



THE FIRST THING TO KNOW ABOUT "LA BORNE: 1940-80,"

the exhibition currently on view at New York's Magen H Gallery, is that the catalog pictures don't fully do it justice. The same could likely be said of any show, but in this case, the chasm that yawns between the sensation of seeing the sculptural ceramic objects on paper and seeing them in person — in all their raw, lustrous, organic beauty — is so wide that the point must be made anew.

An exhibition currently on view at New York's Magen H Gallery features dozens of works from the postwar French ceramics movement La Borne, including this large vase, ca. 1969, by Jean and Jacqueline Lerat. All images courtesy of Magen H Gallery

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Named for the small village in central France, La Borne refers to the output of a pioneering group of ceramicists working there between 1940 and 1980, including Jean and Jacqueline Lerat, who founded the movement, as well as Elisabeth Joullia, Vassil Ivanoff, Yves and Monique Mohy and Anne Kjaersgaard, among others.

Though revered in France (as well as in Japan, a nation that highly prizes ceramics), La Borne is not widely known in the United States — in fact, this exhibition, which opened November 8 and runs through December 15, is the first of its kind in the US. For Hugues Magen, the gallery's principal, it's nothing less than a personal passion project some 10 years in the making. La Borne pieces rarely come to market, and he's collected more than 100, all in perfect condition.

Uniquely, women were both as numerous and as prominent as men within the La Borne movement. One, Elisabeth Joullia, was known for creating rounded pieces such as this sculptural vase, ca. 1980.



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When something is so primal, so right, and the proportions are so perfect, it speaks to you," says Magen. "For me, it's this quest for beauty. I love beauty in all its forms, but it has to be great beauty, not just simple beauty. And I see enough to know the difference. That was my quest — and why it's taken so long."

Magen's principal Hugues Magen encountered his first La Borne piece, one by Elisabeth Joulia, in the early 2000s. "It came across as a shock to me," says Magen, "I didn't know anything about it, but viscerally I was very taken by it."

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Though varied in appearance, La Borne ceramics share such chief characteristics as geometric, architectural shapes (many of the artisans, in fact, came from architectural backgrounds) and coarse, naturalistic surfaces that reflect the rural, wooded, salt-of-the-earth environs of La Borne itself. (For contrast, picture the smooth, candy-colored earthenware that comes out of the better-known

pottery town of Vallauris in the country's south, which is bathed in warm air and Mediterranean light.) Another characteristic is a sense of timelessness, or rather time-straddling: From one angle, a piece's form will evoke Greco-Roman classicism, but swivel it around and you're confronted by modern architecture. In several instances, a ruddy red-brown glaze recalls the famous Paleolithic Lascaux cave paintings (discovered in

1940 and undoubtedly influential on La Borne, says Magen). At the same time, one can discern the influence of concurrent art movements such as Arte Povera and Abstract Expressionism, with one artist slashing knife marks into his stony "canvas" and others sprinkling salt into the kiln to create a splattered surface.

A long vessel by Yves Mahy, ca. 1958, does double duty as a dish and a sculptural object.



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As Magen explains it, the appeal of La Borne isn't necessary something that will flatten you outright — at least not initially. "It's not flashy or something that screams at you," he says of pieces in which you can visualize a pair of hands at work, smoothing here, pinching there, creating sharp planes and bulging curves, textured surfaces and delicate ridges. "It's something that requires you to be invested in a conversation. But the more you look at it, the more you want to know."



One La Borne trademark is the earthen-colored, variegated glaze visible on, from left, a sculptural bowl, ca. 1957, by Monique Mohy-Laoroix, and a tall vase, ca. 1958, by Hildegund Schlichenmaier.

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