

ART IN REVIEW

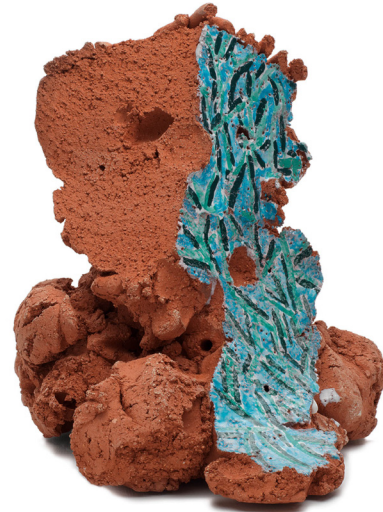
Norbert Prangenberg: ‘The Last Works’

By ROBERTA SMITH

*Garth Greenan Gallery
529 West 20th Street, Chelsea*

Through April 5

Norbert Prangenberg, who died in 2012 at the age of 63, trained in metalworking, and in his 20s worked for a silversmith and then a glass designer. But when it came to making art, he was largely self-taught, as demonstrated by this winsome group of small, disheveled ceramic sculptures that he made the year he died of liver cancer. Nearly two dozen examples form the first New York show of his sculpture since 1986.



Kopf (2012)

At first sight, these small, ebullient tabletop works convey a wildness typical of kindergartners. Realism is not exactly a goal. Undisguised coils abound, and rough, explosive surface incidents are frequent. Abstraction is a prevailing effect, although the pieces are almost always titled “Kopf” (“Head”) or “Landschaft” (“Landscape”), which encourages you to view them as representational, even when the resemblance turns toward ruined sites and partly destroyed buildings.

Glaze is applied sparingly, contrasting pointedly with expanses of matte stoneware in terra-cotta red or porcelain white. The rich colors and careful patterns of glaze suggest a different level of attention and underscore architectural references, evoking tiled or painted walls or hanging fabrics that have survived the general destruction. When such areas appear on one side of a head, they can imply interior thought or fantasy. On a relatively smooth, Brancusi-like head titled “Afrika,” they also underscore Modernism’s debt to non-Western cultures. In another piece, two blue-glazed tufts resemble curtains blowing out of a pair of windows, until you read the work’s title, “Kopf mit Tränen.” This translates as “Head With Tears,” making explicit what is implied by the general energy of these pieces: an artist working furiously against time.