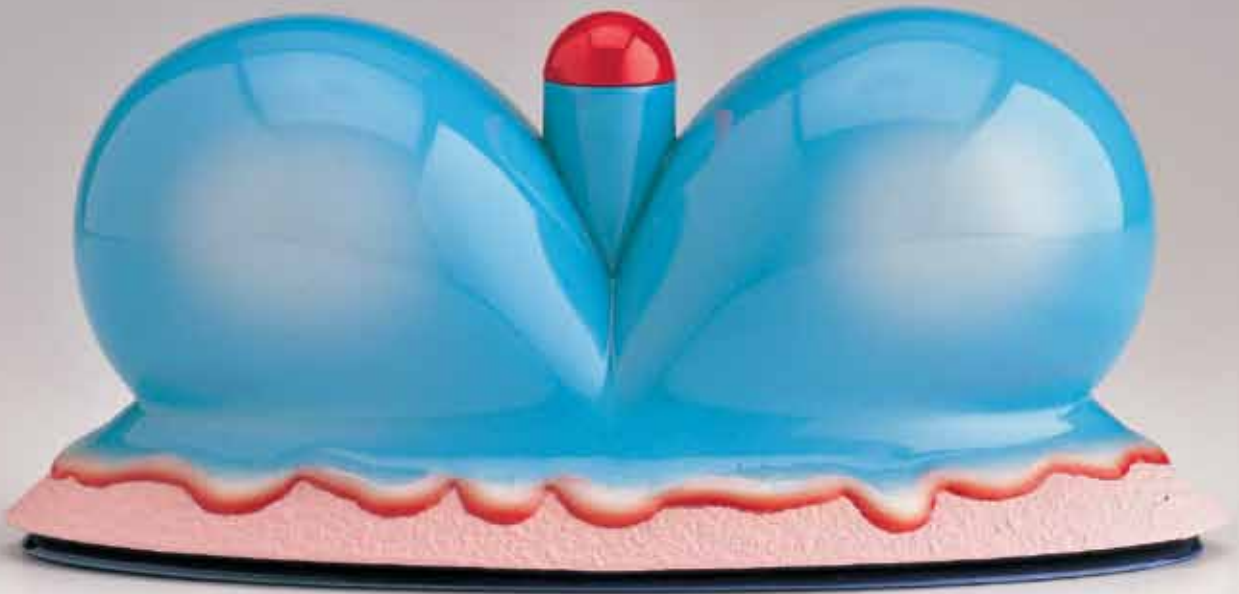


Ron Nagle

Peripheral Cognition

A Review by Sara Morris



THE CUP, MUSIC, HOT RODS, POP CULTURE, MELANCHOLY, and humour are all inherent themes that we have come to associate with Ron Nagle's small-scale sculpture. Recently, Nagle's work is informed by another type of art – graffiti. Bubble-letter forms and spray-can chromatics have been appropriated from the streets of San Francisco, swallowed up and spat out by this ceramics veteran. But stirring up concepts and borrowing are not new for Nagle, "I have many interests, both inside and outside of art, so let's combine this shit."

Although Nagle has been mentioned in numerous articles and books, and has shown in galleries and museum group exhibitions since the 1960s, it was not until 2012/2013 that the bestowal of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a showing at the Venice Biennale prompted his first major solo exhibition, *Ron*

Nagle: Peripheral Cognition. Curated by Ariel Plotek, *Peripheral Cognition* opened at the San Diego Museum of Art in November 2014.

Appropriately, this show was not only a celebration of Nagle's recent *Fiti* pieces, but also an exhibition of a mesmerising collection of past work, such as *Bad Clown* and *Lobster Boy*. Consisting of 19 sculptures and 11 drawings, experiencing the show was like wandering through an abridged version of his career, but uninhibited by chronology or annoying museum placards, a trip down a rabbit hole – simply wondrous.

Displayed high, almost at eye level, each sculpture was spotlighted like an actor on stage. Behind glass, these sculptures, or 'three-dimensional paintings', were seen from a calculated vantage point, which for the most part is straight on. *Balky*



Facing page: *The Bad Clown.*

Top left: *3D Fiti.*

Left: *Untitled Drawing.*

Above: *Carbomb.*

Caucas, a mixed-media hybrid from the *Fiti Series*, is comfortably balanced; however, the mate-red and anxious yellow hues collide and blister. The rock-like base serves as ‘the wall’ and the red figure ‘the graffiti’. A two-dimensional concept made three-dimensional, but viewed like a painting.

As a ceramics student in the Bay Area, my studio classes usually begin with a slide show that always includes close-ups of Nagle’s premeditated tri-coloured drips or samples of his mash-ups. Upon entering the gallery, I quickly realised that in Nagle’s recent works he continues to explore his tried-and-true aesthetic: opposing textures and forms, an obsession of his that does not disappoint. A light-blue cube, with the grain of plastered walls from the 1940s, serves as a base for the sculpture *3D Fiti* and a stage for the star, whom the people came to see – a sculpted, mate-red bubble form. Red, as if it came right from a spray can, the three-dimensional gestural form slumps on the blue platform – a reincarnation from the streets of San Francisco.

Gliding past *The Third Person*, relying on my own peripheral cognition, a luminous pink orb titled *Carbomb* stole my gaze. From Nagle’s *Snowball Series*, this mixed-media piece features a creepy, opaque glossy drip and omnipresent golden fin at the top. The barely translucent plastic ball provides an excellent surface for the pearlescent pink automotive





paint. The primitive handbuilt form's soft appearance looks weightless. Unlike Nagle's purely ceramic sculpture, where he tends to sharply sculpt geometric shapes with defined or smoothed edges, in many of his mixed-media sculptures he adopts a looser touch. This gestural form was juxtaposed against classic Naglean geometries and odd colour pairings that unpretentiously elicited one's attention.

Like an ambassador from San Francisco, Nagle successfully transplanted a concoction of good vibes and attitude to San Diego with *Peripheral Cognition*. There is no doubt that Nagle's postmodern works stood out amid the collections at SDMA. Not only is Nagle self-aware of the fact that the work functions as art, but the use of pastiche and the play on high and low art forms, history and pop culture are meant to be humorous – are made not to be taken seriously. All joking aside, however, the trained eye will contemplate the laboured glaze and firing process, since these sculptures are not freely composed, but master plans executed with patience and skill. The fact that Nagle chooses to allude to mid-century aesthetics, bygone television, eroticism and graffiti is another matter left for the viewer to grapple with. Perhaps for Nagle, it does not matter what you see in his work or if you get the joke. Moreover, the titles are more like 'punch lines' and tend to leave the viewers laughing or asking for their money back.

*Facing page, inset: Ron Nagle.
Facing page: Minimetti.
Above: Grim Trimm.*

It seems as though during the past 40 years Ron Nagle has been developing his own not-so-secret formula, which not only separates him from other contemporary artists, but also makes his work reside in our subconscious – and regularly be seen in our peripheral vision.

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