

Jugology
The Decline of the Avant-Garde
Boobies, Boojums, and Snarks

Christopher Gustin Rick Hirsch
Graham Marks Glen Lukens





Graham Marks in his studio, Scottsville, New York (1982). Photo: Tony Casadonte.

The Fruitful Mysteries of Graham Marks

Michael McTwigan

As a child, Graham Marks wanted to be an archaeologist when he grew up. Or play the French horn (another childhood passion). As adulthood approached, he studied modern dance with Phoebe Neville and at the Martha Graham School in New York and danced with Group Motion in Philadelphia, a company formed by students of Mary Wigman (the German dance pioneer). Marks studied at the Philadelphia College of Art (BFA 1974) and at Alfred University (MFA 1976). In 1974, he took part in the restoration and reactivation of Henry Chapman Mercer's Moravian Pottery and Tileworks in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. He now teaches at the School for American Craftsmen at Rochester Institute of Technology and lives with his wife Megan, a writer, in Scottsville, New York. Marks is represented by Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia, where he will have a one-man show this fall, and his work was recently on view at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, and at DBR Gallery, Cleveland.

If man was to play God, he might well populate the planet with forms resembling these. Graham Marks has taken the Great Architect's task into his own hands. The result: Nature by Design. Of course, the competition between *homo faber* and Dame Nature is long standing. The aim here is not to copy nature, however, but improve on it. Unlike the I-Hsing potter, the Art Nouveau designer, or Le Corbusier, Marks is not designing with nature, but against it. With late-twentieth-century sensibilities, Graham Marks constructs what might be termed, in a Euclidian world, "natural" objects. Yet, no matter how much he draws upon nature's inventory of forms, the result is hardly natural. We might best compare him to the painter of still lifes, who arranges apples and oranges in dramatic compositions that are rarely encountered outside the studio. Pursued a bit further, this analogy is quite useful. For Marks manages to fuse the still life's usual repertoire of objects—fruit and majolica jug, for example—into one form. This points to a crucial difference between nature and culture, between what Levi-Strauss termed the *raw* and the *cooked*. And while we may experience in nature many of the pleasures of art, it remains as *sign*, not symbol. Oranges and apples sitting on a table do not comprise art; a still life does. The world as we find it is just *there*; it means nothing. This truth is older than Plato. But when transformed by human beings, the objects of the world come to symbolize ideas, emotions, memories. Philip Rawson makes just this point in regard to ceramics, when he distinguishes between metaphor and conceit:

The essence of the metaphor is that the suggestions conveyed by the pot's inflections and forms are communicated as allusions, while the pot retains its existential identity, visibly and tactually. . . . The conceit, on the other hand, sets out to imitate a single natural object to the extent that the pot's identity and its many-dimensional symbolism may be shed in favour of one dominant analogue.¹

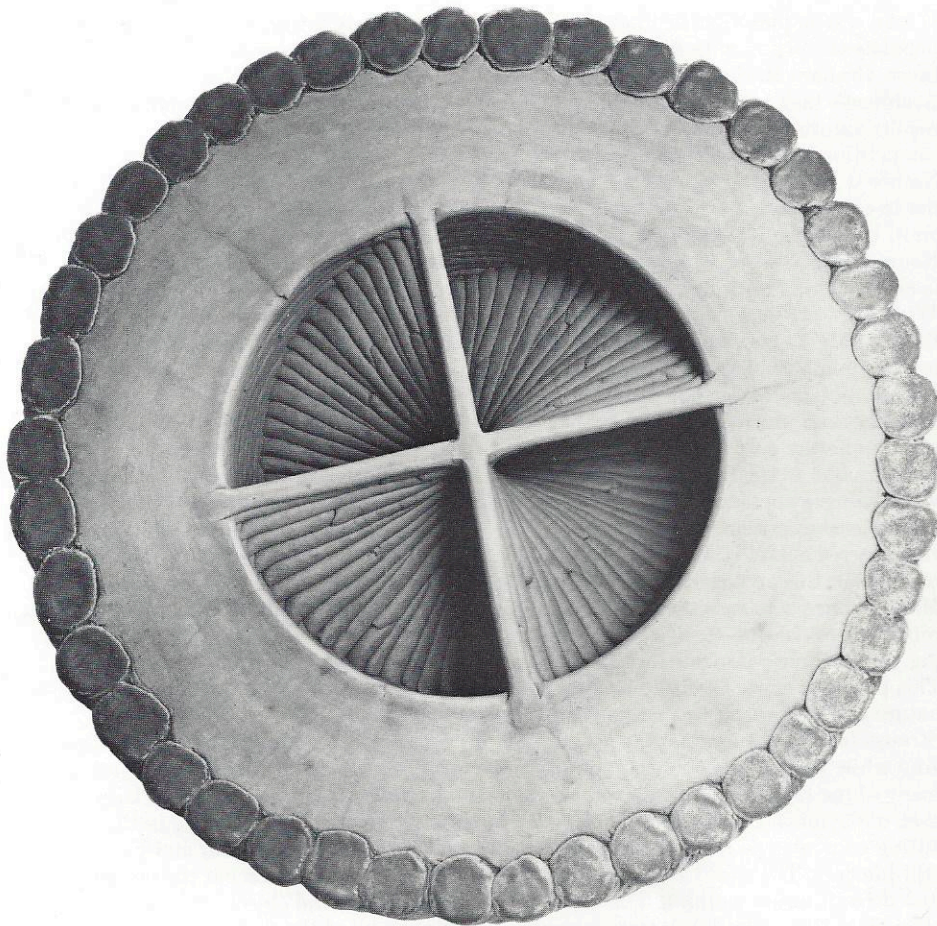
An example of a conceit is a Chelsea porcelain box:

shaped and glazed in imitation of and the same size as an apple, with a lid-handle the size and shape of a caterpillar, [it] has

abdicated its pot-nature . . . it accepts the scale of the everyday world of reality in its detailing, losing the status of complex transformation image in favour of its one "amazing" conceit.²

Art is transformation, not imitation. And while we may never know how human beings came to make what we now call art, certainly its origins reflect not simply nature, but the human being's relationship to nature. And this relationship, like the art of language itself, called for communication—the communication of myths, beliefs, history, skills, and more. How does Graham Marks address this task? Let's consider six works here. Examining first the Celestial Forms (my designation), we find three sculptures about twenty-nine inches in diameter, with turquoise blue skin and earthenware red flesh. They resemble huge melons or gourds sliced in half. Each is more complex than the next. The first has parallel ridges running along its wrinkled skin, and has been sliced cleanly to reveal its inner flesh. Our associations with forms of the vegetable kingdom are strongest in this piece. But its central orifice of spiraling coils divided into quadrants, its large size, and its blue glaze (triggering in the memory centuries of Near and Far Eastern pottery), rule out the possibility that it is a found object.

The second of the three has a thicker skin—a spiraling rind formed by blue coils one and one-half inches thick. This spiral pattern, coupled with the fact that the blue coils retain their skin even along the "sliced" face, lead us to suspect some artificer has had a hand in its making. The last of the Celestial Forms confirms our hunch, for here the blue coils, three layers deep, zigzag over its surface in geometric regularity. We know we are in the realm of imaginary beings, of make-believe. We notice other tell-tale evidence. In relation to the natural objects to which they allude, their larger-than-life scale makes us feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland. The artist reinforces this perception by placing them on pedestals, which affects us in two ways. They sit in perfect repose; stable, solid, like boulders at rest. Yet they are round and may roll at any moment. We are impressed by their serene balance, yet somewhat anxious lest this equanimity be only momentary. Earthly gravity, too, is defied. For they tilt up at us in an agile stance



that belies their great weight.

By placing them on pedestals, the artist avers: no matter how familiar, these objects did not fall to earth like apples from a tree. Independent of us and of nature, their uneasy equilibrium, mass, and large scale have the desired effect: we are humbled. This is appropriate for the Celestial Forms.

But the three Earthly Forms seem out of place in the exalted, white environment of a gallery. Like Lucio Fontana's clay spheres or Isamu Noguchi's chiseled rocks, these would rest more comfortably outdoors, directly on the ground. If the Celestial Forms are of the vegetable kingdom, the Earthly Forms are members of the animal kingdom. They seem to have been broken open, not cut neatly with a knife. Earthy, dark brown, and rough, they look weathered and old.

While the blue forms appeal to our imagination, these fecund bodies stir responses in our own body. For example, the red form resembles a bottom viewed from the rear; another has the shapely curve of a woman's breast; and the exterior of the third Earthly Form corresponds to a mass of wriggling intestines or serpents. Most art aims either toward the earth or toward the stars. It is either raw, sensual, and irrational—striving toward nature—or it is refined, spiritual, and rational—striving toward the realm of Plato's presumed essences. The two tendencies are so opposed, they rarely coincide.

Graham Marks manages it, with an economy that nearly hides the work's actual complexity. For as we approach these spheres, we don't expect more than their skins or hides promise. Coming closer we realize these are not wholes, but halves—cut or broken open. Will they reveal a vessel's inner volume, a melon's orange red flesh? Their easy resemblance to natural objects is misleading, and we are surprised when confronted by their rotating cores, which spiral to a terminus we can only guess at. Graham Marks reveals one mystery only to leave us at the doorstep of another. His art is the better for it. Much as a rose is more beautiful when partly open, these forms stir the imagination by their secrecy and ambiguity.

1. Philip Rawson, *The Appreciation of the Arts: Ceramics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 189.

2. *Ibid.*





(Detail) Untitled (1979), 33" x 29" x 31" (84 x 74 x 79 cm), earthenware. Collection of the Lannan Foundation. Photo: Michael McTwigan.

(Above) Untitled (1979), 31" x 27" x 32" (79 x 67 x 81 cm), earthenware. Collection Dr. and Mrs. Jay Cooper. Photo: Jerry Schmidt.



*Two views of Untitled (1979), 33" x 29½" x
33" (84 x 75 x 84 cm), earthenware.
Collection William Harper. Courtesy Helen
Druett Gallery. Photos: Michael McTwigan
and Jerry Schmidt.*



Untitled (1979), 25" x 29" x 28" (63.5 x 74 x 71.2 cm), earthenware. Collection Robert Pfannebecker. Photo: Michael McTwigan.

