

Sean Donovan's Praxis of Matter at M 2 3: Beyond Material and into the Meta



Installation view, Sean Donovan: *Praxis of Matter* at M 2 3. Courtesy of the artist and M 2 3.

Sean Donovan: *Praxis of Matter*

M 2 3

January 13 through February 26, 2023

By **RAINA MEHLER**, February 2023

Sean Donovan's solo show, *Praxis of Matter*, features 7 skillfully constructed sculptures that are both thought-provoking and harrowing. It is his second solo show at M 2 3 (New York), a contemporary art space that exhibits artwork that focuses on materiality with an overall minimalist, abstract aesthetic. Each work featured in the show utilizes different sculptural processes and varies greatly in scale and opacity. Similar to his previous show, the artist once again calls attention to the existential dangers of climate change and moral myopia, but this time the work delves deeper, resonating with the viewer on a psychological, metaphysical, and introspective level. By distinctly exploring the human condition, it mutinously reveals the self-destruction coded in our DNA and the ignorance of humankind's global annihilation due to the artist's meticulous selection of materials, rigorous artistic practice, and thoughtful installation layout. The exhibition underscores mankind's collective ambivalence and our innate, unconscious power to repress, while simultaneously summoning awareness and conjuring the will to act.

Upon entry, we are immediately drawn to dark forms scattered on the floor at a distance; but first, we perceive in our periphery two works hung on opposite walls that are akin to unearthed relics. These are *Bone*, a 9.5 x 1.75-inch horizontal linear form that is a melted PVC pipe, and *Three Panels of a Nine Foot Pipe*, a much larger 55" x 42" piece. The latter is a vertically orientally, curved rectangular object made of cast fiberglass and UV crystal clear epoxy. It looms over the viewer, appearing to be heavy and ominously floating. *Bone* insinuates that it is a human or animal fossil in a state of decay and disassociated from its former body. The title of the opposite work implies it's a section of a larger industrial receptacle, detached from its former vessel. Both were disconnected and discarded, but now have been replicated and resurrected.



Sean Donovan, *Urns*, 2022 (titles vary), urns sand-cast from 74 up to 1,217 AR-15 brass rifle ammunition casings, patina, each stamped and titled with the number of brass casings used in its casting, 4.5 x 3.5 inches (12 x 9 cm) up to 12.25 x 5 inches (31 x 13 cm), 1 pound (442 grams) up to 16 pounds, 2 ounces (7,302 grams)

Viewers then begin to meander through a series of dark, small-sized works that range from 4.5 x 3.5 inches up to 12.25 x 5 inches. Instead of referring to these works as vessels or vases, the artist dubs these *urns*, a term that harkens back to ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Chinese cultures that used them as funerary containers to hold human remains. Donovan's urns are made up of thousands of AR-15 brass rifle ammunition. During a 2022 Texas residency, the artist contacted gun ranges to acquire used gun shells and proceeded to melt them into a sand mold: the first time he used the traditional metal process of sand casting. When the urns are shown all together in the gallery, they allude to memorial or grave sites - concocting a sensation of unease when walking among them, as if you might trip, tip one over and break it. It reminds us of the fragility of our existence and how our lives can utterly change in an instant.

The already-fired gun shells used to create the urns have the potential to be reprocessed: in other words, gun owners and gun companies can take the empty brass shells and make them usable again. The brass shells that held the bullet, the primer, and the gunpowder can be reassembled, enabling someone to shoot those same gun shells again, but at a much-reduced cost. Donovan's audacious act of confiscating the shells in Texas, a state notoriously known for having lax gun laws, eliminates any potential for reuse. By subverting and displaying these tools of destruction and putting them on display, they become vehicles of contemplation and activism.

This show serves as a flagrant reminder of America's unresolved issues and the politicization of gun control: the repeated new stories about police brutality, the ongoing shootings in public places and schools, the failure of the federal government to act to pass legislation on guns, and the divided beliefs about the Second Amendment due to our deeply polarized country. The intentional display forces viewers to step over the urns, alluding to how we often overlook our societal malaise. We see a headline or image on a web page or on social media of a catastrophe, but we just scroll to the next image, the next distraction. This exhibition compels us to reflect on the stances we have, the paths we walk, and the actions we take.



Sean Donovan, *Nine Panels of a One Foot Pipe*, 2022, cast UV fiberglass, pigment, graphite, hardware, 14.5 diameter x 54.25, inches (37 diameter x 138 cm)

In contrast with the inky black urns, the artworks toward the back have a yellowish, translucent quality. *Nine Panels of a One Foot Pipe* is a circular tunnel that we can look through, making visible the internal and external. The ability to visualize the other side suggests there is a path or a way out. Thus, this work gives a glimmer of hope: it's the "light at the end of the tunnel". But this tunnel reveals another work titled *Progressive 989*, a found double bar police lock cast that is made from over 900 brass AR-15 rifle ammunition casings. Once again, we are reminded of violence and atrocity.

The two artworks in the back room *Three Panels of a Seven Foot Pipe* and *Three Panels of a Three Foot Pipe* contrast with the dark, opaque artworks and are semi-transparent cast fiberglass pieces. The diaphanous qualities give an effect of lightness and air, hanging precariously off the wall. Despite the translucent appearance, the works seem contaminated, stagnant, and abandoned. They are contemporary artifacts, albeit manufactured, that are ghosts of a previous existence; haunting and taunting us.



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When deconstructing the title *Praxis of Matter*, praxis means action and recalls Praxis theory, which considers knowing, being, and doing. While also defined as a composition of atoms that make up most of the tangible world, the word matter could also be a play on the things that "matter" to us - what we love and care about. It causes us to question what actions we perform and what we disregard and neglect. These works have a corporeal and performative feeling: connoting the sheer force of the body to create them and the will to transmute the materials to produce these poignant artworks. What motivates us to respond and react and finally trigger a chasm in our cycle of repression and put effort into bringing about awareness and change? Our innate, primal feelings are triggered: the flight or fight response. The show touches on multiple levels of our understanding and experience - the phenomenological, the philosophical, and the ontological. It elicits latent feelings that linger on your skin like oil. It leaves an indelible mark like the enduring smell of a putrid body or toxic environmental waste. It rings in your ears like the echo of a gunshot.

On view through Feb 26th at M 2 3, 24 Henry Street, New York, NY 10002. **WM**



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Raina Mehler currently serves as a Director at Pace Gallery, and is part of Pace Verso, the gallery's Web3 hub. Mehler has worked at Pace for over a decade and previously served as the Director of Media Arts at Pace, founding this new department dedicated to developing best practices for exhibiting analog and digital artworks, as well as working on sales strategies.

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