

The Mastadon in the Room

Written by **Stanton Hunter**



Opposite left:
Untitled Unvessel-ed
(before).

Opposite right:
Untitled Unvessel-ed
(after). Visitors were encouraged to add water to the unfired vessels with an eye dropper. All were eventually eroded except the single vessel which was coated in tar from Craft Contemporary's floor.

... the primordial ooze travels underneath the busy four-lane street... and seeps up through a couple of cracks in the floor of Craft Contemporary's lobby.

Craft Contemporary (formerly Craft and Folk Art Museum) in Los Angeles recently held their first ceramics biennial, *Melting Point*, with the non-traditional work of 22 artists from around the country filling all three floors of the museum during the three and a half-month exhibition. Holly Jerger and Andres Payan of the museum were co-curators.

A well-known fact is that the museum is across the street from the La Brea Tar Pits, naturally occurring asphalt pools that have been seeping up through the ground for tens of thousands of years. The pools are famous for having trapped pre-historic mammals in the viscous ooze, as well as predators who hopped in after, hoping for a free meal.

Being a ceramist is most likely what initially piqued my interest in working with a material that is also geologically produced, or at least geologically related, and mined from the ground. The museum graciously extracted some of the floor tar for me to experiment with (and I believe someone may have said something about a secret night mission to the tar pits for a small cup of it as well. But this is probably rumour).

One of my first experiments was coating small porcelain blocks in tar and firing to cone 6 to see what would happen. It turns out tar is mostly carbon that burns off. However, it did leave orange fuming which I associate with sodium, and a dry graphite-black that collected only at the edges; perhaps traces of manganese or copper.

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A lesser-known fact is that the primordial ooze travels underneath the busy four-lane street (Wilshire Blvd) and seeps up through a couple of cracks in the floor of Craft Contemporary's lobby. This adds a sense of mystery as to exactly what one is standing on, a fact one employee at the museum gleefully described as "terrifying!"

These floor blemishes are something the museum understandably tries to keep at bay, most likely with copious amounts of scraping and Goo Gone. They even put tape over the cracks to temporarily discourage asphalt from visiting the museum, getting on patrons' shoes, and subsequently tracked throughout the building.

I have heard that indigenous cultures throughout history used pine pitch and tar to waterproof clay containers prior to the discovery of firing, or at least prior to being able to fire hot enough for vitrification. This history fuelled one of my installations for the show, an updated version of *Untitled Unvessel-ed* from 2002. This work consists of fired platters with unfired vessels sitting in them, this time with differing shapes and clay bodies, and one of them coated in Craft Contemporary floor tar. Throughout the course of the exhibition they eroded to varying degrees – some pitching to the side like the Titanic going down - from water poured into the platters by museum staff, as well as from water added with gusto by museum-goers via provided eye droppers. The vessel coated in tar did not erode, true to history.

Certain clay bodies look beautiful when left alone to slake. They separate into gorgeous and well-defined layers, almost taking on the effect of a terrarium through the undisturbed water. *Undisturbed* was not the environment at Craft Contemporary. After the Los Angeles *free museums day* – Craft Contemporary alone hosted some 2000 visitors (including children, not known for appreciating slow change) – the eroded vessels looked a bit gross, more like someone had lost their lunch than a beautiful terrarium. But I do enjoy work that changes through interaction; the work isn’t about control.

In some ways this installation also comments on the bias against clay and craft that has been rampant in Los Angeles academia (it’s getting better, so some say), the eroding vessels becoming symbolic of that rejection.

The oozing cracks themselves especially interested me. There are many ways our attempts at structural permanence are foiled by entropy: earthquakes and floods, cement settling, wear and tear, roof rats chewing wires, termites, contemporary architecture springing leaks because of outrageous angles. Flowing asphalt can now be added to the list. I also like that the floor is not the usual topic, nor place, to find art. I decided this natural intrusion had to be pointed out and even celebrated somehow. A mock extraction site is the idea I settled upon (asphalt is derived from petroleum after all).

For this, I mined a previous body of work of scaffolding-like forms made of porcelain because of their visual connection to oil derricks. The forms (from the *Migration Grids* series – see Rebecca McGrew’s article in *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, titled *Stanton Hunter; Butterfly Migration Grids*, vol. 69, 2007) were based on research that discovered Monarch butterflies migrate following invisible sky grids of UV light. Utilizing smaller grids as floor, rather than sky pieces, with attached glass tubes partially filled with tar, the floor became a model-scale oil field. As our climate changes from carbon emissions, so will the Monarch’s future, hence the title, *Monarch Migration Grids 37 (Extinction)*.

The kind of site-specific work that most intrigues me not only relates to the environment in which the work is shown, but also exposes forces within the environment through the changes those forces impart on the work, human or otherwise. I wrote about this more extensively in *Anonymity and a Secret Afterlife* (*Studio Potter* vol. 42, Summer/Fall 2014).

With that in mind, my hope was not only for the grids to remind visitors that the fates of certain woolly mammoths could be theirs, but also to point out that the asphalt is not static. It is a force, a flow that could change the installation over the course of the exhibition. I was hoping there would be enough flow to travel up and out the glass tubes and over the scaffolding, or maybe carry the work along the floor a bit, possibly even knocking the structures over.

No such luck. I always seem to learn new (and obvious) details after the fact. It turns out that during the winter months, tar becomes much more viscous, not having near the rate of flow it has during summer months. This makes sense if you’ve ever seen roofers or road maintenance workers using asphalt – they heat it up to make it workable. I also knew this as I had to heat up the tar in a microwave (don’t try this at home, like I did) to make it fluid enough to paint on the bowl, and to suck up the glass tubes (also don’t try at home, - a big glob seriously almost became a snack, like stuck boba in a straw that suddenly dislodges).

But that’s not the end of the story. During the run of the show, an extremely large oil tanker-type truck pulled up in front of Craft Contemporary, with guys in hazmat suits running a hose two feet in diameter down a manhole on Wilshire to suck out asphalt. This was not the first time. Tar still flows under the street, even in winter, creating a build-up of methane, in turn causing manhole covers to explode off the boulevard.

The narrative thickens. The La Brea Tar Pits are actually just the tip of the iceberg. A huge swath of Hollywood sits on top of a rather vast lake of asphalt. Not so long ago a fire started in a parking garage on Fairfax Ave., about a mile of dense city away from Craft Contemporary. Because of asphalt deposits underneath the structure fuelling the fire, it took a month to put it out. I’ve also heard stories of apartment dwellers in the area complaining of tar leaking through their floors as well.

These stories make my little gesture seem somehow bigger, or maybe even imbue it with a mild sense of urgency. Here’s hoping that Craft Contemporary doesn’t sink into the pits, and remains solvent (in the Goo Gone sense of the word) until the next biennial. ■

About the Author
Stanton Hunter is a mid-career artist and art professor in the Los Angeles area.

All images courtesy of the Author.

Monarch Migration
Grids #37 (Extinction)

