

# Mark Gordon's Action Sculptures

Article by Elaine Marshall

**T**HERE IS SOMETHING THOROUGHLY ELEMENTAL ABOUT a craft whose materials consist of earth, water, air and fire. This elemental materiality permeates the sculptures of Mark Gordon, as do the

more immaterial elements of experimentation, playfulness and grace. Gordon's series *Three Arches* explores the material, formal and functional elements of brick and arch. Inspired by the classical

*Brick Sphere IV, 2001, Glazed earthenware, 38 x 38 x 38 cm.*



arches of Roman aqueducts, Gordon has taken an overlooked, utilitarian feature of those structures – the projecting stone blocks that supported scaffolding used during construction and repair – and made his art from it. In these arches, bricks jut – erratically, asymmetrically, irreverently – as though caught in the act of exploding the classical form from within or imploding it into its own centre. And yet the bricks do not entirely escape; the arch holds them tenuously in place.

Gordon says he wants a piece to have “action”. His arches, energetic and precariously balanced, offer the action he is looking for: “I like the arch form because of its dynamic tension, its movement, the way it

works against gravity, the way it incorporates volumes and voids.” The same could be said of *Brick Sphere*, an earlier piece that explores similar concepts. Here, Gordon has also used modular brick shapes to construct an ideal form: the sphere. But, like *Arches*, this form appears at the moment of exploding or imploding. Gordon also wants the action that “comes from pushing materials to their limits” to achieve “variation, surprise in surface and texture.”

Gordon achieves surface action through the ceramic process itself, beginning with the alchemy of preparing the clay. For *Arches*, Gordon used a rough clay mixture to which he added combinations of

*Tripod. 2002. Moulded, handbuilt, clay mixed with glass, glaze, steel, copper and salt, 46 x 43 x 40 cm.*



unusual ingredients – perlite, sawdust, alumina oxide grit, fragments of pyrometric cones, nails, house keys, chunks of glass or copper wire pulverised with mortar and pestle. "Their presence makes for unpredictability, accident, randomness in the firing," Gordon says. He also experimented with glazing and firing temperatures, again looking for surface randomness produced by glazing, or the lack of it. With *Brick Sphere*, he used a copper-saturated matt glaze and heavy reduction firing to bring out shades and unpredictable colour: "The sphere is cool in colour, perhaps directing attention toward cold atmospheric realms, beyond the warmth of the sun." In contrast, *Arches*, which he "grounded in warm

earth tones with encrusted fragments" was not glazed. "Glazing can give a uniform surface and hide cracks. But I wanted the look of ageing in these arches to reflect their history. I am also learning to accept the cracks and shrinkage of these jagged unglazed pieces," to be "comfortable with imperfection."

Gordon's work pays homage to the historical and cultural traditions of his craft. *Arches* and *Brick Sphere* reflect his interest in the long history of brick-making. A student of pre-industrial and contemporary brick-making techniques, he is able to see "common brick" as a bridge that spans time and cultures.

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*Top: Cones + bricks. 2002. Moulded, handbuilt, earthenware iron slip, unglazed clay mixed with perlite. 38 x 76 x 36 cm.*  
*Below: Ovoids. 2002. Moulded, handbuilt, glazed and fired. 38 x 79 x 38 cm.*

