



Tony Marsh: Perforated Vessel, with Attachments, 2022. Earthenware, glaze H: 12; Diam: 20 in (Collection of Judi Roaman and Carla Chammas)

## TONY MARSH DOES CERAMICS HIS WAY AT LONG BEACH MUSEUM OF ART

SHANA NYS DAMBROT

Ceramicist Tony Marsh does everything wrong. He mixes up weird clay formulas, he fires chunks of pure glaze, he layers assorted materials in topsy-turvy orders, he pokes tons of tiny holes in vessels, he invites the forces of nature and weather to intervene. He doesn't take notes on his procedures, meticulously record formulas — or seek to recreate or even really control at all — outcomes in the kiln like most of his colleagues.

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In these and myriad other ways, Marsh has long treated the practice of ceramic sculpture as an opportunity for endless experimentation. The results range from globby, gloopy, painterly, geological, volcanic, lunar, fractal, kaleidoscopically pigmented, craquelure-enriched topographies, to ivory-hued, perforated bulbs that cast lace-like shadows, to evocations of wood, bone, rock, rust, and metal, and almost organic seed-pods that flirt with nature's forms as well as its forces. It's a fantastical, enchanting, confounding array — and the Long Beach Museum of Art is currently presenting a selection spanning 50 years of it.



*Brilliant Earth: The Ceramic Sculpture of Tony Marsh. Long Beach Museum of Art.*  
(Photo: Jeff McLane)

*Brilliant Earth: The Ceramic Sculpture of Tony Marsh* presents more than 50 works covering several benchmark series, examining Marsh's artistic evolution from 1972 to the present — many that have never been shown publicly. The selected works touch on early series titled *Water, Marriage, Fertility, and Creation Vessels* in which as a younger artist Marsh clearly imprinted impactful narrative inflections from his own life — and his years of study in Japan in the workshop of master ceramicist Tatsuzo Shimaoka, the influence of which on his style, psyche, and relationship to materials cannot be overstated. A great deal of real estate is dedicated to his celebrated *Perforated Vessels*; as well as to his most recent and ongoing series — *Spill and Catch, New Moon Jars, Crucibles, and Cauldrons* — all of which are exactly what they sound like.



*Brilliant Earth: The Ceramic Sculpture of Tony Marsh. Long Beach  
Museum of Art. (Photo: Shana Nys Dambrot)*

The truth is though that none of this risk-taking, improvisational riffing would be possible — would ever succeed — if he weren't in serious command of the materials and process. Like a jazz great who goes off on solos that threaten to fall apart, this unrehearsed brilliance is built on years of careful study. The appearance of chaos is an illusion, if a sincere one, and the exhibition offers more than one example of serious technical flex. The process of perforating the clay thousands of times without compromising structural integrity, the deft application of rusting agents mimicking oxidized metal, the works made of dozens of reconfigurable individual elements, the evocation of natural geology in texture and shape — just because Marsh makes it look easy doesn't mean it is.



*Brilliant Earth: The Ceramic Sculpture of Tony Marsh. Long Beach Museum of Art. (Photo: Shana Nys Dambrot)*

While not at all functional in a pottery sense of containers or utilitarian uses, Marsh considers the work as, “an homage to what the medium has traditionally been called upon to do — preserve, hold, offer, ritualize, commemorate, and beautify.” To contain, if you will, not water or holy relics, but rather moving energy and living spirit, the memory of their making, traces of the artist’s presence, and the scars of the alchemy that conjured them. Each new pot is its whole own inquiry, its own being, infused with the agency of materials and the unpredictability of chance, even the chance of failure. He likes to say he sets things in motion and waits to see what happens. He likes to say, “I wonder what would happen if I...” And in the end, what happened was that he established his place as one of the most acclaimed and respected artists, and one of the most impactful teachers and ceramics impresarios, of his generation.