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# Adding a New Name to the Canon in Clay: Doyle Lane

The underrecognized Black ceramist made tiny “weed pots” in the 1960s and ’70s that are seen today on a fresh pedestal.

The ceramicist Doyle Lane in his home studio, around 1976, in the El Sereno neighborhood of Los Angeles. His pots were as complex as paintings; he also made color-field tile murals and mosaics that observed no delineation between fine art, folk art and design. Ben Serar

**By Jonathan Griffin**

July 29, 2020

LOS ANGELES — One afternoon in the early ’90s, the banking consultant Rudy Estrada returned to his mansion in Pasadena, Calif., to find two members of the local sheriff’s department standing over a lightly built African-American man spread-eagled on his front lawn.

Mr. Estrada immediately recognized the man as his friend Doyle Lane, a mild-mannered ceramic artist whom he had known since childhood. Growing up in the 1950s and ’60s in the working-class neighborhood of El Sereno, in East Los Angeles, Mr. Estrada and his schoolfriends used to visit Mr. Lane at his hillside home studio to watch him throwing pots.

Now Mr. Estrada was a collector of Mr. Lane’s work, and Mr. Lane had come to his house to install a tile mural. In this affluent, predominantly white neighborhood, the officers had assumed he was an intruder. (A few months later, Mr. Estrada’s father, who is Hispanic, was similarly harassed.)

Once the sheriffs had departed, Mr. Estrada was astonished to find Mr. Lane apologizing to him. “To this day it bothers me,” he told me recently by phone from his home in San Marino. “He was such a humble man.”

If Mr. Lane, who arrived in Los Angeles from New Orleans in the early 1950s and died in 2002, age 78, endured other such humiliations in his lifetime, he did not use his art to confront the racism, violence and economic inequity that surrounded him, unlike so many of his peers — Charles White, Betye Saar, Noah Purifoy or John Outterbridge, for example. He threw pots, made color-field tile murals and abstract “clay paintings,” along with mosaics, beads, enamel panels, wooden keepsake boxes and other artifacts that observed no delineation between fine art, folk art, applied art or design.

“Weed pots,” ceramic vessels by Mr. Lane, at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles in a show curated by the artist Ricky Swallow. Rozette Rago for The New York Times

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It is his tiny "weed pots" that are celebrated in an exhibition through Aug. 29 at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, which is open by appointment. The show gathers 60 pots made between the 1950s and the '70s: slim-necked, round vessels in a profusion of colors and textured glazes. All are borrowed from private and public collections; none are for sale. The show, which includes a virtual tour and a catalog currently in production, was the idea of the artist Ricky Swallow, a collector of Mr. Lane's work, whose own exhibition of bronze sculptures runs concurrently in the gallery's adjacent space.

The "weed pots" are ravishingly seductive. Some are smooth as river rocks; others are cracked or lumpen, like overripe fruit from otherworldly trees. Many are barely more than a couple of inches high. Despite Mr. Lane's name for them, the "weed pots" have nothing to do with marijuana; their apertures are wide enough for only a single wildflower stem. They are potent objects. David Kordansky, who is lending pots from his personal collection for the exhibition, describes them as "magic crystals."

Mr. Swallow's love of Mr. Lane's pots comes neither from their cultural significance nor from their historical value as design objects.

"I'm a fan of the possibility of the minute," he told me from behind a mask and a baseball cap during a break from installing at the gallery. "I've made very small intricate sculptures over the years and I've collected different things of that scale." One of the sculptures in his exhibition is "Cap #4," a life-size bronze cast of a ball of twine in a teacup. "I think there's something about the 'weed pots' that you could hold one or you could look at one and have a really clear understanding of who that artist is," he said. "That's a simple idea but it's a hard thing to achieve."

"I've never had the urge to make a social statement in my art," Mr. Lane said in a 1981 interview. "It's nice if you can do that. Some of the artists who do those things have other incomes; they're not making their living from just their art."

One loyal friend and supporter of Mr. Lane was the artist and educator Charles White, who died in 1979. Mr. White, who was a hugely influential figure in L.A.'s Black arts community, once said, "I have no use for artists who try to divorce themselves from the struggle." He helped Mr. Lane throughout his career, recommending him for a mural commission at the International Children's School in Los Angeles — a mosaic of a cat surrounded by birds, now lost. What drew Mr. White to Mr. Lane's work? Mr. White's son, C. Ian White, an artist and the director and chief executive of his father's archives, told me that it was Mr. Lane's "tireless work ethic" that appealed to him.

Mr. Lane worked hard to diversify his income streams. He was a glaze consultant for local ceramic supply companies, while also selling wares direct from his studio. He sold through craft galleries like The Folk Tree in Pasadena, where his beads went for a dollar each, as well as the Brockman Gallery in Leimert Park, a vital and respected Black-owned gallery for African-American artists in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Dale Davis, its co-founder with his brother Alonzo, said that Mr. Lane was a popular fixture at what he called his "holiday shows" — group exhibitions of objects under $30.

Around the same time, Mr. Lane was undertaking much larger projects. When the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens in San Marino unveiled its new visitor entrance in

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Ceramic vessels by Mr. Lane on display at David Kordansky Gallery. Rozette Rago for The New York Times

The Australian sculptor Ricky Swallow at the gallery with some of Mr. Lane’s tiny pots. Rozette Rago for The New York Times

The pots are ravishingly seductive. Some are smooth as river rocks; others are cracked or lumpen, like overripe fruit from otherworldly trees. Rozette Rago for The New York Times

2015, the courtyard outside its education center was dominated by a 17-foot wide mural made by Mr. Lane in 1964. The abstract work, made up of nearly 5,000 irregular red tiles, was commissioned by the architect Welton Becket for the Pasadena office of the Mutual Savings and Loan Association.

A mural made by Mr. Lane for the Mutual Savings and Loan Association in Pasadena, Calif., has been restored in a courtyard at the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens in San Marino. David Wakely

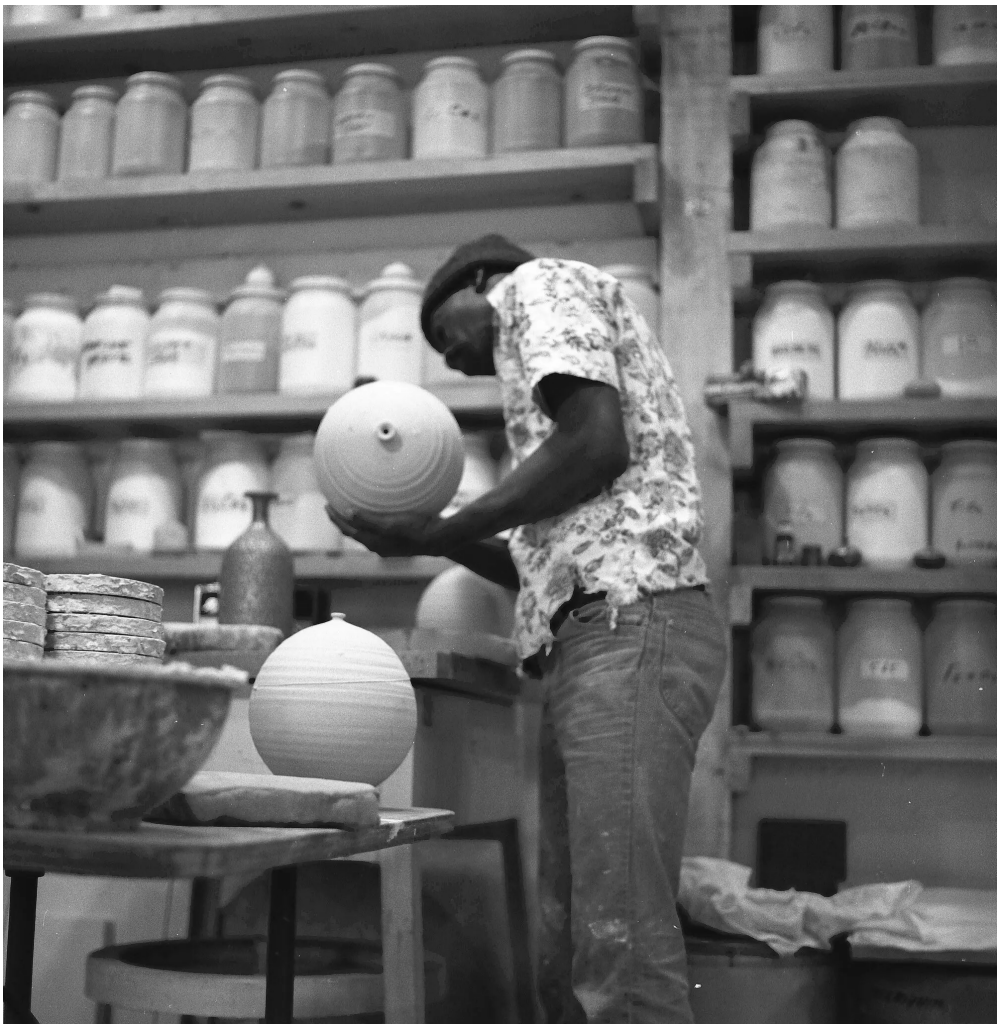
“He had a connection I wasn’t aware of,” Mr. Davis said. “Because a bank was not going to buy a major work by an African-American artist in the 1950s or ’60s.” In fact, Mr. Lane had many connections. He would carry boxes of pots to architects’ offices, offering them direct or, in at least one instance, allowing the architect to sell on his behalf. These relationships brought larger commissions for him, from Los Angeles to Palm Springs.

The photographer Ben Serar, who photographed Mr. Lane around 1976, recalled how his father, the architect Rudy Serar, met him while they both were throwing pots at East Los Angeles College. “Over the years, my dad connected Doyle with a lot of different architects,” he said.

The Los Angeles-based independent curator jill moniz (she writes her name in lowercase letters), formerly head curator at the California African American Museum, to which Mr. Lane left his archive, suggests that this resourcefulness alone makes him remarkable. “It’s wonderful that he could sell his work and live doing this thing that he loved,” she said. “For a lot of Black artists at the time, that was an almost impossible consideration.”

She has little patience with the patronizing, pitying narrative that is often attached to Mr. Lane, who died alone, without family. “You know — ‘He was alone, poor Doyle Lane,’” she said. “But not poor Doyle Lane! Doyle Lane had a community, he had friends, he had collectors, he had

commissions. He lived a full life.” She added, “This is the thing for me that’s so important right now; there is a community of Black makers and thinkers and collectors who were friends with Doyle who supported him, who were interested in him long before he became the purview of white institutionality.” His legacy, she insists, does not need saving by anyone.



Mr. Lane had strong support from Black art dealers and from architects, and now has a growing audience among collectors. Ben Serar

But Mr. White is not so sure. He broadly welcomes the attention — “overzealous attention,” Ms. moniz calls it — that Black artists are receiving from white collectors and institutions, even if it comes too late. “He was a single man,” Mr. White said. “I remember his house as a shack. He wasn’t afforded those opportunities of a certain level of lifestyle, whether or not that he wanted it. When he passed, everything was just moved and put onto the street.”

These days, Mr. Lane’s “weed pots” change hands for around $2,000 each, said Gerard O’Brien, the design dealer and gallerist who has handled much of his work over the past 15 years. Large pieces go for much more. Most of his clients, he says, are white, and typically are collectors of midcentury design rather than African-American art.

Contrast Mr. Lane’s market with that of Ken Price, perhaps L.A.’s most celebrated ceramic artist, who studied in the same class as Mr. Lane in the 1950s. Last year, Price’s “Slate Cup II” (1972)

sold at Christie’s for $243,750. Price, who was white, had his first solo exhibition at the Ferus Gallery in 1960, age 25. Mr. Lane, who received such deep affection and support in his lifetime from those who knew him, likely never imagined receiving that same devotion from those who did not.