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Seeing Things | Matthias Merkel Hess

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A view of Matthias Merkel Hess's "Bucketry" show at ACME. Gallery in Los Angeles

Buckets, trash cans, gas cans, laundry hampers and milk crates. [Matthias Merkel Hess](#), a Los Angeles artist, reimagines mundane containers, made to hold everything from gasoline to dirty socks, as ceramic sculptures that are clever, quirky and surprisingly graceful. In his show "Bucketry," at [L.A.'s Acme Gallery](#), on view through Dec. 21, he has expanded his quotidian repertory to include several new forms, including those of Styrofoam coolers and laundry hampers, the latter rendered in stoneware in various shapes and sizes.

Merkel Hess started making buckets three years ago, when he was a graduate student in the Master of Fine Arts program in ceramics at U.C.L.A. “I was thinking about what it means to be a potter, a ceramic specialist who is making work for the contemporary art world,” he said. “What do you do today as a potter if you’re interested in making functional things?” Fascinated by traditional 19th-century stoneware, he realized that the form of the five-gallon plastic bucket, ubiquitous in ceramics studios, could be the contemporary counterpart to the large crocks and storage vessels that potters used to make, and which have disappeared from everyday use. A series of ceramic buckets followed, and for his thesis show, Merkel Hess added “Brutes,” 40-gallon trash cans glazed in unlikely colors, from iridescent blue to pink and puce. “Bucketry” is the culmination of the artist’s three-year exploration of container forms. “I’m interested in making things that comment on functional plastic objects,” he explained, “and the pieces can be selected the same way you would choose something in a retail store.” For the exhibition, the artist (who makes drawings and posters as well) designed a price list that’s a riff on a turn-of-the-century price list from the Syracuse Stoneware Company. Merkel Hess also has a line of hand-thrown pottery, MerkelWare, for the retail market, and its polka-dotted bowls and whiskey jugs are available at [Iko Iko](#). And the current issue of [Pin-Up Magazine](#) includes several of Merkel Hess’s “knee bowls,” which are, as their name implies, molded on the artist’s knee.

