

Nat Breitenstein, *Tocaseñh*

A medieval Provençal word that refers to the act of striking a bell, *tocaseñh* has evolved into the modern English *tocsin*, a still somewhat old-fashioned way to refer to a warning sign that is now largely reserved for metaphor. *Tocaseñh* itself is a decidedly strange term, more distant-sounding from both modern English and French than a handful of centuries would suggest. It falls into the uncanny valley of medieval European languages, almost recognizable (it begins with the verb *tocar*, still used in Spanish to denote striking or playing), but unfamiliar enough to evoke a different civilization altogether.

Nat Breitenstein's *Tocaseñh* takes familiar forms and motifs and imbues them with a striking weirdness. Combining the soft angles of the body with the hollow curves of a vessel, Breitenstein's ceramics are subtly organic, majestic, and haunting. Orbs perch at the ends of wooden plinths; saber-like bones hang from the walls. There is an awkwardness to the forms, suggesting that they do not totally belong to the world they are occupying. Drawing on ancient pottery traditions, Breitenstein's work straddles the binary between art and function, refusing to fully inhabit either role.

The ceramic sculptures are frequently held and adorned by braided leather, another way in which the organic world – in this case, animal hide – forms an essential part of this body of work. Associated with agriculture and labour as well as ornament and kink, leather here serves as a compelling contrast with the glassy surface of glazed clay and the imitation of skin formed by the imprint of the ceramist's hands. While leather is traditionally associated with masculinity – cowboys, bikers, gay men – here the neat braids indicate a fusion of the masculine and feminine.

Across her career, Breitenstein has returned to the motif of large, opaque containers of water. Holding an inner mystery, these sculptures invite the natural world into the gallery space. On one hand pointing to the life-giving capacity of water, the vessels simultaneously hint at the menacing unknown of unlit water's hidden depths. Throughout the space, Breitenstein's vessels emerge as mythic objects from a culture that perhaps does not actually exist.

At the back of the gallery hangs a silk image of two doubled figures in an embrace. From the distance, the fabric resembles an abstract flag fluttering in the mild stir of the indoor wind. Turned toward each other, the figures merge in an echo of Breitenstein's sculpture series of birdlike creatures facing inward, as if joined in a secret, mystical conference. Although in one sense facing away from the world, they are also inescapably part of that world, firmly planted on a rock that doubles, through the image's mirroring technique, as a sky.

For much of human history, the act of striking a bell served an essential function within many communities, the only means by which a message could be spread with urgency. Despite the heady technological advances that characterize modern life, audible alarms still form the major means by which an urgent message is conveyed. Whether in the case of a fire, tornado, or impending nuclear attack, we are most likely to be alerted to danger by the ringing of an alarm not far from the traditional function of a village bell.

Behind a passageway, a large bell clapper is suspended from an oak bracket, ominously recalling a scaffold. The bell clapper threatens to breach the quiet, alerting us to an unspecified danger. Or, an even more disquieting possibility: the alarm has already sounded, and we failed to hear it.