

## Critic's Choice A foray into clay with stunning results: Richard Hawkins' 'New Work'

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Over the last 10 years, clay has become the go-to material for artists who want to be in on trends. This has led to loads of mediocre work, much of it made by artists who should know better.

In contrast, Richard Hawkins' foray into clay has resulted in a body of work perfectly suited to the material's malleability as well as to his uncanny ability to work with just about anything.

For the last 25 years, Hawkins has transformed rubber masks, magazine pages, scraps of felt and repurposed dollhouses into haunting meditations on the fugitive pleasures people cultivate when the ones served up by mainstream culture fail to satisfy our deepest desires.

At Richard Telles Fine Art and Jenny's, Hawkins' two-venue exhibition is based on the drawings Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) made after he had been subjected to electroshock therapy. Simply titled "New Work," the engrossing pair of

exhibitions consists of 25 low-relief sculptures Hawkins has made over the last year.

Many resemble ancient artifacts. The most audacious appear to be primitive fertility figures. Sometimes Hawkins' pint-sized icons are complete with oversized breasts, genitals, mouths, bellies and anuses accentuated with glistening glazes.

At other times, various limbs, organs and skulls are scattered around flat slabs of glazed clay, which are also fractured and fissured. It's impossible to know if the body parts once belonged to whole figures or if they are complete unto themselves — magical talismans that have taken on lives of their own.

Symbols also appear, particularly 3-D discs and incised circles. Some look like peyote buttons. Others recall wheels, sliced pizzas and sphincters, as well as eyes, sand dollars and circled crosses. Gears grind objects between their stubby teeth. Or their broken forms suggest cosmic clockwork in need of repair.

Coffins show up in the majority of Hawkins' pieces, either serving as the resting places for strange deities or forming apertures in wall-like expanses on which DIY petroglyphs have been scratched. Each of Hawkins' curious clusters of weirdly detailed artifacts has been fastened to an approximately 2-foot-square wood panel around which a simple frame has been hammered.

You feel as if you have stumbled into the storeroom of an archaeologist whose discoveries have not yet been made public, partly because they are unbelievable and partly because Hawkins is having too much fun studying every nook and cranny.