

Kayne Griffin Corcoran

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John Mason: Sculpture 1958-1964 at Kayne Griffin Corcoran



John Mason is recognized as one of the pioneers of modern ceramic sculpture, a West Coast phenomenon with worldwide ramifications. Mason's innovative works from the later 1950s and '60s pop up—usually singly, given their normally large scale—in museum collections around the country; but too rarely are they seen in any kind of aggregate. This grouping of “vintage” pieces was curated not simply to reassert the then-revolutionary strategy of fashioning abstract sculpture out of clay, but to expose Mason's own artistic character—to lift him, for once, out of the arc of history and to focus in on the artist's own aesthetics.

The result was a survey that revealed a structural dynamic forged from two opposing formal impulses. The “feel” of the work, as expected, is gestural, closely related to abstract expressionism; the textures are kneaded and sensuous and Mason has exploited the material for its weight and density. But, by contrast, his compositions are geometric, perhaps even quasi-architectural, whether free-standing or hung on the wall. The wall-mounted multipartite works, in fact, suggest doors and windows as much as walls, and hark back to the use of tiles and oddly fashioned bricks in local Craftsman houses and the experiments of Frank Lloyd Wright. The free-standing pieces feature (if sometimes by implication) a vertical shaft as a formal armature, on which Mason has appended variously shaped extensions. By 1963 such extensions, now simplified, determine a cross motif.



Mason has never allowed that this crucifix-like format refers to anything religious or even art-historical. Rather, these stark formations assert a non-objective reasoning; their power derives entirely from shape (enhanced by surface incident), heft and presence. In their rough-hewn forthrightness and their insistence on their own physicality, they anticipated the obdurate, anti-relational formal language of minimalism. In this regard, they had advanced further from their abstract expressionist roots than had any other contemporaneous clay sculpture. These were truly radical ceramics.

That aura of radicalism maintains. These pieces still catch us by surprise with their gaunt, stripped-down thingness. Even those that retain some suggestion of the vessel reject any sense of function. From the start, Mason wanted to work with clay as a substance, not just a medium, and to find shapes in it as a sculptor would, rather than be limited by tradition to the production of intimate utilitarian objects. Even more than his friend Peter Voulkos, Mason set the standard early on for "anti-pottery." That standard still comes through powerfully today, and still feels like a breakthrough.

— Peter Frank