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Potters make pots and artists make art—if you cling to party-line thinking, which Matthias Merkel Hess does not. He messes with boundaries and adopts multiple causes. Utility and futility appeal to him equally and at the same time. He is nothing if not an earnest ironist.

Merkel Hess refers to himself variably as a potter and an artist, as well as a manufacturer. Each label sticks to a different part of his persona. Each connotes a certain sphere of operation, a specific history and category of intent. That he identifies with all three terms tells us much about his frame of mind, his sense of humor and especially his embrace of contradictions. The term manufacturer suits him surprisingly well. Originally, manufacture meant hand-made (from the Italian *manifattura* and Latin *manufactum*), but over time its meaning has reversed, and now a manufactured object is generally understood to be one produced on a large scale, typically by machine. Doubling back on itself, the word applies to Merkel Hess's Bucketry work both coming and going.

These hand-built sculptures faithfully mimic mass-produced objects: trash cans (particularly the Rubbermaid Brute), milk crates, laundry baskets, buckets, gas cans and beverage coolers. Through attentive work of the hand and a variety of glazing techniques, Merkel Hess transforms mundane, generic items that are made to look absolutely uniform into distinct, one-of-a-kind pieces. The containers' drab, industrial colors have been replaced by vibrant hues (garnet, emerald, periwinkle, lemon) and rich, earthy tones, a nod to glazes popular in California ceramics of the '60s. The bland smoothness of the plastic forms has given way to organically mottled textures, a lively play of serendipitous drips and spots. The pieces feel newly precious, even as they retain something of the stubbornly ordinary. They have split identities generated by a cunning set of inversions and reversals, multiple identities that oscillate and fail--brilliantly--to resolve.

A bit of nostalgia wafts through this assembly, and a whiff of material history, too. Merkel Hess has been interested in vessel forms since he first started on the wheel, about ten years ago. His mother, an artist, makes fiber vessels, and two of his primary teachers in ceramics, Tony Marsh and Adrian Saxe, riff on a host of traditional vessel forms. When he started graduate school at UCLA (earning his MFA in 2010), he made some crocks, harking back to 19th-century American stoneware pottery forms that were common on farms and homes in the midwest, where he grew up. For common storage, those vessels have long since been supplanted by lighter, cheaper, plastic containers, like the 5-gallon buckets that proliferate in his studio, holding glazes and other supplies. Buckets led to Brutes, which led to milk crates, gas cans and more. The whole Bucketry ("pottery plus buckets") family of forms has an engaging physical immediacy to match its wry charm. For his models, Merkel Hess tends to gravitate toward older containers, styles that

weren't computer-designed, he says. "Those are the plastic forms I was drawn to, things that were around when I was a kid in the '80s. Like someone might say, 'I like Midcentury Modern'--well, I like '70s Rubbermaid."

It would seem an act of elevation to bring versions of inconspicuous, functional items into the foreground as autonomous art objects, but from Merkel Hess's perspective, it's more of a lateral move. He has deep respect for the integrity of common objects, plus artworks don't necessarily belong on a metaphorical pedestal. They have a function, too: "to be looked at and talked about." Merkel Hess studied journalism as an undergraduate at the University of Kansas, and started a satire page in the college paper. He enjoyed doing what he calls "fake journalism, Onion-style stuff," and much of what he now does as an artist involves similar jester-like jabs at truths and assumptions. What makes a pot a pot, for instance, and a sculpture a sculpture. What differentiates art from mere product, artist from merchandiser.

He has developed a line of pottery (jugs, vases and more) called MerkelWare that he promotes as "Perfect for everyday meals as well as those special times when only handmade, artisanal pottery will do." MerkelWare, he coyly states, has been "Rebuilding the wall between pottery and life since its launch in 2009." Some of his bowls are made from slabs of clay shaped by the impression of his knees and shins. One-of-a-kind pieces, yes, but deviously, defiantly not made by hand, the Shin Bowls and Knee Bowls, Merkel Hess writes in a mock MerkelMall ad, "just scream Bruce Nauman crossed with a Zen begging bowl."

Originally, the line went by the name Futility, Ltd. Its catalogue featured charmingly crude ink drawings and watercolors, and text copy marrying conceptual wordplay with marketing slogans. "Poetry with an extra T," one page declares. "Confident Men Choose Futility, Ltd." pitches another, beneath a "Buy Today!" banner. Yet another page offers this prescriptive appeal: "Cure Depression With Worked Earth."

In Merkel Hess, the humility of a simple potter jostles with the self-promotional savvy of an emerging, 21st-century artist. He has chosen to fold the making, marketing and selling of his work into a single enterprise unified by self-referential wit. "This is not business as usual," he declared in his MFA thesis. His spoofs are also sincere. He neither spurns the language and operations of commerce for appearance's sake, nor does he engage with them cynically, as if a necessary evil. Instead, Merkel Hess crafts his ad campaigns with as much care and verve as he crafts his buckets and crates. He designed his own price list for a Los Angeles gallery show, basing it on an actual turn-of-the-20th-century sales sheet for a New York stoneware company. The MerkelMall spread (for Slake magazine) adopts the familiar graphics of a SkyMall catalog, spiked with clever, ever-revealing text. Its column of Frequently Asked Questions is punctuated with a single entry under NAQ (never asked questions): "Were you named after the German Renaissance painter Matthias Grunewald? Yes."

In these consumerist times, establishing a public identity has become synonymous with forging a brand name, and Merkel Hess skips smartly down that path, too. He has developed a font (called Merkel, of course) based on his own handwriting. And for a few years, he has been giving away rulers the length of his right arm (his “main pottery tool”) from armpit to fingertips, a span otherwise known as One Merkel.

Merkel Hess quotes Harold Rosenberg as saying, “An artist is a person who has invented an artist.” It’s a job done by hand, through the material assertion of the individual self, through making. And it’s an act of will, of imagination. Merkel Hess makes his way--quite literally--by fiddling with expectations, tampering with definitions, trespassing across categorical borders, tempering reverence with irreverence. He commits acts of aesthetic disobedience, even as he honors the history of his chosen medium. Especially to honor the history of working with clay.