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He Dignified Mud

by Jonathon Keats

When Stephen De Staebler studied sculpture at UC Berkeley in the late 1950s, no material was more scorned than ordinary clay. Museums deemed ceramics a craft, useful enough for making pots, but too crude for high artistic expression. Over the next decade a couple dozen bay area artists brought international acclaim to the region by upending this old shibboleth. Though De Staebler was not the best-known member of this so-called California clay movement, his first retrospective, at the de Young—opening a mere eight months after his death last may—and a concurrent exhibit of just his later work, at Dolby Chadwick Gallery, show that he was among the best.



More than any other ceramicist of his era, De Staebler understood that clay comes from the earth and that it can be sculpted in ways that mimic the geologic processes that formed it. He practically invented his own art form by beating and buckling tons of clay into awesome mountainous landscapes, but his human sculptures are also very moving. In his late figurative works, such as *Figure with Lost Torso* (2008), the artist acted as a sort of archaeologist, digging into his personal “boneyard” of broken fragments from past sculptures to assemble life-size bodies as hauntingly fragile and incomplete as prehistoric fossils.

Winged Figure Ascending

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108 x 32 x 33 inches

“MATTER + SPIRIT: THE SCULPTURE OF STEPHEN DE STAEBLER”: JAN. 14–APRIL 22,
DE YOUNG MUSEUM, DEYOUNG.FAMSF.ORG.
THROUGH JAN. 28, DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY, DOLBYCHADWICKGALLERY.COM