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Art review: Aaron Morse and Matthias Merkel Hess at ACME.

By Leah Ollman

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A terrific double bill at ACME pairs paintings and collages by Aaron Morse with ceramic sculpture by Matthias Merkel Hess. Separate and equally compelling, the shows feature two of L.A.'s most engaging younger talents.

Morse is driven by the vexed urge — irresistible, yet futile—to make sense of the big picture: the past, the present, how they connect, where we're headed. Looking at disparate parts from a distance (the show is called "Earth From Space") helps to make sense of the whole, and Morse envisions every scene from above, afar, or in cross-section. His collages depict evolutionary markers from the big bang to upright man in a giant zigzagging timeline. In "Men and the Sea," he paints a slice of the vertical spectrum from aquatic menagerie below to dense metropolis above.

Ambitious, accretive, awestruck, Morse is part history painter, part archivist, part cosmic philosopher. The textures of his works, whether on paper or canvas, are richly evocative of time's passage. A crinkled, crusty canvas piece at the entrance to the show feels like a physical trace of a geological process or, more macrocosmically, a relief map of broad terrain. Morse favors colors that seem slightly faded, and illustrations more than one

step removed from their original sources. As a result, his work invokes vaguely out-of-date instructional materials, and comes to rest somewhere between documentary record and painterly guess. It can feel muddled (in good ways and bad) and chaotic (the same), but its relentless, vital energy is a perfect match to civilization's irrepressible, disorderly course.



Merkel Hess is a gentle trickster whose material transformations send out ever-expanding ripples of resonance. His show, titled "Bucketry," consists of a few dozen familiar containers — garbage cans, milk crates, laundry baskets — rendered in glazed ceramic. There's a five-gallon water jug in lovely pale jade porcelain, a 'Styrofoam' cooler in burnt-earth stoneware, a trash can with a luscious skin of fuchsia and teal. At first, the work seems merely clever, a bit coy. It graduates quickly into a smarter form of charm, a knowing contribution to the canon of shape-shifting surrealism. Pseudo-functional sculpture, the pieces nod to clay's old confinement to the ghetto of useful craft, but they also bring to mind some of the oldest and most treasured relics of humankind, vessels for carrying water, storing grain. Merkel Hess has taken the new, plastic, mass-produced, cheap versions of those containers and made them double back into something semi-precious, handmade. He's endowed the generic and uniform with character, irregular grace and a sense of humor. Even his price list is provocative and amusing.

ACME, 6150 Wilshire Blvd., (323) 857-5942 Through Dec. 21. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.acmelosangeles.com

Images: Aaron Morse, "Timeline (Natural History), top;" Matthias Merkel Hess, "Bucketry" installation view, bottom. Credit: ACME