

Both Sides Now

Irene Nordli

November 7 – December 20, 2025

Opening Reception and Book Signing: Friday, November 7, 6–8 pm

Artist Talk: Saturday, November 8, 2 pm

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HB381 is pleased to announce *Both Sides Now*, a solo exhibition of new sculptural works by ceramicist Irene Nordli (b. 1967, Norway). Nordli forms clay into convulsive vessels, complex assemblages freighted with wrinkling folds and amorphous ribbons of matter that sag, stretch, and compress under the active force of her hands. Exquisitely produced, her intricate sculptures turn the body of the vessel inside out, inviting viewers to contemplate both sides simultaneously: the interior and exterior, the refined and discordant, recto and verso, the structure and the open network of space within it.

While seemingly abstract, Nordli's work represents a dance with the figurative, extending sculpture's tradition into somatic terrain. "I consider them almost like bodies," she says of her vessels, describing the gestural and twisting movement generated by each piece. Although at a remove from classical statuary, they revive its tenets of pose and stance, mimicking the way a body might stretch, bend, or strain. Nordli, however, is less interested in classical ideals of harmony and balance, preferring to render her vessels ragged, unstable, even abject. Often, they are riddled with holes and slender openings, sometimes almost approaching aspects of a skeletal structure or the cavities of tissue and organs. These apertures into the vessels' interiors rid the works of any pretense of function; as alluded to in her titles, they serve as vessels for secrets, introspection, protection, sorrow, and enigma. One finds this in Nordli's *Vessels for the Unknown* with their fragmented and disquieting forms, which hold space for intangible sensations and philosophical musings.

The exterior surfaces of many of the artist's ceramics are produced through a succession of impressions. Forms are cast from an archive of plaster mother molds that Nordli collected over the years. These range in subject matter from traditional and personal to popular and kitsch: mass-produced figurines, precious or impudent animal figures, neoclassical columns and Greco-Roman statuary, and anatomical casts taken from life, to name a few. To begin each vessel, Nordli presses portions of the clay into those molds, the surfaces of which transfer the delicate textures and fissures of the original object. The impressions are then arranged side by side and sutured to one another through the extraordinary malleability of clay, buttressed with coiled ropes of clay. She continues in this way until the desired height and complexity is achieved. Her process then begins in earnest, abstracting and reworking her subjects until they become something unfamiliar, torqued, infinitely folded. Once glazed, the final form is replete with internal interrelations, unforeseen combinations, and chimerical embellishments. "My sculptures are made of parts, fragmented. Fragility is something I want to stress," she says.

Yet these individual details ultimately give themselves up to the roiled, tempestuous surface of the vessel, each distinct form all but disappearing into the totality of the surface. In opposition to the refined and spare harmony associated with so much of the Scandinavian tradition of studio ceramics, Nordli's vessels pursue a charged and chaotic imperfection. In many ways, they echo the frenzied quality and pace of contemporary life, offering a disquieting vision of simultaneity: skulls and vertebrae in concert with kitsch tchotchkes and patriotic iconography.

For *Both Sides Now*, Nordli has returned to some of her earliest pressing molds collected in the 1990s while attending a studio art program at Ohio State University. One such mold in the form of a screeching eagle, wings wide and talons extended, offers a prescient image of political bombast.

Indeed, ongoing political tensions and tragedy inform much of the work. "I'm building new vessels in a world that is changing so quickly and becoming more unstable and unpredictable by the day," Nordli says. "Wars are raging and soon there will be nothing left of Gaza. We all feel desperate. I continue to create; I want to and have to. I flip between losing myself in my work and trying to inject something of the world into what I create. In these sculptures you'll find fragments of pillars, eagles, and bones, but first and foremost, I strive for movement, textures, colors, and lines that bring the vessels to life."

The result encompasses a particularly hallucinatory form of perception, not unlike the endless barrage of media cohering and dispersing. Nordli's formal iconography folds and unfolds, stretching elastically as though under the pressure of centrifugal and centripetal forces. Offsetting the cacophonous agitation of her vessels, *Both Sides Now* also features a series of monumental porcelain tiles produced in Jingdezhen, China, and later glazed in Norway. Treated with painterly oxides and glazes, they provide a moment of respite, open-ended and vibrantly decorated. Like portals or thresholds, they distill the movement of the three-dimensional works in whirling vortices and fluid bursts of gesture set against the empty blankness of a flat plane of porcelain.

Alongside the exhibition, HB381 is thrilled to host the launch of Nordli's monographic publication *My Hands Just Keep Getting Bigger* (arnoldsche Art Publishers, Stuttgart; Hostler Burrows, New York), written and edited by Gjertrud Steinsvåg. A conversation will take place between Nordli and Steinsvåg on Saturday, November 8.

Nordli holds a degree from the National College of Art and Design in Bergen and has also been a professor at KHIO in Oslo, Norway. Her work has been exhibited internationally with solo and group presentations at venues such as Officine Saffi (Italy), Clay Museum of Ceramic Art (Denmark), Bernardaud Foundation (France), Gustavsbergs Konsthall (Sweden), Suzhou Jinji Lake Art Museum (China), and the Grand Palais (France). She has also been exhibited widely throughout Norway at locations such as the Royal Castle in Oslo, Kunsthall Grenland, The National Museum in Oslo, KODE in Bergen, and Format Oslo. Nordli has also completed a number of large scale commissions at various locations in Norway.

Both Sides Now is presented with the support of the Norwegian Consulate, New York.