

Christopher Staley's

TOUCHING TIME

by L Autumn Gnadinger

Jane Hartsook Gallery's September 2019 exhibition "Touching Time" was a homecoming for featured artist Christopher Staley—his first solo show in 10 years, and 30 years since his introduction to Greenwich House Pottery. With this collection of objects largely completed during a May 2019 residency at the Archie Bray Foundation, Staley suspends viewers somewhere between the finished work and the conceptual and physical steps that it took to get there.

Touching Time moves an otherwise familiar set of studio practices (in this case throwing, drawing, painting, and so on) into a distinct kind of theater-archive experience.

A Unified Narrative

The construction method of the ceramic work in Touching Time is legible and generally consistent throughout, collaging clean,





1 Galley view of "Touching Time" at Greenwich House Pottery's Jane Hartsook Gallery. 2 *Photo Wreckage*, 29 in. (74 cm) in height, photograph on paper, 2017. 3 *Bezael Covered Jar*, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, black stoneware, 2019.

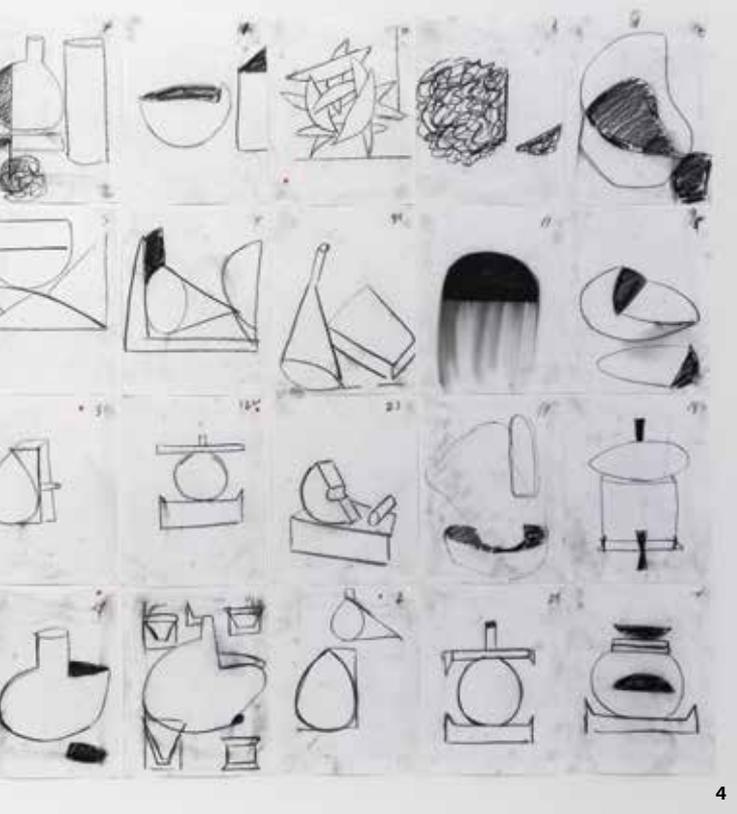
wheel-thrown forms (vases, spheres, and cylinders) and a variety of handbuilt features that range from angular suggestions of architecture to erratic, visceral gestures. This work can be divided into two groups: a set of white glazed objects and a grouping of black colored porcelain pieces. These motifs of high contrast are repeated throughout *Touching Time* and might be read as a structure for before and after, but could just as well be a visual foil to suggest a unified narrative across all of the objects in the room. On the subject of physically cutting into his pieces and the creation of such optical contrasts, Staley offers, "for me, this gesture can simultaneously suggest both connection and separation or something being built or dissembled . . . how opposite effects can occur at the same time."

The darker works, like *Ball and Reclaim* (2019), have dynamic surfaces that include rips, scraps, and markings from the bottom of a shoe. The texture moves from matte to occasional regions of gloss, but mainly the surface reads as just dirty, and overall more like a mixture of steel and asphalt than fired clay. This reference is reinforced by the view of the road out the front window of the gallery and evokes that moment where a street meets a storm drain. There is other evidence in the exhibition that points to this connection to worn architecture: a black-and-white photo print of a

building mid-demolition, and a dented piece of painted white steel hanging on the wall. The function of these references seems to be more about tone than content, as they activate an understanding of other recognizable things (buildings, in this case) being caught between easily defined states.

Finding a Connection

On the left-hand wall, as one enters the gallery, a keystone set of works, *Untitled* (2019), is hung in a tight 4×10 grid. One sees this collection after the primary ceramics they relate to, and they read strongly as maquettes or drafts for the finished ceramics in the center of the room. This performance element accomplishes several things, among them is its invitation for the viewer to flatten and move around the sculptures. In this way, each piece becomes its own series, with many plausible compositions as viewers naturally try to connect a drawing with a corresponding piece of ceramic. By doing this, however, it becomes clear that whether any of the sketches represent a real or accurately finished work is irrelevant. Instead, *Untitled* acts as relaxed drawings in and of themselves, and as an imaginative foil for the rest of the exhibition, which might not otherwise prompt a sense of sequence or temporality.



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4 *Untitled*, 7 ft. (2 m) in length, paper and charcoal, 2019. 5 *Collage Still Life*, to 19 in. (48 cm) in height, glazed stoneware, 2019. 6 Left: *Ball and Reclaim*, 29 in. (74 cm) in height, black stoneware, 2019. Right: *Torn Time*, 16 in. (41 cm) in height, black stoneware, 2019.



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The interpretive framework of the exhibition is refreshingly ambiguous. While there are obvious references to—and celebrations of—pottery forms, classic glazes, and traditional firing techniques, the script does not seem to center on any recognizable craft ceramic. Despite evidence of long-established skills and precision, the artwork labels thankfully avoid technical information and invite a quizzical attitude toward relatively humble objects. *Touching Time* delivers on its name, as those vocabularies are quickly abandoned in Staley's work in lieu of a more complicated and interrelated narrative between objects, space, and time.

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