

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

RON NAGLE

BY PATRICIA L LEWY

Irrational Discovery
 Matthew Marks Gallery
 February 13–April 18, 2026
 New York

“Don’t you just love lobster?” enthuses Jerry Seinfeld’s date Gillian as she performs a two-fisted grip-and-rip on a lobster, tearing it in two. The joke is Jerry’s suppressed revulsion at her “man hands” (literally a man’s hands, clearly spliced in among shots of Gillian). In 1999, Ron Nagle riffed on that hilarious scene in *Lobster Boy*, a 3 ½-inch-high ceramic—named after Grady Stiles Jr., who was born with webbed fingers and performed in sideshows as the “Lobster Boy”—featuring a bulbous looped red finger that rises before a rectilinear backdrop. Uniting Seinfeld’s comic shtick and the macabre so-called “freak show” with Nagle’s hypomaniacal disinhibition, works like these establish the parameters of the artist’s sensibility, along with a

few other inspirational models, including Antoni Tàpies’s assembled and painted objects, Philip Guston’s grotesque and cartoonish forms, Giorgio Morandi’s still lifes of vessels and pots, and Josef Albers’s interactive color juxtapositions. A various list—and we must not forget Offissa Pupp, a character in George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat comic strip* (1913–44) and the shape behind the bulbous forms in many Nagle works. And then there are dripping glazes modeled on the slobber of one of his student’s dogs. Go figure.

Nagle’s unsparingly off-kilter vibe is strikingly on view in *Irrational Discovery*. This group of ceramic and porcelain works from 2023–25 both doubles back to and extends his imaginative mediations of the traditional vessel, and, more broadly, of the vessel as frame, pedestal, platform. Nagle’s evolved vessels—both biomorphic and geometric, both precious and surprising—are themselves contained in the exhibition: each work is housed in a glass vitrine, within which

it stands atop a white riser supported by a maple block, the whole lifted to eye level by pedestals scattered throughout the space. Peering is the mode of viewing here: look, don’t touch. And here’s the rub, literally, for these tiny jewellike objects mandate close looking but beckon to be touched, beg to be held, demand to be fondled and explored with the fingers (and the tongue) as well as devoured with the eye.

In *The Maine Ingredient* (2025), vestiges of the finger in *Lobster Boy* rise as gleaming, volute-like red wings propel upward over the tops of a pair of solid pink-stucco walls as if through an imagined ceiling. Coated in a high-gloss finish—perhaps a gesture toward Southern California’s Finish Fetish days of the 1960s—these wings contrast with the roughened surfaces that Nagle has applied with a spray gun over most of the works in the exhibition. They stand on a dark-gray pedestal, rounded at the front, locked at the back into the join between the two

perpendicular pink walls. The entire construction sits atop a slablike riser of a lighter gray, yet rather than being grounded, it seems to levitate—the effect of a thin line, like a pinstripe on a hot rod, that surrounds the entire base with a mere hint of red, glowing in sympathetic vibration with those fingers/wings. The upward thrust works against those thick, towering rectangular walls, in another of the many oppositional dualities—smooth/textured, squared/rounded, open/closed, geometric/biomorphic, and, in this work, radiant red/tinted gray—inhering in Nagle’s aesthetic.

Nagle has said that he considers his work “as much paintings as I do pots or objects or whatever. I mean, the way that I want them to read is head-

on, flat, and ... considered from a painting point of view.” The notion is jarring in relation to a medium—ceramics—identified for centuries with the vessel form. The definitive break was made in the 1950s by the daring and magnetic ceramist Peter Voulkos, whose improvisatory, hand-built clay behemoths released an athletic, nearly gestural approach to the material. Artists such as Henry Takemoto (who had encouraged Nagle to leave San Francisco for Los Angeles), Michael Frimkess, and Ken Price, among the handful gathered around Voulkos at the Otis Art Institute, were major influences. Particularly Price, whose smaller-scaled forms and expanded color palette, achieved by repeated glazings in a low-fire kiln, shifted Nagle’s own

conception of the ceramic medium from its function as mere receptacle to a vehicle of artistic sensibility.

Little Earl (2023) may take its title from the Delines’s 2021 country-soul single “Little Earl,” but its formal elements, as with two other works in the exhibition (*Potent Portion*, 2023, and *Indifferent Indulgence*, 2025), seem to have been made in the spirit of what the Mexican modernists Mathias Goeritz and Luis Barragán called “emotional architecture.” Here, three slabs of the same thickness are joined at right angles to form side, back, and bottom of a partially enclosed space, which, however, does seem ‘more painting than pot,’ its planar elements functioning as canvas as well as wall. Nagle has painted their surfaces in a flat dark green and has encased them in stucco, a feature of nearly all surface textures in this exhibition. The construction is topped with a rooflike slab in a lighter yellow-green flecked with orange, and a thick blue quadrilateral is inserted within the space, before which a small, slightly bulging golden square stands in the right corner. The effect recalls

Ron Nagle, *The Maine Ingredient*, 2025. Ceramic, catalyzed polyurethane, epoxy resin, and acrylic cornerware, 4½ x 3½ x 4½ inches. © Ron Nagle. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



the entryway staircase in the Casa Barragán, the house that Barragán built for himself in Mexico City. In *Little Earl*, as there, the effect is of a shrine in a near-monastic space.

The title of the exhibition, *Irrational Discovery*, finds its cognate in Nagle's work of the same name, a rendering in porcelain of Salvador Dalí's almost-as-small painting *Persistence of Memory* (1931). In staging the metamorphosis from paint to porcelain, Nagle also redistributes Dalí's tonal scheme of blue and orange/pink while offering a sly wink to notions of impermanence and decay. He constructs three separate events: downstage, a platform from which ascends a single branch, like Dalí's barren branch and tree; middle stage, a thin geometric form that conflates the verticality of the tree and the jutting edges of the boxlike form in Dalí's painting; and finally, upstage, a flaccid porcelain ovoid draped over the textured black backdrop, an homage to the melted clock face that Dalí hung limply over his tree branch. Meanwhile, the blending of color effects in *Gateway Enabler* (2024) creates the feeling of growing grass: as values shift from high to low, the greenish-yellow hue of the platform base seems to sprout minute tendrils that affect a sense of living organisms. In the center, one of the cast drips that Nagle calls "superdrips" oozes bright yellow down the side of

a blackened mound—maybe a diminutive volcano, maybe a Big Mac. A dazzlingly lit orange knoll rises out of the ground, its Finish Fetish pigmented resin blazing against its surrounding terrain.

With Nagle, meaning does not emerge from the process of making, developing incrementally as one part is fixed here, another there. Rather, it comes into being at one go: These objects are three dimensional reenactments of conceptions first laid down as two dimensional drawings. To my mind, then, it's a bit too bad that none of those drawings are on view, as they have been in other exhibitions at Matthew Marks. The drawings capture the suddenness of conceptual arrival declared in the initial medium of graphite.

Nagle's expression lives in the suddenness with which that perfect balance is revealed between color and form—the way a work hits you as if it had always existed, fully achieved in terms of color distribution and formal stability, where the sensation of balanced weight and counterweight among various elements is always present. The tension one feels in looking but not touching jacks up desire—desire for physical contact, for touching those soft and hard colors and sensuous, prickly textures, desire for a kind of reciprocal embodiment that is, ultimately, foreclosed. In one's imagination, smallness, as Price

once said of Nagle's preferred scale, can suddenly pivot to its obverse, the monumental. Nagle's perfectionist aesthetic hedges against the chance that a single imperfection at small scale might suddenly, as Dave Hickey wrote, be "magnified in its awfulness." Yet Nagle paradoxically constructs equipoise from ostensible disorder, from the joining of analogous and complementary colors to incompatible parts. As I wander through this beautifully conceived and presented exhibition, what to me seems at stake is the preservation of Nagle's originating spontaneity, his associative grab bag of reference, and his indelible sardonic humor—all gifts to any viewer who attends to these works as closely as the artist himself.

Patricia L Lewy is an independent art writer, curator, and artists' estate manager living in New York City.