



1

RELIQS

by Linda Tesner

of a TALE

Ted Vogel, head of the ceramics department at Lewis & Clark College, has a studio exercise that he performs with his students. He takes an object—let's say a hammer—and he passes it around the room. He asks the students to describe what the object means to them. In the case of the hammer, students might mention an experience making something in wood, or maybe a student has a grandfather who was a carpenter. Mostly, the memories are sentimental or nostalgic.

Then Vogel poses that a hammer can also be an instrument of violence—that according to FBI crime statistics, the number of murders committed annually with hammers (and clubs) far outnumbers murders committed with guns. This simple lesson illustrates the narrative power of an object, but, more importantly,

shows how the potential narrative can shift dramatically, depending upon the idiosyncratic filter of the viewer.

Vogel describes himself as always having been a collector of objects and a maker of spare parts. In his studio practice, these parts are made of clay, kiln-cast glass, digital images, found objects, and other mixed-media elements. Vogel combines these components into works that read as narratives, but whose meanings, like those of the hammer in the studio experience, are left to the viewer to discern. Those who have followed Vogel's career for many years will recall that much of his past work invoked the bird and the tree stump as central images to explore issues around ecology and, specifically, the interaction between humans and the natural world. In recent years, Vogel's work has subtly shifted from ecological con-

cerns to issues pertaining to living a human life, investigating both personal histories and social injustices. His work is now more meditative and reflective, and often taps into themes of memory and remembrance.

The installation *Shadow* is a moving tribute to an event in Vogel's own life as well as a watershed moment in twentieth-century history. *Shadow* consists of a large shape of a World War II—era plane, slightly distended, as if the shape were a shadow being cast from a low-flying aircraft. The plane's shape is rendered in blood-red dried rosebuds. Strewn across the plane's surface are scattered ceramic feathers. The aircraft shape rests on a field of grass, which, upon closer examination, is revealed to be composed of photographic prints of grass. Both the plane's shadow and the ground upon which the shadow is cast are simulations of an experience Vogel had while he was a resident at the Zentrum für Keramik, a ceramics center in Berlin. Vogel's studio was located in Pankow, a northern district of Berlin, Germany, located directly under the flight paths of the nearby Tegel airport. Every day, hundreds of planes would fly overhead, many passing so low that they cast their shadows on the grounds of the studio.

Intrigued by this daily experience and the fact that it was occurring in Germany, Vogel began to research and explore the history of air warfare in Europe and the Pacific Rim during World War II. He observed how sanitized war photography could be, casting superficiality on the most heinous events. *Shadow* recounts both the sensation one might have had while low-flying planes strafed the earth and the grisly phenomenon



1 *Shadow*, 20 ft. (6.1 m) in length, carved porcelain, fired to cone 10, rose petals, digital images, and wood, 2014. 2 *Passage*, 6 ft. (1.8 m) in height, handbuilt earthenware, terra sigillata, copper stain, fired to cone 04 oxidation, digital images, 2012. 3 *Altered States*, 28 in. (71 cm) in length, handbuilt and press-molded earthenware, copper stain, fired to cone 04 oxidation, 2010.



of shadows that were actually burned into physicality from the nuclear blasts over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The fact that the digital photographs of grass are images that Vogel took in his own backyard conveys an anxious sensation that a holocaust is not a distant or disconnected possibility; it could occur anywhere. The roses that make up the plane's shadow impart a sense that this installation is also a memorial, and perhaps each blossom represents a human being who was lost in conflict. The feathers that seem to have fallen over the rose-rendered shadow remind one that the human element, implied by the aircraft, is still part of the same ecosystem that encompasses birds in nature—an echo of Vogel's past ecological work—but the feathers also expose a spiritual context.

In *Relics of a Tale*, the backdrop is a grid of digital photographs of black, bare tree limbs, seen as if looking up into the sky on a winter's day. But the way in which the digital prints have been arranged on the wall deconstructs the feeling of a tree canopy and morphs the imagery into a sort of hybrid, domestic wallpaper. The predominant feature on this field of branches is an oversized birdhouse built from the spines of discarded books that Vogel rescued from a library purge. The house is constructed of titles such as: *Political Thought in America*, *Anxiety and Disorders*, *Odyssey of a Liberal*, *Sharing the Wealth*, *Life After Television*, *The Book of Saints*, *11 12 Web Style Guide*, and *To Help You*

Through the Hurting. The titles remind us of our place in time and culture, yet because these are books that have been discarded from a library—a supposed pantheon of accumulated human knowledge and achievement—the value and validity of these modern concepts (as represented by the book titles) are called into question.

Other emblematic objects are placed on the wall along with the book birdhouse. There are two cast-iron outline drawings of a songbird and a tulip, images that recall the paradox that some aspects of nature are simultaneously both domestic as well as wild. Also in proximity to the birdhouse are two two-dimensional works of art. One is a loose sketch of a bird perched in a tree; the other is a found, paint-by-number painting of a wooded path. There is a visual tension between these two images—the freehand impression and a prescribed-by-the-rules rendering, both of which describe an idyllic experience of nature. But there is more going on in this installation. From the perch on the book birdhouse hangs a chain;





4 *Campfire Stories—Tales of the Fallen* (overall and detail), handbuilt earthenware and black clay, stain, cast glass, cast resin, tree branches, paint, silver leaf, 2014. 5 *Relics of a Tale* (overall and detail), earthenware, cast glass, cast iron, books, digital images, silver leaf, and mixed media, 2014. 6 *Object Lesson: Feather*, 24 in. (61 cm) in length, earthenware, glaze, fired to cone 04 oxidation, cast glass, and cast iron, 2013.

at the bottom of the chain is a small sculpture of a human head. Just beneath the head, as if prepared to catch it if it falls, is an open human hand atop stacked stumps. This is a precarious assemblage, uncertain of its stability. To the right of the tableau is a theater curtain, and the “ground” is elevated, as if this installation is a diorama or something occurring on a stage. This artificiality—or the posed question, “what is real and what is artifice?”—is a theme that Vogel increasingly investigates, probing, perhaps, what is real and what is false in both his own personal narrative and that of the collective.

Altered States is an earthenware sculpture by Vogel that both harkens back to his earlier works using birds and stumps and leads to his more recent social concerns. The base of the sculpture is a trunk, but the trunk is shaped like the outline of the US on a map. Where one would expect to see tree rings on the top of the trunk, one sees a huge thumbprint. Vogel concedes that fingerprints resemble the dendrochronological patterns recording tree growth—but the fingerprint also implies human touch, and the thumbprint, specifically, recalls issues of control: being under someone’s thumb. The US-shaped stump serves as a perch for three black birds that hover on the periphery of the stump. The birds—stylized, but perhaps most reminiscent of crows—are both slightly sinister and oddly comforting, as if their presence implies a sense of hope in the wake of peril. But any exact reading of *Altered States* would be a disservice to Vogel’s audience. His installations and sculptures are,



after all, constructed from relics, but they do not reveal the ending of the story. The alternative interpretations are up to the viewer.

Ted Vogel is professor of ceramics at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. To see more of his work, visit <http://tedvogel.com>.

the author *Linda Tesner, is the director of the Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis and Clark College.*