

Brian Molanphy



Encapsulations

Article by
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ON EXHIBIT AT THE FORUM GALLERY WERE THREE series of ceramic works by Brian Molanphy. Molanphy created *carres encadrés* during a four-month residency at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, where he worked with the potter Philippe Beltrando. The series *square cube* resulted from a 10 week residency at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center located in the Rocky Mountains of the US. His most recent series *trim* was completed in Dallas at Southern Methodist University (SMU) where he teaches ceramics. Simultaneously embracing as well

Above: *Encapsulations*, installation view (*carrés encadrés* & *squares cubed*).

Below: *Square cubed*. Cube, woodfired porcelain. 9 in.



as thwarting expectations of traditional ceramics, in Molanphy's work *Encapsulations* he explores the themes of accumulation, repetition, imperfection and enclosure.

In the large gallery, a single line of ceramic cubes covers all four walls. From a distance they look similar – most obvious is the repetition of form, stark shadows and the eye-level placement on the wall. Examined closely, each cube has a different glaze and texture. Some cubes have overlapping or mismatched seams, while some appear to have collapsed on top. The imperfections make each piece unique.

In speaking with the artist about his concept and process, Molanphy told me that his underlying inspiration for the work was to engage with architecture in its most basic form. Like the minimalists of the 1960s, Molanphy was interested in identifying, working with and building upon singular formal elements. In Molanphy's work, he started with a square tile. Painted ceramic tiles have a long historical tradition in many cultures as decorative objects within architectural structures. Liberating the tile from its two-dimensionality, Molanphy expands his painted tiles into three-dimensional cubes.

The cube also has a long historical tradition within art history and Molanphy's work pays homage to some of the great cube works. He cites sculptor Tony Smith, Suprematist founder Kazimir Malevich and ceramist Masamichi Yoshikawa as influences. In some ways, Molanphy's cubes resemble six-sided



Above left, above right and below: *Carré encadré*. Faïence (low-fire ceramic) with glaze. 8 in.

paintings more than sculptures. When in Provence, the artist worked with marbling coloured slip and applying it to the surface of the objects. The resulting patterns suggest a painted, cloud-filled sky.

While some of the cubes have decorative surfaces, many remind me of geological phenomena. Surfaces appear weathered and eroded. Some have cracks as if the earth's tectonic plates had shifted from an earthquake or volcanic eruption. Employing the sgraffito and *décor au clou* techniques, the artist scratches and cuts on the surface with a nail to produce texture. This visceral form of mark making permeates deeper than surface texture, producing a permanent 'scar' in the ceramic landscape.

Most ceramists would reject imperfect vessels, but Molanphy embraces them, purposely creating the flaws. Highlighting rough edges that do not line up, grooved blemishes and collapsing concave crevices, the work is a reference to the expansiveness of time and how the landscape is continuously shifting and changing. It is ultimately the flaws that make me love the work. I spent much more time closely examining each cube in minute detail, as I noted each fissure and rift. Perfection does not interest me. I also wondered what the artist felt as he made the marks. Did he revel in subverting tradition? Did he feel any residual guilt about not destroying imperfection? I imagine he might have some conflicting emotions. One has to master the rules, before one can break them.

The exhibition's title *Encapsulations* alludes to something that is sheathed or covered. Ceramic vessels usually have a space or orifice that allows access – a place of holding or containment. Molanphy refutes this by enclosing the cubes. We assume that the space is still there, but do not have access to it. This obstructs the object's utilitarian function. They are containers, but do not have working lids. As viewers, we are not privy to their contents. I wonder what they encase, protect or hide? In this regard, Molanphy frustrates viewers' expectations by denying them/us entry. In this way, he again subverts tradition.

Located in the smaller front window gallery is Molanphy's most recent work *trim*. Like *carres*

encadres and *square cube*, this series is an examination of the themes of repetition and enclosure. Unlike the previous work, Molanphy suffuses the vessels with beauty. Each form echoes an elongated oval. Inspired by pictographs in Horseshoe Canyon, Molanphy describes the shape as a combination between a circle and a square. I think it looks like a perfectly formed, bisected geode, with the interior revealing a powder blue, marbled sky.

The form also reminds me of a pharmaceutical pill, cut open to reveal a swirling blue interior surface, suggesting the euphoric feeling attained by designer drugs. The repetition of the form throughout the wall installation perhaps is a reference to the over-reliance/dependence our culture has on pharmaceuticals and the desire to synthetically produce happiness. Upon closer inspection, I notice a glitter in the objects' outside textures. Like a touch of gold mica, this subtle effect renders the entire installation with an understated elegance. This sharply contrasts the bling bling of our consumer culture. (Molanphy later told me that the mica is naturally found in this type of clay.)

As in the *cube series*, these vessels do not allow the viewer full access to the interior. We do not know if the objects are hollow or filled. The celestial blue-sky pattern seduces us with its allure, but keeps the viewer at the surface level.





Top left: **Trim**. Slipped and burnished micaceous earthenware. 7.5 x 4 x 4 in.
 Top right: **Trim**. Slipped and burnished micaceous earthenware. 9 x 5 x 5 in.
 Above left: **Brian Molanphy**.
 Above right: **Encapsulations**, installation view (*trim*).

temporarily) to appreciate the complex subtlety of Molanphy's vision. Otherwise in a distracted state, it is easy to dismiss the work as a bunch of ceramic cubes and ovals. Molanphy's work requires our full attention; it is worth the effort.

The title *trim* means to reduce or to decorate. Molanphy incorporates both meanings into the work by literally reducing the vessel to a minimal form, yet also imbuing the work with refined beauty. The word *trim* suggests sparsity, yet the installation is one of abundance.

Encapsulations is a meditative act of creation, inspired by the natural landscape. To fully engage with the work, one must unplug technology (at least

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