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'Forget About the Sweetbreads' at James Fuentes

By [Andrew Russeth](#) · 01/22/13 4:33pm

Even if artist Joanne Greenbaum and James Fuentes's associate director, Adrienne Rubenstein, had included work by only one artist in their group show about the uses and peculiar attributes of ceramics, it would have been a hit—so long as that artist was Alice Mackler, an octogenarian ceramicist represented here by nine wild little ceramic figurines, all from 2012. There's a purple-broccoli-haired woman, a marshmallow-ish ghost with a wild orange grin and blue eyes, a manic-looking chef in a black-and-white-speckled costume and a sad slice of blackened toast with two legs. They are clearly the work of a master—maybe even a magician—of ceramics.

But seven artists are represented here, and none of them underwhelms. The other six are, like Ms. Mackler, mostly older figures, a welcome counterpoint to the ceramics craze going on among young artists these days. These old hands engage the language of ceramics in different ways, sometimes even without using the material.

Heike Kati Barath gives the squiggly white curls of the hair on a monstrous rabbit in a 2012 painting the weight of fired clay. Annette Messenger creates the bulbous feel of ceramics using piles of multicolored fabric, which she fashions into two nose-diving figures in the 2006 *Deux Replicants Ensembles*. Miriam Cahn's 2002–11 *Blaue Mutter Gelbes Kind* (Blue Mother Yellow Child) shows those two wraith-like figures, both bald, in front of a purple sky. Tiny accents near the mother's eyes add movement and volume, and suggest the shifting that occurs as wet clay solidifies.

A highlight of the show is the group of abstract paintings by Norbert Prangenberg, a German artist who died this past summer. Brush marks as thick as buttercream have the same unwieldy density of ceramic sculpture. There's a comical little Pinocchio-nosed head hiding in a Hans Hofmann-worthy forest of color in a 2009 painting that echoes *Koff* (Head), a 2012 clay sculpture displayed nearby. A tidy little abstract painting on the base of that work underscores the futility of rigidly categorizing art by any medium or method. (*Through Feb. 3, 2013*)

Observer, January 2013