

At Last, No More

By Janelle Lynch

Donna Green's studio walls are lined with boldly colored oil stick drawings, craft tools, and a copy of John O'Donohue's poem "A Morning Offering." A kiln fills one corner of the space. An anthropomorphic clay piece awaits firing. The wheel sits still. The air smells of oil paint. Windows offer views of the Eastern Long Island landscape.

Green works in Water Mill, New York, in her Manhattan home studio, and in a studio in her native Sydney, Australia, where she began using clay nearly sixty years ago. The first of fifteen grandchildren, Green started rolling coils with her maternal grandfather, Victor Smorgon, when she was four years old. Smorgon was a tenacious Russian innovator who immigrated to Australia in 1927. Despite his lack of formal education, he built an industrial empire, manufacturing plastic, glass, and steel. At home, he worked with clay.

A similar spirit has propelled Green to this moment. At sixty-three years old, she has spent a lifetime navigating her intrinsic need to build, paint, draw, and photograph within the parameters of familial, cultural, and societal expectations. She completed a degree in industrial design, moved to New York, started a family, and earned a black belt in karate. Courses, workshops, and residencies with renowned artists at Greenwich House Pottery, Anderson Ranch, the International Center of Photography, and the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting, & Sculpture—in addition to her creative temperament, education, and personal life experiences—inform her vibrant practice today. And her conviction about her future as an artist. "This is an exciting time in my life. I have reached a point where my full attention can be put into experimentation and making," she told me recently in her Water Mill studio. Green's only limitations now are those inherent to the materials with which she works and the size of her kiln. "I want to push the limitations of scale and make even bigger work!"

That exuberance and liberation are palpable in the pieces that make up her solo show at HB381 Gallery. Forty works, including clay pieces, oil stick drawings, and ink drawings that Green made between 2019 and the present, form a body of work energized with her passion for materials, touch, color, nature, and freedom of expression itself.

Anchoring the exhibition are *Cumulus*, *Meteorite*, *Metamorphosis*, and *Ice Flower*, stoneware vessels that Green made during a 2019 residency at California State University in Long Beach, invited by the artist Tony Marsh. Exemplary of Green's intensely physical approach to shaping clay—pinching, pushing, punching it—they hold significance beyond their form and scale. They embody a pivotal moment in her artistic trajectory for which she credits Marsh. "He kept telling me, 'Just do it! Be bad. Stop trying to do the right things!'"

With an air of newfound confidence, Green described the process through which she made several works in the show:

“I would make them, come back the next day, and find that they had fallen to pieces. And I would just intuitively put the pieces back together again, which was often imperfect but more interesting to me—and see what happens. I’m reminded of my grandfather. As a child, I would go into his office, which he shared with his brother and cousin. The two others had perfect desks—all neat and good. His desk was filled with cardboard rolls that he’d glued to a box that he’d glued to something else because he was trying to figure out how to make a machine work. He wanted to understand how something goes from one point to another and what would be the most efficient way there. So he experimented with the materials that were at hand. I admired his ingenuity. He was uninhibited.”

And so now is Green. “It’s taken me a long time to get here, but this is what I want to do. I want to make sculptures,” she told me. In fact, Green has wanted to create sculpture all along, but because of the onus she has felt to make utilitarian objects and to hew to antiquated ideas of gender, she has created objects with a purpose. Now she is asserting—foremost to herself—that she, too, can build nonfunctional closed forms. This presents a new view on the shapes that relate to male and female sexual anatomy that have appeared in Green’s work in recent years. Until now they have suggested sexual liberation, but the creation of breast-like and phallic forms has also been part of her process of declaring herself an artist. An additional part of that process has been eschewing notions of open vessels signifying the female body and function, and closed or towering forms signifying the male body and sculpture. For Green, “They can be either. The piece itself is the guide.” What is essential to her is that the work is alive. “I want it to have a lot of energy—to epitomize life in an energetic way. That’s my goal.”

Green’s embrace of her identity as an artist is also evident in oil stick drawings on canvas and ink drawings on watercolor paper. Dense with meandering lines and punctuated by fiery marks, the oil stick drawings are Green’s interpretations of nature surrounding her Water Mill studio. Sometimes the drawings serve as a landscape she views as she builds her sculptures. Open and fluid, black and white, Green creates the ink drawings with one continuous gesture forming organic shapes. She sometimes makes both the oil stick and ink drawings with her eyes closed, reveling in touch, materials, the arc of her arm, the movement of her body. The drawing methods seem to allow space for different facets of Green’s personality—ardent and determined, graceful and elegant.

While her work is enriched by her biography, it is equally imbued with art history. Green was raised in a family with a deep appreciation for art, and for much of her life she has looked at it with a fervor similar to that which drives her own creative practice. The clay works in the exhibition draw inspiration from the coiled funerary vessels from Japan’s Jōmon period (c. 14,000 – 300 BCE) and figurative Haniwa tomb sculpture of the Kofun period (c. 300 – 710 CE). The form at the top of Green’s untitled 2023 vessel pays homage to Silla urns from Korea’s

Three Kingdoms period (c. 57 BCE – 676 CE). The oil stick and ink drawings reference Joan Mitchell's and Emily Kame Kngwarreye's lively abstract paintings.

Green is poised to make her mark on visual culture that will endure time and inspire viewers. She is exercising a sense of freedom akin to O'Donohue's sentiment in "A Morning Offering":

May I have the courage today
To live the life I would love,
To postpone my dream no longer
But do at last what I came here for
And waste my heart on fear no more.

Janelle Lynch is an artist and writer in New York City. She is represented by Flowers Gallery and has three monographs published by Radius Books