



Being human: Abstract ideas infuse Matt Wedel's large-scale ceramics



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Albany, Ohio, ceramic artist Matt Wedel is not your everyday ceramicist; he is known for pushing the boundaries of clay.

“I found my work trying to break rules. I had habits of how I’d render things and I would repeat different types of renderings and so I would change it, I would push it forward,” Wedel said about his work. “Over time that kind of mark making and the rendering became more abstract and more about the subject matter of mark making.”

Incredibly large-scale, ceramic works featuring a glass glaze will be showcased in an upcoming Toledo Museum of Art exhibit titled *Matt Wedel: Phenomenal Debris.* Along with his massive sculptures, a collection of the artist’s 2D works will be on display from Nov. 5 to April 2, 2023.

“The title comes out of this idea that Matt very much considers his work as the process and the experience of making it and that’s kind of where the

term ‘*debris*’ comes from, it’s kind of this outcome of the experience of making,” said Diane Wright, senior curator of glass and contemporary craft at the Toledo Museum of Art who curated the exhibition.

Located at 2445 Monroe St. the museum is open Wednesdays, Thursdays and Sundays from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., and 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays for the public to view Wedel’s work for free. The opening reception on Nov. 5 will also host *Points of Curiosity: A Conversation with Matt Wedel and Diane Wright* from 2 to 4 p.m.

“Diane Wright and I will be giving a kind of artist, curator talk where we’re going to explore some of these trajectories and how my work shifted and some of the root ideas around practice and making that are behind the exhibition,” Wedel said.

Wright says that the exhibition will host 145 works from the last 15 years that Wedel has spent mastering his craft.

“Matt is somebody that you would definitely describe as a maker, as somebody who has finely tuned his skills and his craft and because he is such a master of his material he can do things with the material that would be difficult to do otherwise,” Wright said.

This exhibit is a new scene for Wedel, being his first ever solo exhibition at an institution of this size. To him, the opportunity to showcase this collection is an incredible honor.

“It’s been such a breath of fresh air to work with individuals who are just interested in advocating for the arts and the artist,” Wedel said. “They just have treated me with such generosity in terms of the time they spent with me and my home and my studio, with my family, over the past I think four years or so.”

According to Wright, the choice was obvious with Wedel. Offering the lesser-known artist a spot in the museum was a risky venture, but one that the team at the Toledo Museum of Art was happy to make.

“It feels terrific to be an institution that’s willing to take that kind of risk,” Wright said. “We exist as an institution because of what artists do, because people have made work, because artists have created artwork. So to be able to support them in this way is really critical to my work as a curator.”

Tied to the museum's roots in the studio glass movement, ceramic is a "close cousin" to glass, which is what inspired Wright to put on the exhibition.

"There are similarities in terms of material, there are similarities in terms of working with heat to finish and finalize your work, and then there are also similarities in terms of the history," Wright said. "For example the studio glass movement in Toledo, the people who were coming into glass, the kind of pioneers of the studio glass movement, were coming out of ceramics."

The museum's Director and CEO, Adam Levine, spoke in a press release about the exhibit, noting that this exhibit also ties into the museum's commitment to broadening the narrative of art history through exploring the use of long-established mediums like ceramics in an entirely new way.

"Our commitment to broadening the narrative of art history extends to the type of work represented in our galleries," Levine said in a press release. "*Matt Wedel: Phenomenal Debris* is a purposeful engagement with contemporary craft, an area of artmaking as rooted in heritage as it is in the exploration of traditional mediums such as ceramic and glass."

Launching off of recognizable plant forms, Wedel mixes the qualities of clay with his own imaginative designs. Leaning heavily towards the abstract, he says his work also serves as commentary on humanity.

"It's a celebration of an exploration and the idea of just pushing oneself and trusting oneself as we kind of try so desperately to understand what it means to be human," Wedel said.

Playing with his love of the natural world and mixing his abstracted ideas, Wedel's display is truly an exhibition of the phenomenal possibilities of clay art.

"He is interested in kind of the phenomenon of clay and really pushing the material to these kind of incredible limits, whether it's the scale that he is reaching for or just the creativity of it," Wright said. "He's really interested in taking one idea and through repetition exploring that idea to its fullest."

As a master of his craft, Wedel offers visitors a once in a life-time opportunity to explore the world of ceramics through massive, intricate

sculptures, many of which required an unimaginable level of focus, skill and patience. According to Wright, the exhibit has a life of its own.

“This exhibit has a tremendous energy about it and life; it’s like his work has this life force to it,” Wright said. “It comes out of a place of intense creativity, it comes out of a place of introspection and Matt’s interest in our human condition and kind of exploring that. It comes out of a place of love, his incredible love for the natural world and respect for the natural world.”

Wright encourages everyone to come visit Wedel’s exhibition. She says that she expects attendees to be enraptured by the impressive display of ceramic masterworks.

“I think that it is just something that people are going to be enveloped by; by the energy, by the color, by the range in scale,” Wright said. “I mean ‘phenomenal’ is just this word that kind of rings over and over again in terms of seeing where he’s taking this material, places that artists haven’t gone before.”

For more information about the upcoming exhibit, visit toledomuseum.org/.

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