

# Graham Marks: For Joy and Grieving at HB381 Gallery, New York

March 7 – April 19, 2025











More years, More birthdays / More birthdays, More candles /  
 More candles, More light / More light, More truth /  
 More truth, More beauty / More beauty, More love.

– Excerpt from the poem “Birthdays” by B. Abbott, ca. 1918

HB381 is pleased to present For Joy and Grieving, an exhibition of improvisatory candelabras by the New York-based ceramicist Graham Marks (United States, b. 1951).

There is a peculiar quality to candlelight — still but never static, pulsating, shifting in response to small fluctuations in the atmosphere — which is shared by the gestural, unspooled coils, tenuously slumped loops, and pinched and spliced lengths of clay which make up Marks’ sculptural fabulations. His ceramics appear as though drawn incongruously in three dimensional space, dancing doodles materialized from the air. Many are riotous with rainbow glazes pooled atop one another. They constitute a visual parade of color, line, and form. Marks compares them to the spontaneous rhythms of jazz, observing, “The moment I love is the moment when you ask, ‘Where did that come from?’”

For his first solo exhibition with HB381, the artist presents close to four dozen sculptural candelabras, each endowed with his improvisatory, cut-and-paste approach to hand-building. He incorporates vessels, thrown on the wheel, which are subdivided and reassembled, stacked and joined in piecemeal harmony. The candelabra is new as a fundamental form for Marks— who has previously focused on broken spheres and tori—and it is one with its own distinct connotations. Artists have frequently employed candles as markers of time, devotion, ritual, and mood. Consider Gerhard Richter’s painterly motif of ghostly candles from his Kerzen series, famously reproduced on Sonic Youth’s album Daydream Nation. They are distinctly funereal, grave, sombre. Marks’ output is their antithesis, a refusal of those austere, near monochrome depictions of time passing. Rather, his candelabras serve as messengers of life itself, not at a remove from it, but immersed in its vibrant cadences. They connote joy, sociality, and discovery.



Prior to his current renaissance, Marks was actively exhibited throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. His work during those decades was monumental, organic, and enigmatic: textured, fragmented spheres that recalled geodes or seed pods but on a scale comparable to the viewer's own body. Now in his seventies, Marks' return to working in clay follows a thirty-year hiatus from the medium. During that time, his encounters with environmental activism and an interest in healing led him to study acupuncture under J. R. Worsley, the practitioner responsible for popularizing five-element acupuncture in the U.S. Subsequently, Marks established a private practice in Alfred, NY, which operated from 1995 to 2020. As a result, *For Joy and Grieving* represents his first solo exhibition in a commercial gallery in three decades.

In his essay for the exhibition, ceramicist Tony Marsh writes: The ceramic art in this exhibition is built intimately in the hands of the artist and is a beautiful record of a thousand contiguous decisions and improvisations. Tools appear to be standard and minimal. The number of aesthetic decisions that are made in a short period of time to complete one work are numerous and fluid. To create in this way compresses time. The process and results speed up the creative growth curve. When one works intuitively, the art teaches the maker ... This is not ceramic art that could be created by a newcomer to art or clay. There is a wealth of artistic experience and craft wisdom encoded in each piece. The work process follows creative pleasure and clearly the joy of the maker resides in each object.

One catalyst for Marks' return to studio ceramics was his encounter with the Rococo and Baroque decorative arts of 18th-century France, which he discovered in an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2021. The show was dedicated to the historical objects which inspired Walt Disney's hand-drawn animations and gathered together an assortment of ornate decorative wares by the likes of Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, whose flambeaux were the prototype for *Lumière*, the garrulous candelabra in *Beauty and the Beast*. This, alongside the artist's appreciation for historical pottery spanning Italian majolica and early 20th-century Oaxacan earthenware prompted his revitalized approach.

Notably, Marks' reengagement with studio ceramics came during the pandemic's monumental toll on health and livelihood. His years working in the medical field left an imprint on him, spurring a reconsideration of the humanistic function of his ceramic wares. "We are living in a time where joy is a necessity and grieving a part of our lives as well," Marks says. "I intend for the candelabras to be a kind of 'functional sculpture' in that sense." Marks taught ceramics at Kansas State University, Rochester Institute of Technology, and the Cranbrook Academy of Art, where he was Head of Ceramics from 1986 to 1992. His work has been exhibited internationally and collected privately; it is held by numerous public institutions including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Yale University Art Gallery, Detroit Institute of Art, the Everson Museum, the Museum of Art and Design, the Cranbrook Museum of Art, the Stedelijk Museum, the Hermitage Museum, and the National Gallery of Australia. From 1992 to 1995, he studied acupuncture with J.R. Worsley, establishing a private practice which ran successfully for two and a half decades. In 2020, Marks returned to ceramics. He splits his time between Brooklyn and Alfred, NY.