

CUPPED

One of the earliest known records of the Greek alphabet appears on the Cup of Nestor, an artifact from the eighth century BCE discovered in 1954 on the island of Ischia in the Gulf of Naples. The inscription upon it reads: “Nestor’s cup I am, good to drink from. Whoever drinks this cup empty, straightaway the desire of beautiful-crowned Aphrodite will seize.” By way of these words, etched into its surface, the cup speaks proudly for itself and of itself. It informs us that it is to be used for drinking—and more. While it addresses everyone (“whoever”) equally, it summons more intimate modes of expression on the part of the one who will hold it, and in turn raise it, while directing affectionate sentiments toward another. Above all, perhaps, the cup is an invitation to poetic flight, a tool of toasting.

We are here dealing with a household implement and, moreover, technological product, among the first of the kind, insofar as it involves firing, the harnessing of an external energy source. To designate such an object as “ceramics”—with respect to both its material and medial constitution—risks glossing over this point. Objects of this sort, which abound in today’s artworld, are more typically treasured for their hands-on crafting. Deeply imprinted with the artist’s touch, these now are proposed as a kind of humanistic pushback to a more conceptual, farmed out, fabricated and/or manufactured order of work. However, the decision, central to this exhibition, to speak of cups rather than vessels, let’s say—a term more readily associated with the refinement of the fine arts—keeps us in the realm of the “low thinking” so dear to Bertolt Brecht. After all, cups involve the extraction of earth.

Not everything here conforms to this medium-specific description, but all of it relates, however tangentially. The setting exerts a binding influence. It is The Wolford House in Mount Washington, a residential space that lends to everything shown inside it a domestic, lived-in character. A wide-ranging assortment of cups has been installed here, lining the shelves, much as they might in any home. Alongside this collection of artist-made earthenware is also included some sculpture, painting, photography, video, and music, all of it referencing cups or things that are cup-like. How far can this theme be stretched? As far as the swimming pool, which has been reimagined as a mega-cup. The toilet, too, fits the bill: a cup for the behind and with a behind, feeding into the sewer system, the wastewater treatment plant, and ultimately the ocean—a whole series of cups ascending in orders of magnitude. Cups everywhere, products of art and industry, at once exalted and degraded, holy grails and throwaway Styrofoam tumblers.

CUPPED has been organized by a team of Art Center MFA students as part of a class taught by Kelly Akashi. Their own works are included alongside those of the faculty, and then those of artists still older, a shared cadre of inspirational figures. Many “big names” are featured, but mostly by way of their humblest offerings. These things are good—as in “good to drink from”—although not necessarily great. Greatness is rather what they give rise to, summoning feelings of ebullience and splendor. Let’s remember that, even before they give shape any material, our hands can be cupped in gestures of supplication or prayer. Held around the mouth, they amplify the voice. These are passionate gestures, like those deployed in ancient times at the banquet table where Nestor’s cup was once held aloft. The toast sounded at The Wolford House is no less inter-generational. And here, too, the cup operates simultaneously as a container of and a conduit for fiery spirits.

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