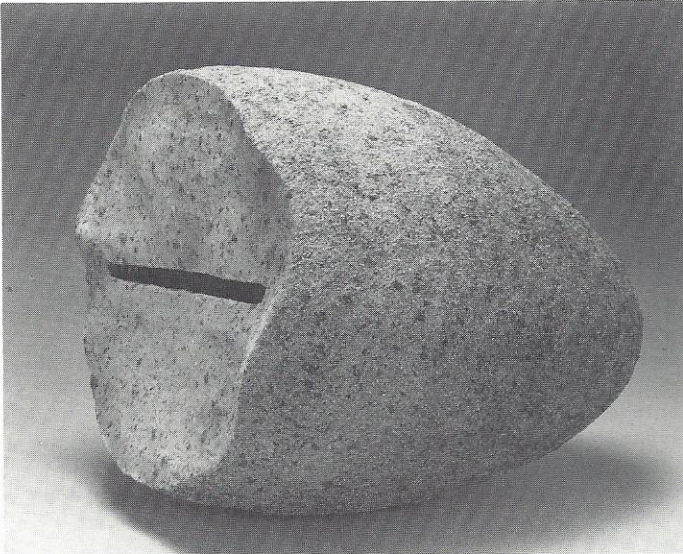




# Graham Marks

*Robert C. Morgan*



Untitled (1983), 34" (86.4 cm) long. Courtesy Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo: Jamey Stillings.

The earthenware sculpture of Graham Marks has become increasingly sophisticated over the past three years. The changes are subtle. The task has been one of refinement and meaning—or, perhaps, refinement toward meaning. Morphologically, there are three parts to each of his pieces: the outer surface, the inner volume, and the contoured lip or face that separates the other two. In order for a Marks sculpture to function in visual terms, these three elements need cohesiveness and balance.

Then there is the question of where the forms come from. That is, what is the meaning of their source and their direction? They maintain a vestige of containment; their roots in the vessel shape are evident. Yet they are gigantic forms. This is where materiality comes into play. One is aware that Marks is coiling thick snakes of earthenware clay—not bronze or wood or marble—but clay. Real matter, corresponding to the earth, the source of inspiration, the ovum: signifying what strange or banal presence?

The strongest work is unglazed, partially glazed, and sandblasted. I will cite two forms in particular, both untitled from 1983. The outer surface of the first is covered entirely by evenly spaced nodules. Such a remarkable epidermis could have evolved either from land or from water; it appears tough and impregnable. The inner volume, if there is one, is invisible. Invisible because the contoured lip has become a full face, another stony surface bearing the cracks of firing. The cracks breathe life into this sealed vessel. The absence of interiority intensifies its mystery. But what is the mystery in an earthenware form by Graham Marks? Not mystification; not pretension. The emphasis is on the presence, the physicality, of the form itself. Nothing is hidden. No meaning is obscured. It is all here. The monument or marker stands by itself, or it stands for nothing.

A second piece by Marks is distinguished by a long, thin slit across its face, just high enough to accommodate the curious, searching fingers of the viewer. The orb itself is flatter, longer, than his other forms. By not tilting its face upward to meet our gaze, this piece remains at rest, quietly self-contained. Its surface, too, is unassuming, granitelike.

The horizontal slit functions in two ways: as a mark upon a solid; as an invitation to another space. As mark or incision, the horizontal slit operates like a sign, calling our attention to the force of gravity. Parallel to the ground plane, the slit is the orb's built-in horizon. Figure and ground fuse, yet there is no lack of depth. The mark recedes and we must follow. As invitation to another world, its secret becomes our quest. Just as we peer in, it stares out. Yet eyes do not look this way. Its monocular gaze gives no information; the more we stare back, the less it tells us. The power of the sign is an incision into darkness, a beckoning mystery on the face of light.

*Graham Marks's recent sculpture was shown at Bevier Gallery, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York (October 23–November 6, 1983) and at Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia (November 12–December 10, 1983).*

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Untitled (1983), 31" (78.7 cm) long. Courtesy  
Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia. Photo:  
Jamey Stillings.

