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Florid ceramics: Matt Wedel presents 'Peaceable Fruit' at LA Louver

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Matt Wedel's unusual, stylised ceramics are being displayed at Venice's LA Louver Gallery until 30 December. Pictured front: *Figure with heads*, 2015

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'I grew up with fairly conservative ideas of making ceramics,' says Ohio-based artist Matt Wedel. From the time he was two years old, Wedel was at the wheel with his father, who worked as a functional potter in Palisade, Colorado. The elder Wedel gave his son exacting instructions on how to make didactic objects — 'He would say, "This is how you make a cup"' — and at a young age introduced him to the work of the late midcentury clay titan Peter Voulkos, from whom the young Wedel took a class at Colorado's Anderson Ranch Center.

'To me, he was challenging the entire history of ceramics. I enjoy figures in art that hold so much power as a maker,' says Wedel, referring to Voulkos' iconic (and iconoclastic) stacked assemblage sculptures. 'He was one of the earliest figures that held that for me.'

However, it wasn't until Wedel disconnected from the material as an art student (he studied sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago and Cal State, Long Beach with stints in Spain and Italy) that he realised it was his foundation. 'Clay had a connection to my own history,' says Wedel. 'And I was interested in this idea of a platform.'

Early on, his concrete sculptures were blob-like abstractions of the Southern California landscape, which grew into intricate representational plants (Joshua Trees, flower trees, etc) attached to geometric forms. 'They were my own idea of flower and tree and figure,' says Wedel, who now works out of two large car kilns he built in Athens, Ohio in 2012. 'I was revolting against abstraction back then, but now I'm letting elements of abstraction come back into the work to expand my abilities.'

Those abilities have strengthened over the past few years, most ambitiously in 'Peaceable Fruit' a new solo exhibition at Venice's LA Louver gallery (on view until 30 December). Inside the two-storey, beachside space Wedel has installed more

than a dozen of his massive flower trees (rendered in ceramic, porcelain and stoneware) which range in size and weight from a 40 lb blue tabletop sculpture of scalloping flowers to his explosive 1,900 lb, sherbet-bleeding *Banana tree* whose 'tumorous fruiting' lies on the ground of this tentacular plant beast. It's all meant as a dystopian nod to the Garden of Eden and the *Peaceable Kingdom* paintings of American folk artist Edward Hicks.

'It's a little less aggressive than Voulkos' deconstructed revolt against his own work,' says Wedel, who will take up to eight months to piece his sculptures together with the aid of removable scaffolds. 'But I think there's this uncertainty of the work's conclusion that creates this constant struggle as it's being built.' In addition to the trees, there is a smaller gallery of rough hewn heads that look like melted busts and upstairs he's attached aortic flowers to the walls. He's also turning away from the 'burdensome' bold glazes of his past series and infusing more muted colors into the works, letting them bleed out over the forms while exposing white spots of fired clay in the process.

'I'm beginning to use mythology in my work more as metaphor than literal stories and letting my hand become more present,' says Wedel, noting his new figurative sculptures (an amputee couple with a frightened dog; a prostrated woman picking up severed heads of apostles; or a gold-leafed father standing over a lifeless child) function as idols of loss and collapse en route to a more lasting harmony with the natural world.

'I think previously the narratives were so fragmented but now they're starting to work together more clearly,' says Wedel, who is also working on an outdoor installation for the Omi International Art Center in upstate New York. 'Hopefully they'll be more experimental and challenge my knowledge of the material.'

If the fantastical flora and fauna on display at LA Louver are any indication, Wedel's world could become even more exotic.