

SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH ART

PAUL S. BRIGGS NOT-SO-HIDDEN MESSAGES AT LACOSTE



ARTIST PROFILE

**PAUL S. BRIGGS:
DARK BEAUTY**

**LUCY LACOSTE
GALLERY
25 MAIN STREET
CONCORD,
MASSACHUSETTS**

THROUGH JULY 15

Paul Briggs's ceramic work is a conversation between medium and artist resulting in contemplative objects with healing qualities.

Briggs purposefully infuses his clay works with metaphors and meanings. Throughout his life journey as a young athlete, undergraduate student, and ultimately, an artist, clay has always accompanied him. Since his early days attending summer camps, Briggs's talent and passion for this type of craftsmanship have never left his side. Eventually, he wholeheartedly embraced his artistic career, becoming a mentor, lecturer, speaker, role model, successful artist and a scholar, as well as a beloved teacher.

As a ceramic artist, Briggs goes beyond manipulating clay; he engages in dialogue and interactions with the material, contemplating its qualities and focusing on its manifestation. By approaching clay as a meditative exercise, Briggs merges his ideals and philosophical beliefs with the medium, whereby his personal, unique and evocative artworks materialize. His creations are borne out of pondering on the aesthetics of nature, architecture, self-discovery, self-reflection and constant inquiries into societal endeavors.

Artists are endowed with the gift of expressing themselves through their craftsmanship. They help us, as viewers, to awaken our senses and perceive the world through their minds and life perspectives. Briggs's most recent artistic practices tackle issues directly related to social and cultural crises, particularly

those surrounding incarceration and social justice. Through his creative expressions, his work becomes a transformative experience for both artist and viewers, allowing for much-needed introspection, inner search, healing and contemplation.

In the solo exhibition "Paul S. Briggs: Dark Beauty," presented by the Lucy Lacoste Gallery and running until July 15, the artist showcases works that respond to the recent years of collective trauma, losses, indignation and fear. His awe-inspiring black glazed stoneware pieces blend beauty, functionality and profound artistic expression.

Briggs's distinctive pinch technique elevates the simple act of applying pressure with the thumb and finger to a precise and rhythmic series of movements. Through each subtle adjustment and deliberate motion, clay becomes a potent medium for storytelling, a profound conduit between humanity and the natural world. His signature vessels, shaped through pinching clay, hold immense significance, akin to revered icons. Placed upon pedestals, they assume the role of sacred altar pieces, embodying a serene and symbolic essence of transformation, inviting viewers to embark upon a spiritual journey.

Briggs has dedicated countless hours to the meditative practice of pinching, honing his craft with unwavering focus. Some of the non-glazed pieces on display at the gallery bear visible lines left by his fingerprints, serving as portals to a realm where art and human connection converge. These marks invite viewers to explore his captivating creations and witness the

Paul S. Briggs at the opening of his "Dark Beauty" exhibition.



intricate dance among fingers, pliable clay and a profound mastery of technique and medium.

For the first time, the gallery showcases seven wall pieces that have been separated from their original installation comprising 25 wall sculptures created in 2018, titled “Cell Personae: The Impact of Incarceration on Black Lives.” Leveraging the intrinsic physicality and expressive capacity of clay, Briggs aims to illuminate the profound consequences of incarceration, particularly the disproportionately high representation of Black Americans in American prisons. Through his sculptures, Briggs endeavors to unveil the extensive impact of imprisonment, which not only inflicts deep wounds upon the incarcerated individuals themselves, but also detrimentally affects their families and hinders their ability to participate in democratic life after release.

The wall pieces, a combination of slab and coil clay building techniques, embody a profound language of pain, their visual representation being characterized by the interweaving of black elements and delicate, slender bars that occasionally contort and twist. These bars assume metaphorical roles, symbolizing movement, power or the longing for escape. Intertwined within these structures are knots, borrowed from Briggs’s acclaimed “Knots Stories” series, which serve as potent symbols of entanglement, ownership and limitation. Crafted from black glazed stoneware, the walls, bars, and knots are sometimes featured both on the inside and outside the pieces clearly alluding the incarceration systems — laden with a haunting sense of despair and agony. Some pieces bring entangled knots that communicate the presence of pain reverberating suffering internally and externally.

Briggs expertly materializes this pain and agony within the compositions, skillfully transforming them into objects of beauty



that simultaneously evoke a glimmer of hope as a remedy for suffering and rage. Among the works on display are Briggs’s geometric vessels adorned with knots, suggesting a yearning for their loosening — an opening that might create room for justice and renewal.

Founded in 1990 by Lucy Lacoste, the gallery is committed to presenting contemporary ceramic artists. Briggs has already had solo exhibitions there, including “Intuitive Response: Poetic Justice in Clay” in 2021, featuring black glazed stoneware sculptures inspired by poems written by Black poets, and “Unadorned” in 2022, featuring work exploring black clay and unglazed techniques in reference to Blackness and beauty.

During the current “Dark Beauty” exhibition opening, Briggs spoke about his new work, but the moment also served as a farewell since he is relocating from Massachusetts to his alma mater, Alfred University, in Alfred, New York. Alfred University holds a great influence over his development as an artist and has always served as an inspiration and oasis to replenish Briggs’s mind with new ideas, reflections and inspiration. Briggs has accepted a position as an assistant professor of ceramics starting the next the fall.

Briggs’s return to Alfred University takes on a profound significance, embodying the concept of the circle of life and reflecting the natural order and interconnectedness of living beings. It encapsulates many of the ideas present in his work representing the continuous cycle of birth, growth, death, and rebirth that perpetuates the existence and evolution of species and ecosystems. Briggs’s works evoke interdependence, impermanence, renewal, transformation, resilience, not short of ethical considerations, all encouraged by contemplation and self-discovery inspired by his stories and narratives reflected in each of his beautiful works.

LEFT: *Black Windflower I* (original), 2022, black glazed stoneware, 11 ¾" x 8" x 8".

RIGHT: *Womb (Cell Persona)*, 8 ½" x 7 ½" x 6".