

Nicole Cherubini at Santa Monica Museum of Art

By **Christopher Miles**

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It's been a good season opener for ceramics, with an impressive half-century survey of work by 95-year-old Southern California modernist ceramic artist, designer and innovator [Harrison Macintosh](#) at the [American Museum of Ceramic Art](#) in [Pomona](#) (on view through January 9); a tour de force exhibition by Tony Marsh at Frank Lloyd Gallery (regrettably already closed) of vessels containing objects, all perforated to the point that the forms manage a delicate balance between presence, ethereality and structural integrity; a just closed, compelling exhibition, wryly titled "The Curse of Ceramics" and including work by [David Korty](#), [Jonathan Pylypchuk](#), [Caroline Thomas](#) & Torbjorn Vejvi at China Art Objects; a just-opened show of playful, nimble and precise thrown and altered ceramic forms by [Wouter Dam](#), also at [Frank Lloyd](#); [Bari Ziperstein](#)'s current show of slip-cast-ceramic-and-furniture combines at See Line Gallery (at the [Pacific Design Center](#)); and an exhibition at [Shoshana Wayne](#) (closing this weekend) of work by [Kathy Butterly](#), who blends meticulous crafting with an embrace of the physicality of clay and the tradition of vessel as bodily metaphor to extend the custom of the decorative ceramic objet d'art into the terrain of the abject.



In her first West Coast museum exhibition, in the project room at the [Santa Monica Museum of Art](#), [Nicole Cherubini](#) has installed a group of works that variously resonate with the works of all these artists, as well as the broad history of ceramic art. Cherubini's practice is unmistakably rooted in ceramic craft, and in tradition, with specific references, at times, to ancient works. But her works, which incorporate ceramic objects — variously hand-formed, cast or thrown — wood constructions, photographs, drawings and other materials and elements, would fit no better in the ceramics-specific type of venues in which ceramic artists often find their only exhibition opportunities, than they would exhibited and contextualized among art by [Marcel Duchamp](#), [Robert Rauschenberg](#), [Robert](#)

Morris, Eva Hesse or, more recently, Rachael Whiteread, Ai Wei Wei or Michael Asher.

Such is because Cherubini's work — which concerns itself as well with how objects have been displayed, have both navigated and stumbled along paths through history, have been imprinted by and have imprinted themselves upon other objects and images, and have emerged out of functional need and ritual impulse and then folded back into culture — makes sense as both exhibits and entries in the discourses of the found object, postminimalist and conceptualist practice, the semiotic, the abject, and contextual critique. She is also part of a fully emerged generation of artists who invest themselves in more traditional crafting practices, but are informed by the critical dialogues among which they were reared. Consider, for instance, a work by Cherubini that joins a crude replica of a 6th-century-B.C. Greek storage vessel from the Metropolitan Museum in New York with a framed reproduction of an 18th-century Thomas Hosmer Shepard watercolor depicting a vase infamously smashed in the British Museum by an Irish vandal. Such might sound like apologetics — a trap into which crafts-engaged artists fall in attempts to avoid ghettoization via a kind of postmodern cultural assimilation — but Cherubini is wiser than this, aware of her roots and how varied they are, and equally aware of the branches she can take and the potential of going out on a limb.

Santa Monica Museum of Art, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave. G1, Santa Monica; Tues.-Sat., 11 a.m.-6 p.m., through December 5. (310) 586-6488, smmaa.org.