

Matthias Merkel Hess *Loot*



April 4 – May 11, 2024

Morgan Lehman is pleased to announce the opening of “Loot,” an exhibition of new ceramic works by Matthias Merkel Hess. This is the artist’s first solo exhibition with the gallery.

In this new body of work, Merkel Hess continues his ongoing investigation into how objects are valued, the distinction between high and low art, and the meaning and purpose of ceramic vessels in culture. Merkel Hess is known for his playfully witty reimagining of everyday plastic vessels in glazed ceramic. These new pieces on display take that conceptual premise even further, and are imbued with imagery found on various looted ancient ceramic artifacts.

Much of the imagery in Merkel Hess’s latest work is derived from ancient Greek vessels that had been collected by New York-area museums. The journey of these objects, of course, started thousands of years earlier: Greek ceramics were once collected and venerated by the Italians, who had placed the vessels in their tombs as objects of significance for the afterlife. These ceramics were later looted from burial sites and sold to museums including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where they often became some of the most prized possessions of an institution’s collection (e.g. the famous “Sarpedon Krater”). The vessels were never returned to Greece but many were eventually delivered back to Italy.

Rather than exactly recreating the looted vessels themselves, Merkel Hess has repurposed those vessels’ imagery on his own works as low-relief drawings. The vessels in the exhibition take the forms of ceramic copies of plastic containers such as 5-gallon buckets and bucket lids, and Rubbermaid Brute-style trash can lids (just some of the artist’s favorite quotidian subjects). Merkel Hess uses ceramic coils to create linework, which he builds up in relief and then highlights and accentuates with glaze. Considering the importance of the original objects that these designs came from and the low nature of the plastic containers, Merkel Hess poses a question: how do we decide what should be valued and collected? Further, what are the possibilities of the ceramic vessel and ceramic-making as we move deeper into the 21st Century? With this latest body of work, the artist mines both the act of image-making as well as cultural and transcultural mythology, asking us to rethink how we define the ordinary, everyday, and disposable.

Matthias Merkel Hess lives and works in New York City. His work has been exhibited at ACME (Los Angeles, CA); Peters Projects (Santa Fe, NM); Volume Gallery (Chicago, IL); and James Harris Gallery (Seattle, WA). His work is held in the collections of The Museum of Fine Arts (Houston, TX); The Crocker Museum of Art (Sacramento, CA); The Cedar Rapids Museum of Art (Cedar Rapids, IA); and The Nerman Museum of Art (Overland Park, KS); among others. Merkel Hess was born and raised in Iowa, and received an MFA in 2010 from the University of California, Los Angeles.