to the material, citing what he calls the artist's "controlled exploration of clay's natural qualities." At the same time, it is Wedel's subversive expansion of the conventions of ceramic sculpture that generates the emotional appeal and broad popularity of his strange, magical, captivating, and absolutely unexpected objects and installations.

Wedel's 2013 solo exhibition at LA Louver surprised a lot of people. Having achieved his MFA from the world-renowned ceramics program at CSU Long Beach, Wedel's work had been somewhat known in and around Los Angeles before that, with group shows locally at Marine Salon, the Sturt Haaga Gallery, and in galleries and regional museums from Long Beach to Pomona, including several smaller-scale exhibitions at LA Louver in recent years. The jaunty confidence and prismatic bravado of *Sheep's Head* made his show one of the most acclaimed, talked-about, and Instagram-tagged of the season, not because people weren't used to seeing sculptures that big—just rarely did they see them made of clay. Add to that the rambling installation of botanical works in an evocative and dynamic landscape array, combining welcoming and inscrutable shapes and colors that invited the audience right inside.

Those following Wedel's career often point to the undeniable crossover appeal of this work, rescuing Wedel from the aesthetic and generational pigeonholes of the ceramics world, based on his commitment to saying something new with the material, to pushing its limits in a very literal, physical way. Culled from the *Sheep's Head* series, the monumental and charmingly enigmatic *Portrait* (2013) was installed in LA Louver's Skyroom this spring, where it interacted with the vagaries of weather and the changing light of the open atmosphere, existing in a friendly posture of spectacle in relation to the

architecture; its hand-molded surfaces and tactile glazing catching the light, sparkling, changing, and about as undeniably analog as possible.

Although he's currently based in Ohio, it was during his MFA time at CSULB's lauded ceramics program that Wedel truly found his voice. Tony Marsh, an alumnus who has been the head of the ceramic program at CSULB for 25 years, recalls with fondness Wedel's student days and subsequent teaching and residencies on campus. The department boasts a vigorous program of student travel, and Wedel spent some very formulative time in Europe as part of that curriculum. As Marsh recalls, "Matt was making abstract sculpture when he got here. When we sent him to Italy, he ran into the history of figurative sculpture and its function at an architectural scale, and he came back transformed."

Wedel concurs that the trip, especially in the context of the support and freedom afforded to him at CSULB, represented a breakthrough. "Going to Italy was for the purpose of looking at ceramics in the context of architecture. Niki de Saint-Phalle has a sculpture park north of Rome in the middle of nowhere; I had to hitchhike to it. Florence and Rome exposed me to a longer history of art and to the possibilities of scale. At the Vatican there was this giant cherub on a baptismal font; the effect was abstract and slightly perverted—a giant naked boy in the context of that space. The della robia blue and white architectural adornments and the Majolica platters made an impression on me; how they were so loose and clunky, almost unrefined. They are like 17th- and 18th-century illustration, sharing that awkwardness, and with the proportions all wrong. My imagery comes from those kinds of isolated images rather than from either abstract or sculptural art per se." These experiences are what spurred his transition to figurative work after his return to California, a transition he continues to navigate to this day. At the Art Institute of Chicago (where he got his BFA) they have some of Roger Brown's sky paintings, and he definitely felt such folk art, art brut, and Outsider influences manifesting in his struggle with modes of abstraction and depiction, rawness and refinement. "I needed a vocabulary to deal with the pictures in my

"FLOWER TREE," 2013
CERAMIC, 72" x 42" x 52"

©MATT WEDEL

PHOTO: COURTESY OF L.A. LOUVER, VENICE, CA



“There’s something about this work that sits in Southern California just perfectly,” says Marsh.

So then what is he doing in Ohio? “I love teaching, but I needed a base studio, somewhere with a big enough kiln for what I’m trying to accomplish. Being nomadic is hard when you work at this scale.” Peter Held understands this dilemma, saying, “It’s incredibly challenging technically at that scale, and to be so prolific also is unique. It looks spontaneous but he knows what he is doing.”

Held continues, “He’s ambitious and attuned to the material, but not slavish to technique. It’s a cultivated aesthetic.” To that point, Marsh has seen a mixed reaction to Wedel’s work from both inside and outside the field. “Some people think it’s ‘too naive’ etc.; but most people see the fearless genius in how he engages the figure. I can’t think of a real parallel in the ceramics world. He’s had more than one teacher say his color was ‘too messy, unpredictable, haphazard’ but he refused to do it their way. Refraction, chromatic intensity, color spectrum—there are certain properties that are unique to ceramics, while some are not. Wedel has developed his own color vocabulary, working with both. He was here as a student for about two and a half years, and you could tell he was special. He was this skinny kid with an innocent persona, but his brain was wired to investigate ideas. He had loads of failures but no matter what, he systematically worked it out. I could tell I didn’t have a lot to teach him about art, but he needed support,” Marsh adds. “He burned through money, space, and materials—but we didn’t want to stop him! He was so determined and autodidactic, demonstrating urgency, patience, fortitude, curiosity, intuitive clarity, and problem-solving in ways I’d never seen.”

All this dedication to studying skill and technique comes at a time when more and more artists are working in clay, both with and without any real training, whether as their primary genre or as experimental projects. Artists from Beverly Semmes and Liz Lerner to Kristen Morgin, Seth Kaufman, David Kiddie, Mark Whalen, Yassi Mazandi, and countless others, are just going for it. It seems more true than ever what Roberta Smith says, that “clay is the new video.” Only look at LA Louver’s roster—besides Wedel, they show Ben Jackel, Ken Price, Alison Saar, Eduardo Sarabia, Richard Deacon... and that’s just one LA gallery (albeit an influential one). It might have something to do with clay being the most analog thing in the world—and how people who spend all day inside on tech devices, watching clean data flow across flat electronic screens, are craving something earthy, slow, physical, and even cumbersome in a kind of backlash.

Wedel is sanguine about the development. “It’s a fad, but also I imagine artists feeling like they can go there materially, because it’s still mostly unfamiliar, being just at the beginning of a new phase of acceptance as a legitimate fine art material. It was exposed in the 1960s, particularly in LA, but has remained insulated as a specific community—small, tight, isolated.” And now, there’s this explosive proliferation of styles and approaches. “Paul Soldner... was the epitome of the ceramics culture and how it exists in its own context. Ken Price alienated himself from that context and stereotype and succeeded in being viewed in the context of sculpture generally, not just of ceramics. Richard Deacon has his made for him,



“SHEEP WITH FLOWERS,” 2013
CERAMIC
TOP: 39½" x 32" x 29"
BASE: 78½" x 62" x 43"
© MATT WEDEL
PHOTO: COURTESY OF L.A. LOUVER, VENICE, CA

head. When I got back from Europe, I started thinking about landscape as a basis for expressing the situations, and images that exist in my own mythological narrative.”

Soon after he returned from Europe, Ron Nelson (then director at the Long Beach Museum of Art) had him install what Marsh describes as “a 16-foot, bright yellow baby looming up over the wall.” *Child* (2007) surely hearkened to what Wedel had seen both at the Vatican and the Saint-Phalle sculpture park. The piece had “liability issues; and people freaked out a little; but that was huge support at a critical time,” recalls Marsh. In fact, it is that exact kind of formal twist and wry humor that have made Wedel’s work stand out, not only for its scale, but its atypical use of pigment and glaze, and the fantastical relationship to landscape and the figure that read as non-traditional or even subversive of the genre’s conventions. So where does Wedel see himself on the continuum of clay and art history, especially the world of clay in California? Like with the troublesome assignment of ceramicist, Wedel claims “no fixed identity; but I attribute my earliest definitions of myself as an artist to having studied and worked in California. Even today I’m still thinking about what I saw and did there.”

so it's not about the hands-on thing for him, it's more conceptual. Urs Fischer embraces the accessibility and populism of the raw material, in a way utilizing the baggage of 'lowness' and broadening the context for looking at clay. There really is no longer just one way."

And despite having taught in diverse locations, (Boulder, RISD, Nova Scotia), his work retains a distinct Southern Californian attitude. "There's something about this work that sits in Southern California just perfectly," says Marsh. Though Wedel was speaking allegorically about the freedom artists have here, Marsh sees the literal manifestation of that in his work's form and content. "Everything will grow here; there are crazy plants in the desert. It's naturally occurring surrealism. The rocks he makes for underneath things have become like cut gems, faceted and stylized, angular, dreamy, and magical. The succulents he makes don't exist, but they might. The colorful, invented city, its particular light, and scale—this work is a splendid match for the region and for the kind of makers we have here. I don't understand how he could make that work on the East Coast! I mean, he could do it now that he knows who he is, but, it comes from here."

One of the most compelling aspects of Wedel's work is its relationship to painting. His work exudes a radical, gestural deployment of colors, lavish textures, mixed-media surface treatments, moments of glass-like luminosity, chaotic struggles between abstraction and imagery, evidence of the hand of the artist, and a great many other qualities and concerns shared with painting. Wedel demurs. "Painterliness is as elusive as the word 'ceramics.' A painter would have to hyper-render to get the effect I want—rust, mold, crackling, prismatic movement. But firing does change some things about both the shape and surface, and I often have to re-approach them on new terms as objects as we move through the process." He adds, "It's a balance of intention and uncertainty. Make a gesture, wait for the piece to respond, see what happens over the course of days and weeks, watch what changes and keep what is acceptable."

Much has been made of the fact that Wedel's father is a potter; but this work is not about autobiography, as it is neither rebellious nor nostalgic. There's a lovely and telling picture of Wedel at about the age his own son is now, basically sitting on a potter's wheel covered in muck. "My dad is the epitome of traditional. He will still call me up and say 'How are your pots doing?' He's skeptical but interested. And that history was pivotal in my choice to pursue ceramics. As an artist, I was struggling to find a place to start. Clay was a space to begin figuring myself out, it was something I knew. To me, the whole idea of being an artist is just to find practices that allow you to feel most fully alive and engaged with life. This art is the by-product of that attempt at living," he says. "I have a lot more to do."



ABOVE:
"FLOWER TREE," 2011
CERAMIC
15" x 21" x 21"

RIGHT:
"BOY AND COW," 2007
FIRED CLAY AND GLAZE
48" x 34" x 18"

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