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Now Showing | Jeffry Mitchell's Fantastical Totems

CULTURE

BY BROOKE HODGE

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An installation view of Jeffry Mitchell's exhibition, "Shamrock Edelweiss Seaweed." *Heather Rasmussen, courtesy of Ambach & Rice, Los Angeles*

The earthenware sculptures on display in "Shamrock Edelweiss Seaweed," Jeffry Mitchell's new show at [Ambach & Rice](#) gallery in Los Angeles (through May 12), are at once whimsical and slightly sinister. A pair of ceramic dogs, loosely based on the Staffordshire pottery dogs that were popular in the Victorian era, greet visitors to the gallery. Glazed in rich, dark browns with hints of green and ocher, the dogs' coats are encrusted with Medusa-like dreadlocks, protruding flowers, small round bears and loops of ceramic chains, like a sunken treasure dredged from the sea. Free-standing ceramic

letters spelling out the word “Hello” sit in front of each dog; Mitchell named them “Hello Hello” and “Pad Pad” in a reference to a poem by Stevie Smith. The artist points out that the letters are “perhaps a subconscious reference to L.A.’s iconic Hollywood sign, since I made all of the work in Los Angeles.”

This is the first Los Angeles show for the Seattle-based Mitchell, and the works on view mark a departure for him. Mitchell’s new sculptures are larger, and their forms seem almost to have burst, or grown organically, from his earlier domestic-scaled pots and bowls. The three largest works are made of stacked pots laden with drooping chains, garlands of ceramic beads, small creatures like bats, ribbonlike banners incised with text, and protruding fists and flowers. The vertical shapes of the sculptures recall both ethnic totem figures and 19th-century jardinière pots. Mitchell says that a visit to the [Getty Museum](#)’s European Decorative Arts galleries was “over-the-top fantastic and provided inspiration for me, as did a visit to the artist Jorge Pardo’s installation of pre-Columbian work at the [Los Angeles County Museum](#).” While museum pieces were an influence for Mitchell, so too was the work of the cartoonists Charles Schultz, George Herriman and R. Crumb. Baroque in their ornate surface decoration, the old-timey, gooey Early American-style lead glazes and the plethora of applied figures and forms that Mitchell uses lend them a certain childlike quality. As Mitchell says, “they’re Flintstoney, cartoony, but still mud pie.”