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Pioneering Ceramic Artist John Mason Gets a Posthumous Debut at Gagosian
The New York exhibition explores Mason's genre-bending clay works

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"Geometric Force," an exhibition of John Mason's work, is on view through February 15. Photo: Robert McKeever

On a corner of Park Avenue, a hulking orange sculpture peers at passersby from a window-walled space. Over five feet tall and streaked with a reflective glaze, John Mason's six-limbed *Orange Cross* commands the entry of Gagosian's Park & 75 gallery in Manhattan. For *Geometric Force*, the gallery's first exhibition of the late artist's work, Gagosian has brought this robust piece together with other ceramics by Mason, which will be on view until February 15.

A pioneering ceramic artist, Mason, who died last January, expanded the technical feats of clay. Born in 1927 in Madrid, Nebraska, Mason spent most of his career in Los Angeles and New York, studying ceramics at the Otis Art Institute (now called Otis College of Art and Design) and training under the legendary Peter Voulkos during the 1950s. Voulkos, who is known for his Abstract Expressionist-style sculptures bridging ceramics and fine art, trained a group of ceramic artists to do the same: Why think of only making utilitarian objects like pots and vessels when clay had much more potential?



John Mason, Orange Cross, 1963, Glazed stoneware. Photo: © 1963 Estate of John Mason. All Rights Reserved/ Courtesy of Gagorian

Rani Singh, a director at Gagorian who organized the show, explains that some of Mason’s most impactful work was realized when he and Voulkos got a studio together in 1957. Located on Glendale Boulevard in Los Angeles, the large space utilized creative technical methods to produce large-scale works such as a massive kiln, industrial-sized dough mixers, and even humidifiers from fruit packing plants to keep clay pliable. “Before that, this was unheard of,” Singh says to AD PRO. “They totally decided to upend everything and change what was thought to be possible in the world of clay.”

Working through the night was a ritual at the studio, which became a creative hub for the ceramic arts scene. “It was like a 24/7 kind of environment where they would work around the clock every day, and by the time it was dawn, they would decide to get breakfast,” Singh adds.

During his varied career, Mason worked in a number of forms. In addition to the more customary sculptural works, Mason created pieces for the wall. These massive wall reliefs embodied many of the same principles as the early sculpture—plays on volume, inventive glazing, and abstraction—but were closer to painting. Mason created the intricate puzzles on the floor, glomming pounds of clay together that would later be hung. “It was very much like action painting and like Jackson Pollock,” Singh says. In the 1970s, he started working with firebricks, though he returned to clay in the 1980s.

The show at Gagorian comprises two distinct bodies of work: the early *Orange Cross*, and pieces made in the past 15 years. The recent works showcase Mason’s virtuosity of glazing and angular forms; twisting geometries create nooks and crannies that blur natural shadows and tonal variations. One violet work standing about five feet high exhibits a gentle twist upward like a stalagmite, its creases delicately angled to gently absorb and refract light. The most logical way to view a Mason work is in motion, slowly encircling a vibrant-hued piece to make sense of its physicality. On first glance, however, the works still hold the eye.



John Mason, Spear, Mint Sky Blue, 2016, Ceramic. Photo: Jeff McLane/ © 1963 Estate of John Mason. All Rights Reserved/ Courtesy of Gagosian

“I think it’s important that John worked in series,” Singh says, “and it had a lot to do with his interest in geometry and permutations.” Tweaking maquettes until he found the perfect angle for each slant or zig-zag within, Mason was a master of minutiae.

Mason led a successful career in ceramics, scoring solo shows early on at hotspots like L.A.’s Ferus Gallery. (He also had solo exhibitions at the Pasadena Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Hudson River Museum, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.) And in 1960, Mason started teaching, bringing his talents to the University of California, Berkeley; Pomona College; the University of California, Irvine; and Hunter College. In recent years, there has been a resurgence in mainstream interest in his work, which was featured in the Getty Center’s “Pacific Standard Time” initiative in 2011 and 2012—a deep survey of Southern California’s postwar art—and in the Whitney’s 2014 Biennial.

Singh explains that the orange sculpture in the window is an homage to one of John Mason’s early solo shows at Ferus. “Irving Blum and Walter Hopps, who were the curators and gallery directors at Ferus, put that work in their window on La Cienega Boulevard, which was a busy street,” Singh says. “It was a really impactful thing.”