

The Light of Lustre

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Foreword

Inspiration can come in many forms.

For many years, I kept a tray of 'Angel Cards' on my desk, face down, in a pile. Their offering of a one-word motivational theme would entice and distract my boys as I sent them out the door to school. The card 'Adventure' was far more desirable than 'Responsibility'; 'Play' preferable to 'Obedience', and the naked angel of 'Freedom' much better than the po-faced angel of 'Purpose'.

As far as I know, Johannes Nagel does not start his day with an angel card. But, if he did, I think he would be open to any draw, as his daily work calls for such a broad spectrum of inspiration. With his arms shoulder deep in a box of sand, working instinctively and carving out another unseeable negative space, the angels of 'Openness' and 'Spontaneity' would be possible candidates, although his careful 'Transformation' of material would also suggest 'Discipline', 'Clarity' and 'Tenderness'. He certainly would keep all those angels on their toes.

On a visit to his home and atelier in Halle, Germany, I found his studio packed with drawings, sketches and models; evidence of 'Curiosity', 'Thoughtfulness' and a willingness to actively seek out and create hurdles that force him to constantly adjust his techniques and redefine his relationship with his creative practice. He never ceases to surprise.

For me, Johannes is an artist to the core; creative and critical but also warm and generous. I am excited and proud to work with him and grateful to those inspirational angels who led me to his door.

Monique Deul, Founder & Director,
Taste Contemporary





Johannes Nagel: Triadic Ballet

Modern ceramics has a holy trinity: three traditions that have dominated the discipline for over a century. The first is Japanese ceramics, particularly wares associated with the tea ceremony, which possess a sort of perfect imperfection, easy to appreciate but difficult to master. Second, the rationalism of the Bauhaus, oriented toward clarity, geometry, and directness of form. And finally, Abstract Expressionism, with its individualism, gesture, and dramatic intensity.

Imagine these three streams coursing into the just-arriving present, then joining into a single mighty flow, and you will begin to understand the work of Johannes Nagel. He has been influenced by them all, via a curious geographical and professional itinerary. Though born in Jena, he received his initial training in Quebec, under the Japanese potter Kinya Ishikawa. It was a fortunate first connection, for his teacher gently steered him away from narrow perfectionism. ('I'm the one who criticizes your work,' he remembers Ishikawa saying. 'You should just be enthusiastic.') At this early stage, Nagel was sufficiently entranced by Japanese aesthetics that he even considered apprenticing with Warren McKenzie, the leading exponent of Japanese-derived aesthetics in America.

Glenn Adamson

Instead, he ended up returning to Germany, studying at the University of Art and Design in Halle, where he has been based since.

It was at this point that Nagel began learning about Bauhaus precedent – the crisply delineated forms of Otto Lindig and Marguerite Wildenhain, often conceived with an eye toward serial production. In the postwar era, this formalist strand had been carried forward by figures like Beate Kuhn in West Germany, while in the East (where Halle is located), there was a pronounced tendency toward figuration, under the leadership of Gertraud Möhwald. (Most of the older ceramists that Nagel encountered in Halle were students of Möhwald.) At a time when explicitly political art was *verboten*, ceramics could fly under the radar of official Communist censorship, expressing a haunting existentialism with tacitly political implication.

To this already dynamic mix of influences, Nagel soon added the ideas of the California clay revolution of the 1950s and '60s, as exemplified by Peter Voulkos and Jun Kaneko. Inclined even in his early career toward loose and experimental work, Nagel gravitated to this precedent, taking on its muscular abstraction and improvisatory composition.

He came to understand how 'energy could be stored in the clay,' and how familiar forms – handles, rims, spouts – could be transformed through sculptural intelligence.

Speaking of transformation – it is one thing to be exposed to multiple precedents; another to try to merge them; a third still to build something new, making one's influences more than the sum of their parts. This has been Nagel's achievement, as this exhibition at Taste Contemporary makes abundantly evident. His crucial breakthrough came when he began experimenting with sand-casting. Well known to metalsmiths, this technique is not commonly used in ceramics (who typically use plaster molds). Nagel had briefly flirted with the process more than a decade ago, but it was only relatively recently that he began a deeper exploration of its possibilities. At a certain level, his technique is simple: he digs a hole in a box of sand, fills it with liquid slip, and then, after allowing some drying time, allows the extra slip to run out of the bottom. Enough clay clings to the interior of the mold that he is left with a thin-walled object, which traces the interior volume of the shape he has excavated.

Typically, Nagel uses this unorthodox means to fashion volumes within the familiar typology of the vase.

But as he works, he follows his instincts, departing from predictable pot-shapes that could be envisioned in the mind. Unlike wheel-throwing, the more traditional means of rapidly forming clay, his works of course need not be symmetrical. He has been able to find forms that are novel, lopsided, strange. Seamless and complete, they have the quality of things born, not made.

Nagel chose the fitting name *Stegreif* – 'improvisation' – for one series of these sand-cast pieces, underlining the importance of instinct in their creation. Yet he acknowledges that 'the hands learn very quickly, and the innocence is soon gone.' So he has pushed himself to expand his vocabulary. He has, for example, placed flat plaster bats at the end of some of his tunnels, so that the amorphous shape is intersected by a rigid plane. And – in a particularly generative move – he has dug interconnected channels into the sand, like a network of animal burrows. Once cast into positive, the hollow spaces become complex openwork compositions.

One of these latter sculptures, *Tangled Construction/White*, calls to mind a group of dancers, hands joined. The same work exemplifies the subtlety of Nagel's surfaces, which are extensively worked after the casting is complete.



While essentially monochrome, *Tangled Construction/White* features a range of mark-making and textural variation: attenuated strokes of yellow and red tracing the object's contours; drifts of cobalt blue glaze; and a slim gray pedestal, on which the work rests.

Other works included in the present exhibition feature a diversity of different surface effects. Nagel often scores the whole exterior of a pot in whorled patterns, somewhat like finger prints; glazing brings the topology into visual relief. A piece called *Coloured Construction* is painted in a patchwork of hazy polychrome; it would seem to answer in the affirmative a question that Nagel has asked himself: 'can a sculpture be blurry?' And in the series *Lust for Lustre*, he combines celadon – the blue-green glaze hallowed in the Chinese tradition – with metallic lustre glazes, more readily associated with European Art Nouveau. It's a good example of the way that Nagel remixes ceramic history, acknowledging its vastness while also making it his own. As he digs deeper, both literally and figuratively, he is finding new ways to explore his medium's history: an archaeological aesthetic, in which the hole is itself the key finding.

This observation takes us back where we began, to Nagel's handling of his primary influences. Looking at his assembled work, you will catch sight of the wonky asymmetries seen in the Japanese tradition;

the strong silhouettes of the Bauhaus; the painterly vigor of Voukos and Kaneko. But these signals only come through fitfully, like radio transmissions tuned in during a storm, emerging into legibility, then receding again into an overall impression of energetic flux. The metaphor of a dance again seems appropriate, here: a triadic ballet, to borrow the title of a famous Bauhaus collaboration, in which previously antithetical tendencies make discordant yet beautiful music together.

Nagel's work is anything but still, then. Even so, it can profitably be viewed in relation to the genre of still life, which is always just around the corner where ceramics are concerned. Think, when looking at his groupings of objects, of the paintings of Giorgio Morandi; or, when examining his atypically aggressive *Armoured Vase*, of early Cubism. Like all the most accomplished contemporary artists working in clay – Andrew Lord, Rebecca Warren, and Arlene Shechet come to mind – Nagel makes objects that assert themselves in space, yet are also pictorial, sitting at the junction between fact and fiction. At this upper echelon of achievement, the conventional lines between disciplines fall away, established idioms yielding to the force of creation itself. 'If I had to place myself,' Nagel says, 'I would be somewhere in between.'



Gold Planes, 2020
Porcelain
61H x 31W x 32D cm

Lust for Lustre #3, 2020
Porcelain and Pewter
50H x 34W x 35D cm



Stegreif #119/Flow, 2020
Porcelain
52H x 32W x 32D cm



Coloured Construction, 2018

Porcelain

59H x 40W x 45D cm





Stegreif #115/Lustre, 2020
Porcelain
36H x 31W x 30D cm



Stegreif #116, 2020
Porcelain and Pewter
50H x 31W x 31D cm



Stegreif #117, 2020
Porcelain
60H x 29W x 27D cm



Armoured Vase #2, 2020
Porcelain
37H x 50W x 35D cm

Stegreif #118/Blue Circles, 2020
Porcelain
63H x 37W x 37D cm



Stegreif #120/BlueBlue, 2020

Porcelain

40H x 26W x 26D cm



Stegreif #114, 2020

Porcelain
48H x 38W x 35D cm

Cluster/Still Life, 2020

Porcelain and Pewter
67H x 51W x 30D cm



Tangled Construction/White, 2020
Porcelain and Pewter
66H x 60W x 38D cm





'Any object that we design and produce is makeshift, is improvised, is inappropriate and provisional.' David Pye

The subject of Johannes Nagel's work is, specifically, the improvised and provisional. The objects are finished in that the porcelain is painted (glazed) and fired. Most objects are somehow vessels, pots. What else are they? The attempt to confuse the connotations that technology and material provoke. At times constructive composing, at times willful destruction, sometimes vases, sometimes fragments or alienated object.

Using work techniques such as burrowing into sand to form negative figurations for casting, Johannes Nagel successfully performs his work directly and manually, lending the process of searching a tangible presence. The joints and fissures, the blots of colour and unfinished painting appear provisional as they point from the finished object back to the process. It is not the perfection of the ultimate expression that is intended, but to verbalize a concept of the evolution of things.

Johannes Nagel

Germany b.1979

Education

- 2012–17 Assistant Professor, University of Art and Design, Burg Giebichenstein, Halle, Germany
- 2011 Stipend of the Art Foundation, Saxony-Anhalt, Germany
- 2009 Postgraduate stipend, University of Art and Design, Burg Giebichenstein, Halle, Germany
Scottish Arts Council Residency, Cove Park, Scotland
- 2008 Diploma of fine art/ceramics, University of Art and Design, Burg Giebichenstein, Halle, Germany
- 2007 Student exchange, Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, USA
- 2005–06 Artist-in-Residence, Shigaraki Ceramics Cultural Park, Shigaraki, Japan
- 2002–08 Fine Art Ceramics, University of Art and Design, Burg Giebichenstein, Halle, Germany
- 2001 Apprentice potter, Kinya Ishikawa in Val-David, PQ, Canada

Selected Public collections

- Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK
- Musée Ariana, Geneva, Switzerland
- Keramikmuseum Westerwald, Höhr-Grenzhausen, Germany
- Keramion, Frechen, Germany
- Keramiekmuseum Princessehof, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands
- Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kirkland, Kendal, UK
- Kunstmuseum Kloster unser lieben Frauen, Magdeburg, Germany
- Grassimuseum, Leipzig, Germany

Selected Exhibitions | Solo

- 2021 *The Light of Lustre*, Taste Contemporary, Geneva, Switzerland
- 2020 *No Fake*, Brutto Gusto, Berlin, Germany
- Stegreif*, Keramikmuseum Westerwald, Höhr Grenzhausen, Germany
- True Blue*, Cordonhaus Cham, Germany
- 2019 *Blumenrot*, Jason Jaques Gallery, New York, USA
Johannes Nagel, Puls Gallery, Brussels, Belgium

- 2018 *Johannes Nagel – Trial & Error*, Brutto Gusto, Berlin, Germany
Vessels, perhaps 2010 – 2017, Gallery Fumi London, UK
- 2017 *Lacy Traces*, Kunstforum Solothurn, Switzerland
- 2016 *I hardly ever thought of flowers*, Brutto Gusto, Berlin, Germany
- 2015 Johannes Nagel, Keramion, Frechen, Germany
Vessels, perhaps, New Arts Centre, Roche Court, UK
I hardly ever thought of flowers, Gallery Fumi, London, UK
- 2014 *Kaleidoskop*, Brutto Gusto, Berlin, Germany
Fokus Junge Kunst, Kunstmuseum Kloster Unser Lieben Frauen, Magdeburg, Germany
Kaleidoskop, Kunstforum Solothurn, Solothurn, Switzerland
- 2013 *Space Between*, Galerie Idelmann, Gelsenkirchen, Germany
- 2012 *Trouble in Mind*, Galerie der Kunststiftung des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt, Halle, Germany
- 2011 *Improvisorium*, Kunstforum Solothurn, Switzerland

Selected Exhibitions | Group

- 2020 Artgenève [represented by Taste Contemporary], Geneva, Switzerland
Kleur eyck, Design Museum Gent, Gent, Belgium
Alabaster, Galerie Zink, Waldkirchen, Germany
Ode to Clay, Jason Jacques Gallery, New York, USA
- 2019 *GefäßErweiterung*, Galerie Metzger, Johannesburg, South Africa
Thinking with my hands, Galerie Zink, Waldkirchen, Germany
Morfologia delle Meraviglie, Officine Saffi, Puglia, Italy
Come on baby, light my fire, Musée Ariana, Geneva, Switzerland
- 2018 *Further Thoughts on Earthy Materials*, Kunsthaus Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany
Ceramics now: the Faenza prize is 60 years old, The International Museum of Ceramics Faenza, Italy
Reconsidering Canon, Designmuseum London, UK
- 2017 Selected Works – Recent Acquisitions at the Musée Ariana, Contemporary Gallery, Geneva, Switzerland
Amsterdam Art Fair, Brutto Gusto Berlin, Germany

- 2017 Artgenève [represented by Taste Contemporary], Geneva, Switzerland
- 2016 *Modern Classics Fokus Gefäß/ Focus Vessel*, Keramikmuseum Westerwald, Germany
Sphären, Sammlung Jörg Johnen, Berlin, Germany
 Artmonte-carlo [represented by Taste Contemporary], Monte Carlo, Monaco
- 2015 *Geformt und gebaut*, Galerie Handwerk, München, Germany
- 2014 Design Show, [with Daniel Naudé and Joseph Walsh] New Arts Centre, Roche Court, UK
- 2013 *Raw/tech*, Valcucine/Spotti, Milano, Italy
German Contemporary Arts & Crafts, Cheongju International Craft Biennale 2013, Korea
Silver – 25 years, 25 artists, 25 artworks, Brutto Gusto, Berlin
- 2012 *Kunstpreis »junger westen 2011«*, Plastik, Skulptur, Installation, Recklinghausen, Germany
In Form Gegossen, Galerie Handwerk, München, Germany
Transformation, Galerie für Angewandte Kunst des BKV, München, Germany
 Craft & Scenography, Depot Basel, Switzerland
- 2011 *Dauerbrenner II – Freispiel*, geh8, Dresden, Germany
Studio Ware, Gallery Fumi London, UK
Materials Revisited 10, Triennale für Form und Inhalte, Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany
 Inhalte 2011, Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany
- 2010 *die IDEE, das DING, das BILD, die REDE*, Forum Gestaltung, Magdeburg, Germany
Causing Chaos, Fife Contemporary Art & Craft, St Andrews Museum, Scotland
Das Voynich-Manuskript – eine Künstlersicht, Grauer Hof, Aschersleben
- 2009 Frechener Keramikpreis, Keramion, Frechen, Germany
The vessel – The Object, Kunstforum Solthurn, Switzerland
 Ausstellung zum Kunstpreis der Stiftung der Sparkasse Halle, Kunstforum, Halle, Germany.

Selected Awards

- 2019 Westerwaldprize, Keramikmuseum Westerwald
- 2016 Naspa Ceramics Award
Focus: vessel, Keramikmuseum Westerwald
- 2009 Frechen Ceramic Art Award



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