

THE MACHINE has been a staple of modern art-making at least since Dadaism, when Picabia and Duchamp used it with a certain ironical reverence. It was used to debunk sexuality in the act of symbolizing it, suggesting ambivalence towards sexuality as well as the machine itself. More crucially, it was used to mock the body: if it could be conceived as a machine, and even represented by a machine, then it was no longer a sacred mystery. Duchamp and Picabia collapsed the distinction between the organic and the mechanical by suggesting their interchangeability: if the body is a kind of machine — a very complex machine, no doubt — then the machine is a kind of body. Picabia and Duchamp make us wonder. So much of human behavior — sexual behavior, for example — seems rather fixed and predictable, and the structure of the human body hasn't fundamentally changed in millennia. And don't machines change? The museum of machines has many more obsolete specimens than the museum of man. Steven Montgomery's ceramic machines are caught up in these issues, and many more. He's fascinated by the complexity and capability of machines. "I'm commenting on my mistrust of technology," but he can't help admiring and celebrating it. Indeed, Mont-

gomery's machines state a profound contemporary truth: machines, however flawed, have become gods. His monumentalization of them confirms this. Montgomery's machines are gods, but they are also all-too-human, indeed, morbidly human. Montgomery's machines are simultaneously organisms and hermetically sealed machines. The artist's brilliant trompe l'oeil technique helps us forget that his machines are made of clay, even though he exposes their "guts." The clay erupts — sometimes insidiously and inconspicuously, sometimes with abrupt, explosive force — through the Procrustean façade of the machine construction. This occurs in work after work: *Divergent-C*, *Static Fuel #3*, and the astonishing, majestic, tour de force, *Re-Entrance*, among others. Montgomery unites gestural and geometrical abstraction in an ironical dialectic, but he also epitomizes the crisis of representation that has been with us since the beginning of modern art. He suggests that ceramic art is at its best when it becomes impossible to determine whether the material medium or the "message" has priority. As Clement Greenberg argued, modern art is at its most innovative when the material medium is asserted at the expense of the representational illusion, which finally disappears. Made

explicit, the material medium disrupts, undermines, dominates, and finally overwhelms and dissolves the representational illusion. Montgomery's ceramic sculptures reveal the modern tension between the medium and the representation, and the slow but steady encroachment of the medium on the representation in modernism. The artist uses the medium of clay to "betray" the representation of reality. His machines look real at first glance, but the raw clay of which they are made breaks the "frame" of their representation, suggesting their unreality. For Montgomery, clay is not only a means to a representational end but exists autonomously, which brings the machine into question. The solidity of the machine is compromised by the malleability of the clay; that is, the machine seems to regress back into the clay that is its substance, suggesting that it is not as progressive as it looks. His representations ironically mock representation, suggesting that every representation begins to decay as soon as it is realized. Montgomery paints his sculptures to perfect the illusion, but the clay keeps breaking through and subverting the representation — showing that it's all witty make-believe. Apart from this "structuring" wit, Montgomery's sculptures show a certain

Dadaist, even conceptual wit. The word "Emergency" on *Re-Entrance* rebounds back on the machine, suggesting that it is in a state of emergency, and that the spectator cannot rely upon it in an emergency, for it is broken and can never be fixed. Montgomery, then, is an epistemologist, reminding us that representation poses a problem of knowledge. When the birds were deceived by Zeuxis's realistic representation of a fruit, and tried to eat it, there was a failure of reality-testing. Montgomery carries this perfectionist realism to an ironical, even bitter extreme with his ruined machine representations, which not only remind us of the shortcomings of our technological society, but of the inherent difficulty of representing reality. Montgomery not only shatters the myth of technological progress but the myth of realism, which also has a canker of doubt and self-defeat at its core. And yet Montgomery represents the core of reality with astonishing verisimilitude — with a super-mimetic intelligibility worthy of Zeuxis — for Montgomery is not so much representing machines as time. Time is the innermost reality, for it corrodes and erodes every other reality, and Montgomery's clay shows the workings of time, for better and worse. *Donald Kuspit*

*Re-Entrance, 2001, painted ceramic, 92" x 110" x 11". Collection Anna Smukler.*