The background of the image is a close-up, high-contrast black and white photograph of a dense cluster of white clay shapes. These shapes are rounded and organic in form, resembling stylized flowers or perhaps abstract representations of biological structures like coral or brain tissue. They are packed closely together, creating a complex, textured surface.

**Paul S.
Briggs**

**Material
Shapes
in Clay**



Paul S. Briggs

Material Shapes in Clay

January 20 – March 23, 2022
List Gallery, Swarthmore College

Paul Briggs' Material Philosophies

Andrea Packard
List Gallery Director

Paul Briggs has said that he philosophizes concretely in clay—an idea that might surprise anyone who tends to associate philosophy more with metaphysics than with physical objects. However, those who get elbow-deep in damp earth, experiment with using glazes at different temperatures, and ponder the relationships between forms and their functions, can readily understand how ceramics can embody—or challenge—a world view. And because Briggs has also studied rabbinical literature, classical and modern philosophy, Eastern Orthodox mystical theology, and iconoclastic movements, sculpting with clay provides him with a way to critique absolutist ideologies and to assert his perspective as a Black man in America. With gracefulness and gravitas, his creative practice models intellectual inquiry, compassion, and civic engagement.

For decades, Briggs' art has developed in tandem with his varied training and experiences as an athlete, progressive Baptist minister, community activist, father, and educator. We are fortunate that his List Gallery exhibition, *Paul S. Briggs: Material Shapes in Clay*, reflects the breadth of his scholarship and community service. The exhibition brings together 34 works from nine distinct, yet interrelated, bodies of work created over the past twenty years, including examples from his ongoing series of pinch-formed vessels and his ambitious installation, *Cell Personae: The Impact of Incarceration on Black Lives*.

Although Briggs discovered his affinity for working with clay in high school, he did not immediately realize that art would become

central to his life. As the son of a Baptist minister in a small upstate New York town, he often found himself testing the boundaries of authority. After high school, he accepted an athletic scholarship at the University of New Haven—a choice that might seem unrelated to his pursuit of art. But in fact, lessons he learned as an athlete continue to inform his studio practice. Briggs' track coach advised him: during practice, concentrate on your turns and your form, but “when you get to the meet, you’re just going to get out there and run!” Applying this same principle to his art, Briggs rigorously develops and practices techniques in the studio, while also setting aside time to work more intuitively—cultivating a state of flow.

Briggs experiences flow most often when working on his pinch-formed vessels. He discovered his love of pinch-forming in the mid-1980s, inspired by a photograph of an ancient Chinese bowl. Nearly four decades later, he continues to be fascinated by the variations he can achieve by using different clays, glazes, bases, and firing methods. His pinching methods produce muscular, architectonic forms with high-relief elements that suggest undulating leaves, petals, or sea creatures.

Their articulated surfaces, rhythmic patterning, and animism may remind some viewers of Chinese jade vessels and Han and Zou dynasty bronzes. However, while ritual vessels like those are associated with imperial ideologies, complex technologies, and stylized motifs, Briggs's direct and improvisatory process enables him to resist ideological conformity and search for holistic simplicity. As Briggs puts it, his pinch-forming process “is neither additive nor subtractive, but expansive. I grow the form from one chunk of clay, using the pinching method to open the chunk and expand it outward and upward. For larger forms (10 inches or more), I sometimes use a slab or dome base”.¹ Often, instead of clearly defining the lip of each vessel, Briggs continues the exterior surface patterning into that transitional space, blurring the distinction between outer and interior worlds.

The resulting structures do not function as vases, cups, or bowls—they are animated sculptures that heighten our awareness of space and movement. When one sees the tilting form of



Wildflower, 2021, high-relief leaf pinched vessel
pinched from one piece of clay, dome foot, unglazed, 11 x 8 x 8 inches

Wildflower (2021, page 33), one may readily guess that Briggs was inspired by cuttlefish or sea anemones. Its dome-shaped base gives rise to serpentine ridges and rows of petal- or tentacle-like forms that undulate, as if activated by surrounding currents.

In recent years, Briggs has used minimal glazing on his pinch-formed vessels; the five works selected for the List Gallery exhibit are entirely unglazed. Using sand-infused clay from Laguna, California, he fired the forms in an electric kiln using a high temperature (cone 9 or 10), which caused grains of sand to bead on the surface. These nuances of form and texture invite viewers to slow down and marvel at the elemental plasticity of clay. In works such as *Windflower* (2021, at left), the artist's mindfulness seems palpable.

Looking closely, one can also notice how Briggs' petal forms hold the shape of his fingerprints—a welcome reminder of the importance of touch in a technology-driven world. His improvisatory process does not suggest notions of timeless beauty, but instead an aesthetic that embodies individuality and responsiveness to change.

The practice of pinch-forming vessels sustained Briggs and allowed him to, as he puts it, “quiet down” for decades, especially in 2000, when his life took an unexpected turn. He had earned a PhD in art education, and was establishing his reputation as both an artist and educator, when his father became ill. In response, Briggs moved to Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, to assist part-time in his father’s ministry at New Hope Baptist Church. In 2004, after his father recovered, Briggs became the pastor at Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills, New York. Building upon his previous study of diverse theologies and rabbinical literature, he co-organized numerous interfaith groups, helped establish an organization that sheltered homeless individuals, and pursued varied social justice initiatives, such as teaching a media literacy course at Taconic Women’s Correctional Facility. He notes that providing these services, especially working with prisoners and formerly incarcerated people, laid the foundations for his further artistic growth.

Just before he began serving as a pastor—almost as if he anticipated that unexpected calling—Briggs began the *Interfaith Object* series as a way of exploring commonalities among different religious traditions. For example, the structure of *Interfaith Object I* (2000, at lower right) takes inspiration from various forms of ecclesiastical architecture, such as cathedral apses, buttresses, tombs, Egyptian pylons, and obelisks. Although the pieces in the *Interfaith Objects* series are relatively small in scale, they convey a sense of monumentality and focused reverence.

While he was creating a related series, titled *Hypostasis*, Briggs sought to integrate the improvisatory aspects of his pinching process with the narrative concepts he was exploring through slab-building. Works such as *Hypostasis IV* (2000, at upper right) are smooth, block-like structures that partially open to reveal rows of pinched-formed shapes. Like geodes, their exteriors are unassuming, but their interiors reveal wonderous substrates. In Christian theology, *hypostasis* refers to an underlying reality that is usually hidden from view. Similarly, in contrast to their massive slab-built walls, Briggs's delicately-pinched interiors call attention to the importance of hidden worlds—be they creative, natural, or spiritual.

In his next series, *Feeling Tones* (pages 16–17), Briggs continued to explore the relationship between external and interior worlds. As he did in the *Hypostasis* series, Briggs placed organic and naturalistic forms within rigid structures—but each *Feeling Tones* structure is a 12-by-12-inch plywood box lined with industrial felt: they look as if they were designed to store scientific specimens. The sides of some of the boxes are laminated with laser-jet images or paint layers that have been abraded, encouraging viewers to consider the fragility and ephemerality of both nature and knowledge.

In 2016, Briggs decided to translate his ministry into the language of art. He revitalized his creative practice by enrolling in the MFA program at Massachusetts College of Art. *Play Area (Locke Blocks)* (opposite) is a pivotal work that he completed during this transition. Experimenting with wood, rather than clay, and using satire as an iconoclastic strategy, Briggs mimicked the look of a vintage set of alphabet blocks—the type used to teach letters and simple



Top: *Hypostasis IV*, 2000, glazed stoneware, 13 ½ x 11 ½ x 8 inches
Bottom: *Interfaith Object I*, 2000, glazed stoneware, 13 ¼ x 11 ½ x 11 ¼ inches

words. When visitors to the exhibit who are of a certain age kneel down on the olive-green 1960s-era rug to engage with the blocks, they may feel a wave of nostalgia and expect to see familiar associations between letters, words, and images. Instead, they encounter images harvested from popular culture and from Jan Nedervene Pieterse's book, *White on Black, Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*. In Briggs's block set, J stands for Jew, Q stands for Queer, P stands for Patriotism, and X stands for Xenophobia. However, Briggs does not confront viewers only with Confederate flags and other images that symbolize racism; he also includes images such as a rainbow flag that have positive cultural associations. The subtitle, *Locke Blocks*, is a playful reference to the philosopher John Locke (1689–1704), who explored the limits of knowledge, favored empiricism, and challenged authoritarianism. Similarly, Briggs creates an environment in which viewers can consider the complex and changing roles that images have played in their own lives.

Briggs models this kind of self-reflection in *Cell Personas* (2017), a series of small wall-mounted cubes. He began the series while working in Minnesota, not long after Philando Castile, an African American man, was killed by a police officer during a routine traffic stop on July 6, 2016. As Briggs recalls, when he was creating this series, he was “performing Blackness and code-switching more often,” sometimes adopting a defensive persona. Such experiences made him wonder how both stereotypes and aspects of personality might be suggested sculpturally through spatial relationships. Accordingly, he constructed each cube in the *Persona* series so that its primary facade is penetrated by projecting forms or openings—elements that variously recall prison bars, gender symbols, and other cultural constructs. For example, the title of *Cell Persona (Felon)*—and the cage-like projection at its center—call attention to the way prisoners are constrained and labeled, even after their release from prison.

Another of Briggs's important slab-built sculptures from 2017 is *Refuted Vessel (Kylix)*. Both the title and the elegant silhouette of *Kylix* recall ancient Greek pottery, but its structure is rectilinear,



Blocks Q and P, plywood and laser jet transfers. Each cube face: 3 ½ inches square
Installation view of *Play Area (Locke Blocks)*, 2015–16
Carpet: 48 x 64 inches. Block box: 15 x 25 ¾ inches



not round—and solid, not functional. Its darkly glazed front and back facades contrast with its unglazed sides and top, causing the symbolic image—the “vessel”—to seem to hover, as if detached from its clay substrate. Calling attention to this kind of disconnection between images and identities offers the viewer much more than semiotic playfulness—especially when one considers the vessel as a metaphor for human life.

In 2018, Briggs began creating his most monumental and explicitly topical work to date, *Cell Personae: The Impact of Incarceration on Black Lives* (detail opposite), a wall installation that is both complete as is, and continuing to evolve. So far, it consists of between 25 and 29 slab-and-coil sculptures. Briggs has created four editions of *Cell Personae* and has installed the individual components in unique arrangements at different venues. At the List Gallery, Briggs collaborated experimentally with me and Assistant Curator Tess Wei, ultimately arranging the “cell” components along five horizontal and eight vertical rows that are punctuated with gaps. The syncopated openings animate and disrupt an otherwise predictable grid.

According to Briggs, *Cell Personae* is deeply rooted in his pastoral work with Black men and families who have been impacted by incarceration. He was also influenced by *13th*, the documentary film directed by Ava Duvernay, which opens with Barack Obama’s voice-over narration, “So, let’s look at the statistics. The United States is home to 5% of the world’s population, but 25% of the world’s prisoners—think about that.” As Briggs notes, Black Americans represent 13% of the population, but 40% of the nation’s prison population; Blacks are nearly twice as likely as Hispanics and six times as likely as whites to be incarcerated.²

Cell Personae was also informed by *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, by Michelle Alexander (published in 2010), and by “How Albert Woodfox Survived Solitary,” an article by Rachel Aviv (published by *The New Yorker* in 2017), which Briggs cites as a key influence. After familiarizing himself with research on mass incarceration, Briggs designed the proportions of each of his “cells” to correspond to prison cells in the United States, which measure, on average, six-by-eight feet. He constructed each of the 25 components of the installation with massive walls that impinge upon internal elements made from coiled clay—forms that can variously suggest shackles, knotted ropes, or other constraints. Some cells memorialize particular individuals, such as Kalief Browder, who was held for three years without trial in solitary confinement at Riker’s Island, New York (page 29). A noose in the center of the work references Browder’s subsequent suicide. Other works, such as the heavily barred form of *Power Solitary VI (Lockdown)*, call attention to systemic structures and practices that inflict lasting traumas on people.

Like the components of *Cell Personae*, works in the series titled *Knot Stories* (pages 24–27) dramatize both physical and psychic forms of confinement. The larger scale of works such as *Hyperbole* (page 27) invites us to consider them as metaphors for larger processes or states of mind—or even as windows that reveal harsh realities. At this scale, the sinuous knotted ropes become even more suggestive of human anatomy and organic movement. In addition, Briggs’ titles invite us to question the way that the words we use to describe an object can redefine or recontextualize its meaning.

For me, each sculpture poses a Socratic question of sorts, prompting reflection on the way societies can become habituated to injustice and suffering. For example, in *Parenthetical* (page 25), the parallel knotted ropes suggest prison bars while also curving like parentheses—prompting me to wonder, “How have prison bars—which so essentially constrain lives—become as ordinary as parentheses (a grammatical afterthought or non-essential clarification)?” The various works in both *Cell Personae* and *Knot Stories* highlight subjects and narratives that deserve greater attention, notably, the legacy of slavery, the ongoing trauma of mass incarceration, and the need to ensure equal justice.

With *Material Shapes in Clay*, Briggs joins an impressive lineage of clay artists who have exhibited at Swarthmore—including Robert Turner, William Daley, and Sana Musassama. Seminal artists like these—all of whom harmonize remarkable craft, integrity, and civic engagement—model the Quaker saying, “Let your life speak.”

Notes:

1. Briggs’ artist’s statement: <https://artaxis.org/artist/paul-briggs>
2. Email exchanges with the artist, January 2022.

For more information, visit the Prison Policy Initiative’s website: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org>

See also: “Lifetime Likelihood of Going to State or Federal Prison,” by Thomas P. Bonczar and Allen J. Beck, Ph.D, published by the U.S. Bureau of Justice: <https://bjs.ojp.gov/content/pub/pdf/Llgsfp.pdf>



Material
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in Clay
Paul S. Briggs





10 *Interfaith Object Anubis I*, 2000, unglazed stoneware, $15\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{3}{8} \times 12\frac{1}{4}$ inches



11 *Interfaith Object Altar II*, 2000, unglazed stoneware, $13\frac{1}{8} \times 11 \times 11\frac{3}{4}$ inches



12 *Inveigle I*, 2016, industrial felt, plywood, ceramic, unglazed and glazed stoneware, $13\frac{1}{8} \times 12\frac{1}{2} \times 8$ inches



13 *Inveigle II*, 2016, industrial felt, plywood, ceramic, unglazed and glazed stoneware, $16\frac{1}{8} \times 13\frac{1}{8} \times 8$ inches



14 *Hypostasis I*, 2012, glazed stoneware, $11\frac{3}{8} \times 9\frac{1}{4} \times 7\frac{1}{2}$ inches



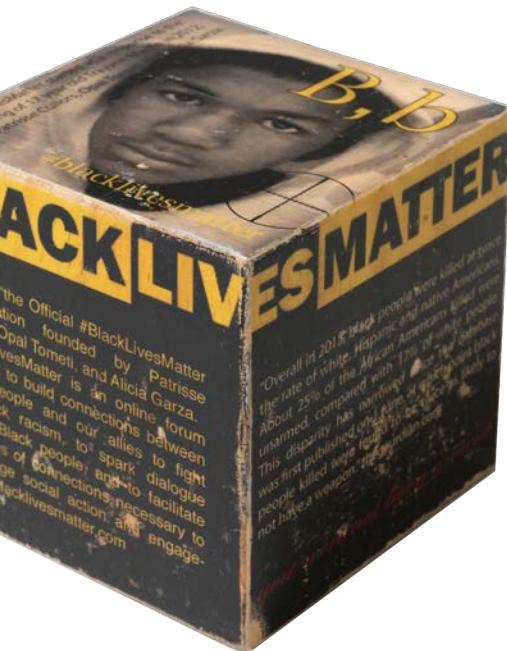
15 *Hypostasis IV*, 2012, glazed stoneware, $13\frac{5}{8} \times 11\frac{5}{8} \times 8$ inches



16 Installation view: *Feeling Tones*, 2016



Feeling Tone, 2016, industrial felt, plywood, laser jet transfers, ceramic, 12 x 12 x 5 inches



Above: Block *B*, plywood and laser jet transfers. Each cube face: 3 1/2 inches square.
Opposite: installation view of *Play Area (Locke Blocks)*, 2015–16. Carpet: 48 x 64 inches. Block box: 15 x 25 3/4 inches.



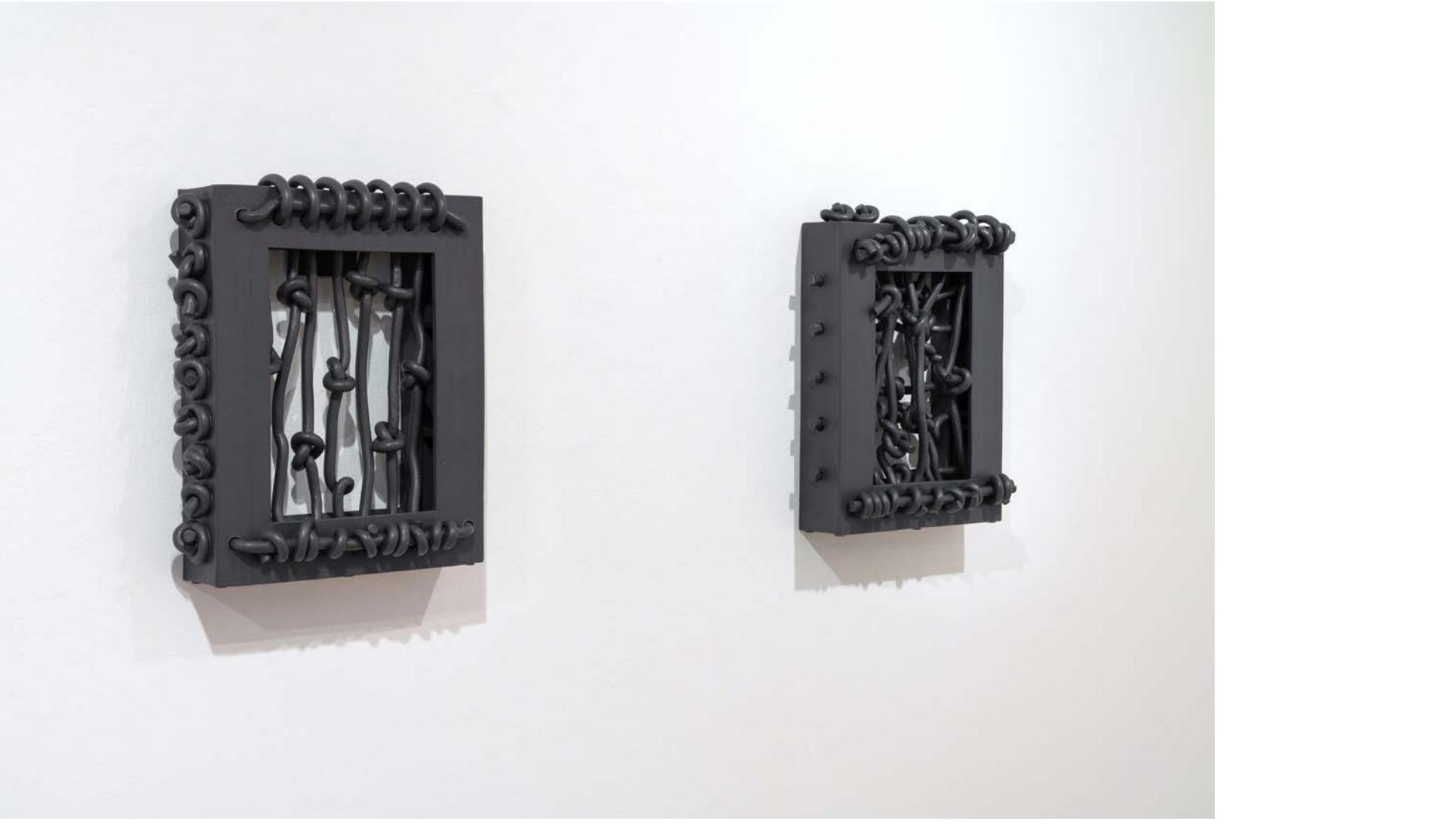
20 Installation view: *Persona*, 2017, partially glazed stoneware
From left: *Persona (Cell)*, *Persona (Zealot)*, *Persona (Imploded)*



Opposite: *Persona (Chauvinist)*, 2017, partially glazed stoneware, 6 3/4 x 6 3/4 x 7 inches



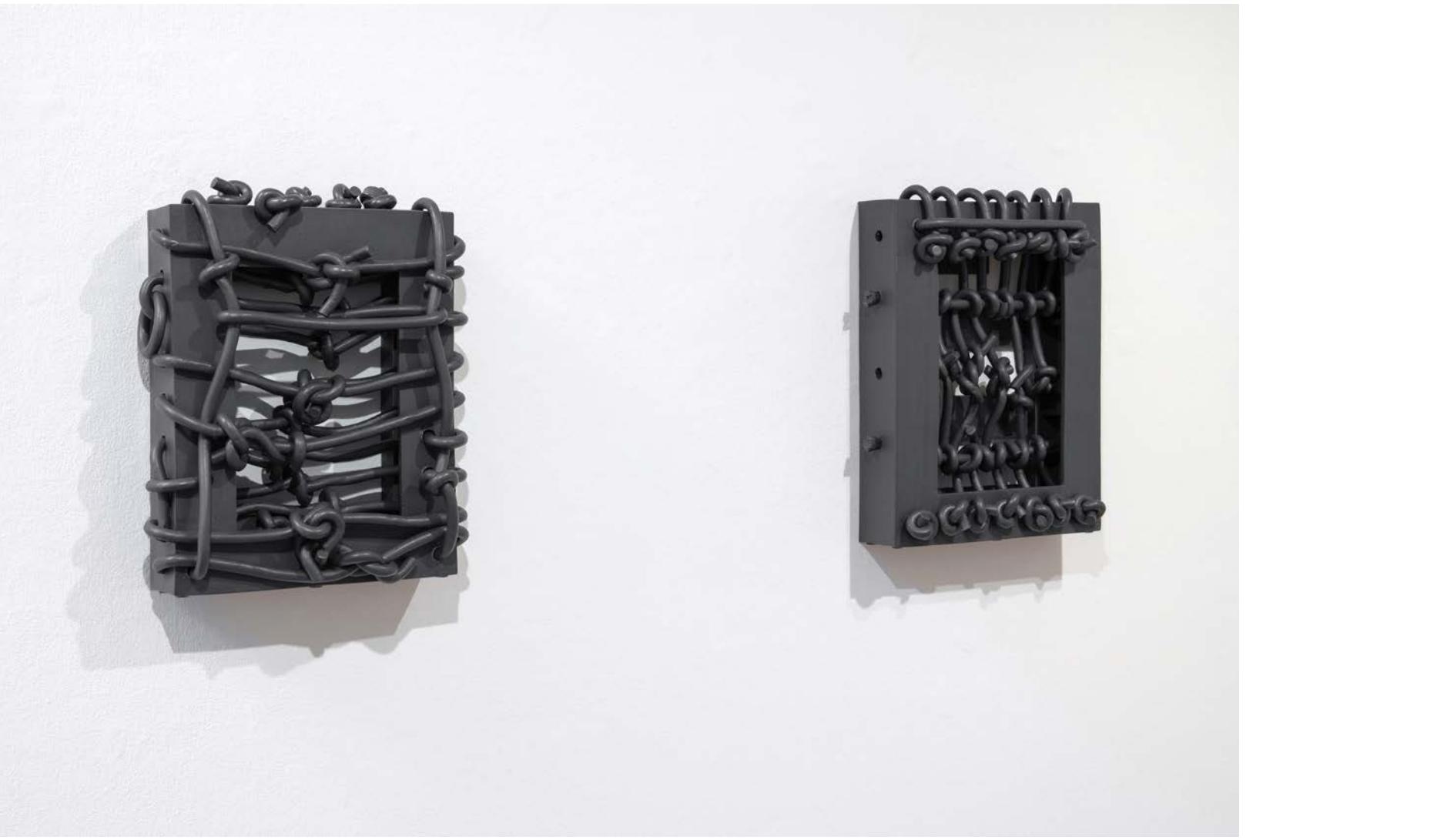
22 Above: *Refuted Vessel (Kylix)*, 2017, glazed stoneware, $6\frac{1}{4} \times 11\frac{1}{4} \times 5$ inches
Opposite: *Refuted Vessel (Kylix)* and *Refuted Vessel*, 2017, glazed stoneware, $12 \times 12 \times 3\frac{1}{4}$ inches



24 Installation view: *Knot Series*, 2021, glazed ceramic
From left: *Narrative*, *Parenthetical*



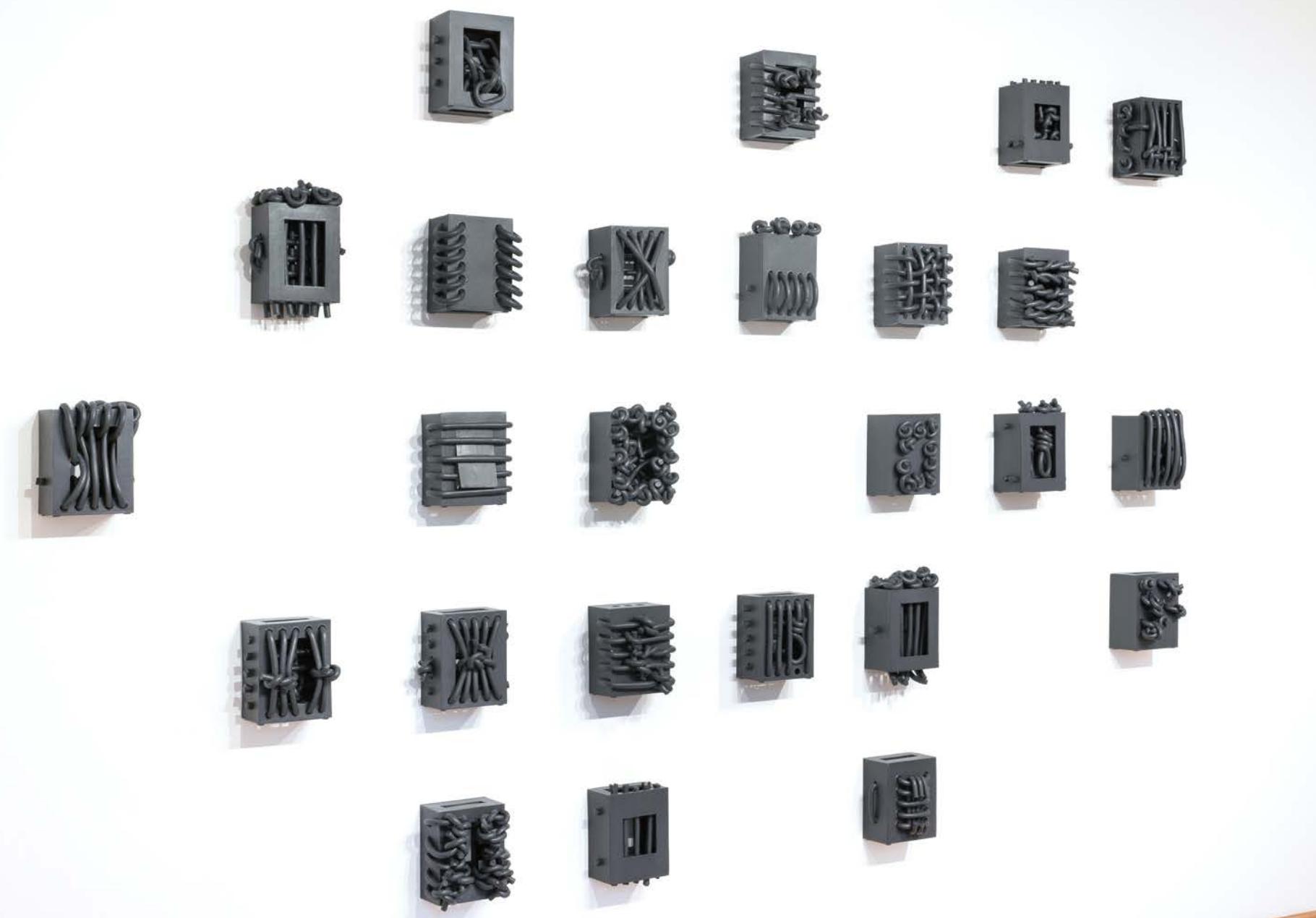
Parenthetical, 2021, glazed ceramic, 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 5 inches 25



26 Installation view: *Knot Series*, 2021, glazed ceramic
From left: *Hyperbole*, *Parse*



27 *Hyperbole*, 2021, glazed ceramic, 18 1/4 x 15 1/4 x 6 inches



Top: *Kalief Browder III*, 2021, glazed ceramic stoneware, $8\frac{1}{4} \times 8 \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ inches
Opposite: installation view of *Cell Personae: The Impact of Incarceration on Black Lives*, 2021



30 *Industrial Power II*, 2021, glazed ceramic stoneware, $11\frac{5}{8} \times 8\frac{1}{8} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$ inches



31 *Womb*, 2021, glazed ceramic stoneware, $9\frac{1}{4} \times 7\frac{1}{4} \times 6$ inches



32 *Windflower*, 2021, high relief leaf pinched vessel, double cuttle, dome foot, unglazed, 11 x 12 x 8 inches



33 *Wildflower*, 2021, high relief leaf pinched vessel dome foot, unglazed, 10 x 10 1/2 x 8 inches



34

Top: *Calyx Krater*, 2021, high relief leaf pinched vessel pedestal bowl, unglazed, 9 ½ x 13 x 13 inches
Opposite: *Calyx Bowl*, 2021, high relief leaf pinched bowl dome foot, unglazed, 9 x 13 x 13 inches





Paul Briggs was born in Beacon, New York, in 1963, and grew up in the Hudson Valley region of New York. He holds an BSEd in education and ceramics from the City College of New York (1986); an MA in rabbinic literature from Oral Roberts University (1991); an MSEd in education and ceramics from Alfred University (1992); a PhD in art education and educational theory and policy from Pennsylvania State University (1995); and an MFA in ceramics and 3D design from Massachusetts College of Art and Design (2016).

Currently, he is Associate Professor of Art Education at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. He has also taught art and art education at Penland School of Craft in North Carolina, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine, and the ceramics program at Harvard University, where he was an artist in residence (2019–2020). In 2022, he was named the Donald J. Gordon Visiting Artist at Swarthmore College and also honored as a McBride Fellow in Ceramics at the University of Iowa. In February 2021, he was featured on the cover of *Ceramics Monthly*. Other honors include an Advancing Artist Grant from the South Eastern Minnesota Arts Council (2018), and an award for outstanding teaching from St. Olaf College (2017).

Briggs' artwork is held in the collections of Alfred Ceramic Art Museum, Alfred, NY; Fuller Craft Museum, Brockport, MA; Flaten Art Museum, St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN; San Angelo Museum of Art, San Angelo, TX; University of Tennessee, Ewing Gallery, Knoxville, TN; Wellesley College Multifaith Center, Wellesley MA; and the Pizutti Collection of Columbus Museum of Art.

The artist is represented by Lucy Lacoste Gallery, Concord, MA and exhibits with Friedman Benda Gallery, New York, NY.

For more information and images, please visit the artist's website:
psbriggs.com

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The List Gallery wishes to thank Paul Briggs for the opportunity to exhibit his works and for his generous and collaborative spirit.

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Cover image: *Womb* [detail], 2021
glazed ceramic stoneware, 9 1/4 x 7 1/4 x 6 inches

Inside front cover: *Equal Justice IV* [detail], 2021
glazed ceramic stoneware, 8 1/4 x 7 5/8 x 6 1/2 inches

Back cover: *Equal Justice IV*, 2021
glazed ceramic stoneware, 8 1/4 x 7 5/8 x 6 1/2 inches



