

Doyle Lane by Ricky Swallow (Clay Paintings, May 2014)

Doyle Lane was nothing if not systematic. His name—usually an all caps LANE incised into the dime sized foot of his coveted weed pots, or written with marker clarity on the reverse side of one of his clay paintings—is familiar to a growing number of hard core followers and collectors who are all scrambling after the same thing: another Doyle Lane.

Lane's "weed pots" are diminutive in size yet perfectly proportioned and balanced. Their graspable scale is satisfying, and there's a covert energy about them. Rudimentary, beautiful, with no fuss, they are as iconic and recognizable in ceramic circles as Rose Cabat's feelies or Harrison Mackintosh's graphically decorated pieces. Like these two artists he was a glaze specialist, developing and enlisting his own specific family of glazes to define his pottery made from the early 1950's through the 1970's. The term "weed pots" alludes to Lane's practice of arranging delicate sprigs and dried flowers in the pots.

Where the forms of the pots are staid even classical, the glazes are anything but—they crawl, bubble, crack and thickly undulate to a thick edge preserved by gravity toward the foot of each piece. The glazes all carry nicknames, both affectionate and descriptive handles of categorization for collectors and potters alike: orange peel, gun metal, poppy seed, robin's egg, mustard, white crackle, and uranium red.

These jewels of California modernism are most credibly understood and appreciated when viewed in groupings, which is how Doyle conceived and marketed them in both gallery presentations and architectural commissions. In this context one can see the subtle shifts in scale and form of the pots, some plump and spherical with tiny collared throats, some wider—more UFO-like (think Nelson lamp) with flattened openings just large enough to support a single twig. This combined with the matte-satin glazed surfaces, varying in color and activity, creates a real rhythm in the groupings and gives one an abridged glimpse into the working nature and diversity of Lane's talents.

This type of rhythm created across the scale and form of the pots can also be seen with the mosaic surfaces of Lane's largest Murals—including the Orange Wall, an 18 ft. mural commissioned for 301 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena, by Welton Becket & Associates in 1964. This phenomenal field of tiles is the largest realization and endorsement for Lane's methodology—the medium is the message. The buzzing field of literally hundreds of rectangular clay tiles in burnt orange to red is beautifully overwhelming as a physical passage of information—a thing as solid in its intention as the building it was housed in. The prominent signature scribed into the lower right side of the piece, one letter per tile is an endearingly simple tag. It floats a little high rather than resigning itself to the bottom corner of the piece, as if to say DOYLE LANE was here.

Rarely will you find embellishment or extraneous detail in Lane's pieces. The format seems carefully planned- a honed and familiar weed pot, a circular disc or unit of simply cut tiles loaded up with glaze and allowed to do its thing—with both trialed results and more expressive reactions during firing. The few exceptions to this rule are Doyle's pots with applied sleeves of texture, or the surfaces of rudimentary shaped fish and bird tiles which demonstrate a repeated impressed pattern. These I would chalk up to a kind of interchangeable modern aesthetic looming at the time, one exploited by many ceramicists. The most identifiable and specific gift Lane offers us is his beautiful glaze work, placing him confidently in the company of Glen Lukens, Otto Natzler and Otto Heino—all dedicated glaze technicians working in the greater Los Angeles area at the time.

Unlike these esteemed potters, Lane's ambitions pushed him to utilize an aesthetic closer to abstract and formalist painting, and to locate a scale and immediacy outside of the traditional realm of pottery. Lane's entry in the Objects USA catalog published in 1970, reveals a linear progression from his functional pottery, to the large murals through to the slab-based clay paintings. Whilst this makes developmental sense in terms of Lane's creative arc, it's impossible to say whether Lane was still working on commissioned murals and weed pots once he'd began the clay paintings. Much of his work (and virtually all of the weed pots) are undated, but the resourcefulness in his approach would suggest the various bodies of work continued and overlapped.

One can find hand typed labels on the reverse of many of the smaller framed square clay paintings and tile assemblages:

DOYLE LANE, Ceramic Murals- Clay Paintings

4470 KEWANEE ST. 225-4585 LOS ANGELES (EL SERENO) CAL. 90032.

It's almost as if the smaller more marketable tiles were calling cards, samples to generate interest in larger projects and potentially larger income for the artist. Lane emerged in a modernist era in which a domestic appetite for ceramics complemented newly devised interior schemes, including furniture, textiles, and so on. He managed to be included in several of the early California Design shows organized by Eudora Moore at the Pasadena Museum, but is noticeably absent from subsequent shows. His pots pictured in those early catalogs gel graciously with the overall aesthetic of that time, whereas the later clay paintings have a more authoritative presence both in physicality and expression.

With little information printed about Lane, friends, and colleagues provide much of his story. Doyle was known to market his pots (and later in life his beaded jewelry) at craft shows as well as literally knocking on doors with a tray full of weed pots in wealthier neighborhoods such as the Pacific Palisades. An elderly architect I purchased a pot from sold pieces on consignment out of his office on Larchmont, noting Doyle would come and arrange them on their wooden block bases, bringing new pots to replace those sold. Photos of Doyle Lane taken in his El Sereno home studio by Ben Serar in 19?? reveal a focused, camera shy man going about his craft. In one image we see Lane at the wheel, with neatly stacked boxes of glazing materials behind him; in another he is carefully a line up of freshly fired weed pots in their beautifully blank bisque state on the ledge of the kiln. The modest contents of his archive, gifted to the California African American Museum before his death in 2002, contains staged photographs of his weed pots (El Sereno Ikebana), various murals and a few grainy gallery installation shots, all housed in Doug-fir ply boxes constructed and labeled by Lane. A treasure to any follower of his work, there's something intriguingly private about this archive, with no literary information to accompany it—no user's guide. It fuels as many questions as it answers in relation to Lane's professional trajectory.

As Jenifer Munro Miller points out in *A Handbook of California Design*, "Doyle Lane succeeded in making a living from his craft—a notable achievement for any craftsperson, particularly an African American working at mid-century." Lane definitely had both loyal individual supporters and architects who commissioned his work. Rudy Estrada, a long time friend and collector, recalls an incident in which Lane was arrested and restrained by police on his property when he arrived with his tool bag to install an outdoor mural. With very few galleries willing to show black artists at the time Lane eventually connected with Dale Davis and Alonzo Davis who had opened the Brockman gallery in Leimert Park in 1967, hoping to solve the problem of where to show their own work, and the work of their peers and immediate community in Los Angeles. By participating in the exhibition program at Brockman and later Akrum gallery on La Cienega in the early 70's, Lane's was able to show his work in a fine art context at a mid-career stage in his practice.

Lane's circular clay paintings, most recognizably shown at the Los Angeles City College art gallery in October of 1977 all follow a similar format in which cut slab rolled circles are fired and mounted onto a white painted board. Some are solid discs of clay in which the glazes seem to literally react, and create their own preserved Weather Systems—grounds over which malleable graphic compositions are applied in what appears to be iron oxide.

Other groups of clay paintings are cut into geometrical compositions with the individual pieces glazed separately and then assembled back into their circular format on the panel. With much brighter and solidly blocked complementary colors—these perhaps later compositions further evidence the important role that painting played in the work. Whereas the more expressive examples show the influence of Clyfford Still the patterned and assembled clay paintings echo the shaped canvases of Leon Polk Smith and the blocked geometry of Frederick Hamersley and John McLaughlin, West Coast pioneers of hard edge abstraction whose work Lane most likely would have seen first hand.

It's interesting that the influence of painting registers as a purely visual, linear and color blocked atmosphere in Lane's clay paintings, and quite sobering if we think about the abstract expressionist ceramics movement in Southern California, rife with physical gesture and texture—"fast and bulbous" to quote Beefheart. There is a formal parallel between Lane's clay paintings and John Mason's modular tile configurations and geometrical sculptures from the past two decades. A radical turn from his early work—these pieces replace expressive gesture and surface grit with glazed hard edges shapes and lines as a means or visual circulation.

Lane's quiet compositions seem to direct all their energy inward; they are beautiful compact things to take in, and hard things to describe. Measured and methodical in their conception, the results are anything but. As objects of our focused looking (and Lane's focused making) the circles mounted onto the square boards operate like tactile Mandalas, creating their own radial balance and approximating a type of spiritual space. There's a fluid fervor looming in everything Lane produced. Both his weed pots and his ceramic beaded necklaces seem like their own planetary constellations, and the clay paintings echo this in a pictorial format. The way glaze is fused and covers the surface of clay is very different to paint, and the way it receives light is also more complicated. Lane envisioned the clay paintings could be hung outdoors to provide an ever-changing compositional experience for the viewer. Lane's unique means of putting things together provides a sophisticated simplicity, and expresses a confidence in form and color to carry the content of a work. The rest is up to us.

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