

Los Angeles Times

Ollman, Leah. "Review: Meghan Smythe's Carnal Clay at Mark Moore," *Los Angeles Times*, January 17, 2015

"Coupling" is the eye of the storm that is Meghan Smythe's remarkable first show, at Mark Moore. The two slightly oversized right hands, sculpted in clay and sheathed in milky white glaze, rest on a pedestal, their gently cupped palms facing up. The thumb of one hand makes the barest contact with one of the fingers of the other. This is coupling of a spiritual as much as a physical sort.



Another kind of convergence happens here too. These hands, with their poignantly irregular texture, are quite overtly works of the hand, the clay pressed and pinched into shape by fingers replicating themselves. The means of creation merges with the image created; the act of making couples with the made.

The tenderness and quietness of "Coupling" are nourishing in themselves, but also a reprieve from the demanding intensity of the surrounding work. "Coupling" whispers; the other pieces grunt and pant.

Smythe, from Kingston, Ontario, and now living in Long Beach after a two-year residency at CSULB, harnesses to its fullest clay's metaphoric power to invoke the very stuff of life.

The raw force of being and becoming, making as well as unmaking courses through these sculptures, which also incorporate glass, resin, epoxy and plasticine. Their energy oscillates wildly between desperate and spent.

"Young Unbecoming" is the most complex of the group, a breathless orgy of bodies grasping, bending, licking, twisting. There are three, or more precisely 3 1/2, female figures in the mix, plus an assortment of stray phalli and a plethora of clutching hands.

Limbs are entwined, tongues extended. Clay is rarely, if ever, this carnal. Some of the skin is mannequin-smooth but veined with cracks. Some seeps a pink foam or a pale fecal flood. Erotic pleasure plays a part here, but is only one of many competing charges.

Throughout this, and Smythe's other works, there is a violent fragmentation that zigzags between sexual fantasy and deathly dismemberment. With its human shipwreck of compromised flesh, "Young Unbecoming" brings to mind Gericault's "Raft of the Medusa," and exudes comparable, palpable urgency.

Smythe is a sculptor of struggle. Primal forces contend in the work, as do various aesthetic and formal dispositions. The sobriety of the relic is countered by the whimsy of glass and resin follies. Figures pallid and cadaverous lie upon a surface oozing with puddles in the happy hues of Easter eggs.

The friction between generation and decay, elegance and entropy, is what makes Smythe's work so alive and also so tough to digest. It doesn't go down easy, or at all. Stubborn, sensual, visceral -- it sticks.

