

Galleries By Edith Newhall

Sculptor Tobin explodes into making clay and glass pots

Most people who have read newspaper and magazine features on the work of Steve Tobin, the sculptor best known for his bronze casts of tree roots, might be surprised that his solo show at Bridgette Mayer Gallery marks his first exhibition in a commercial Philadelphia gallery.

They'd likely be astonished, though, to learn that Tobin — whose sculpture *Trinity Root* is named for the tree that sheltered Trinity Church's St. Paul's Chapel during the 9/11 attacks — is showing pots made of clay and glass.

They're not your everyday clay pots, as you might expect from someone who did not come through the usual art-school channels (he has a degree in mathematics) and who, before the tree roots, cast ant hills in Africa, among other things. But if the pots seem a more wholehearted embrace of craft than do his casts, they're not that, either. As in all his work, Tobin has identified a natural process — in this case, explosion — and interpreted it as a formal, still gesture, or work of art.

Tobin, who worked in clay in the 1970s and returned to it 14 years ago while continuing his metal sculpture, makes his pots by inserting fireworks and pigments inside rectangles or layers of slabs of damp clay and exploding them, then firing them with glass in their interiors (he has developed a method of firing the clay and the glass in-



Steve Tobin makes his pots with damp clay, fireworks, and pigments, then fires the result with glass in the interior.

side it in one firing). The resulting shapes look like pots with the interiors of volcanic craters, the fireworks coloring the insides. The glass at the bottom of each pot resembles a lake or pool of melted sugar.

At Mayer, the smallest of these pots are arranged on the walls in grids, installation-style, which makes it easier to see their exteriors and interiors. Tobin presses various objects and materials into the surfaces of these little pots before exploding and firing them, and they're simultaneously more decorative and more eccentrically shaped than his large works. Those occupy the floor casually, as if still in the studio, giving on-lookers the conventionally pretty downward view of the glass pools at the bottom. I'd prefer to see them somewhat

elevated, showing less of that seductive glass and more of their surrounding rough exteriors.

It's hard to tell whether Tobin considers some of his works stronger or better than others, or if he avoids such distinctions in this work. He calls each piece "an honest document unaltered by my hand," and he's filled the gallery to capacity, so I'm assuming it's the latter. I think some are more compelling than others, and the result of a more successful explosion and firing.

Tobin also has an absorbing, if claustrophobia-inducing, installation in the gallery's vault space, of dozens of found ceramic hand molds used for glove display. He has mounted them to the walls, projecting sideways, and applied various glazes and em-

bellishments. This effort, too, seems intended to defy a singling-out, but it works.

Bridgette Mayer Gallery, 709 Walnut St., 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. 215-413-8893 or www.bridgettemayergallery.com. Through May 1.