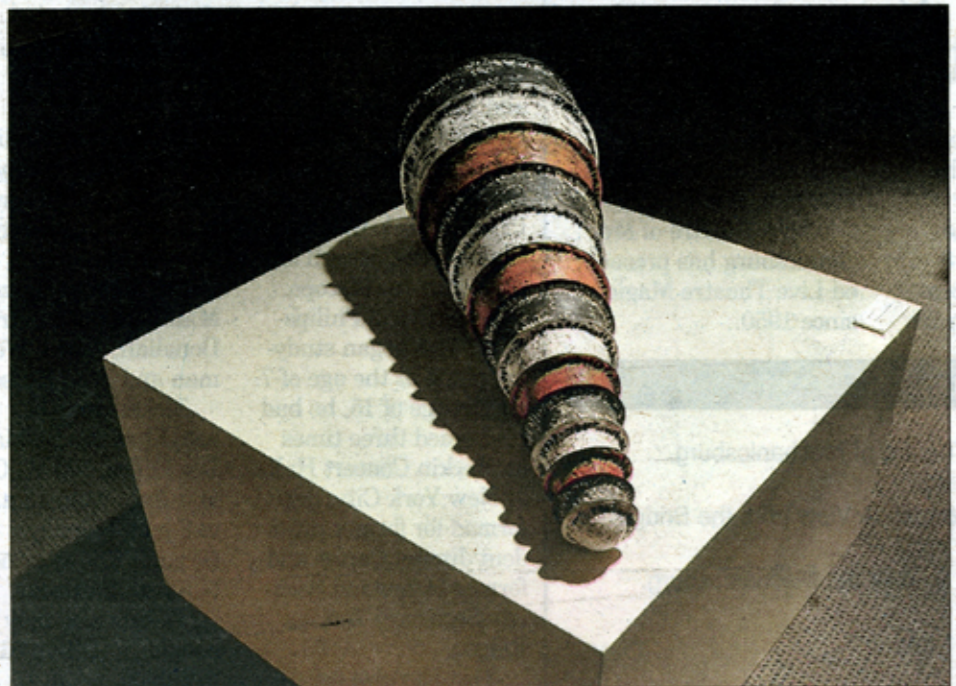
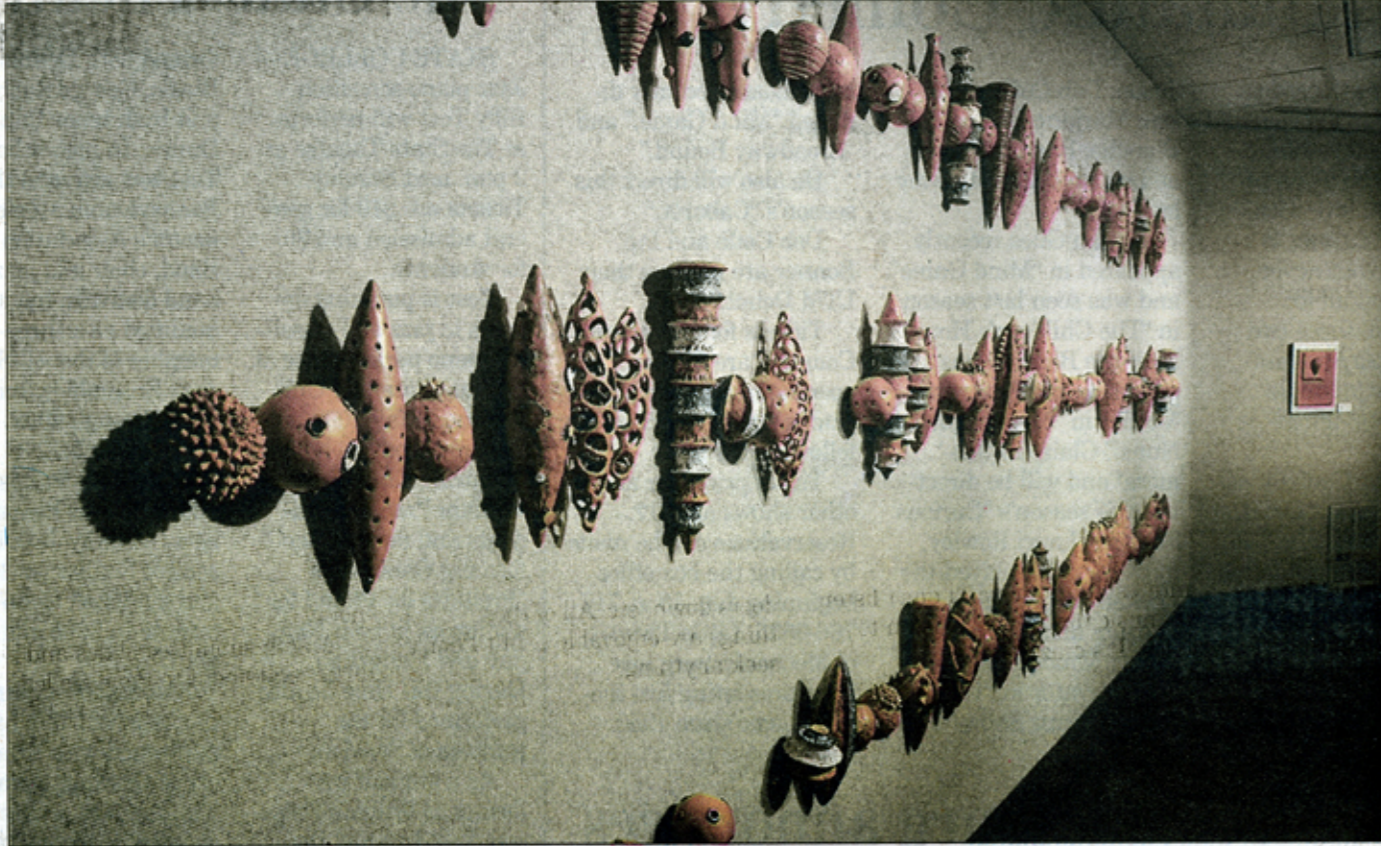


# Lots of layers: Shalya Marsh's artwork is full of hidden meanings



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Many people say that artwork "speaks" to them because it connects in a personal way, touching on an emotion or a memory, but viewers of Shalya Marsh's ceramics can say this and mean it — her art is formed and arranged in Morse code.

Many of her clay forms are organized in dots and dashes that spell out a hidden message for the diligent onlooker to discover.

Why would an artist make use of Samuel F.B. Morse's innovation from the 1840s today? Marsh said, "I have been doing pieces that dealt with communication for years. They dealt with setting up systems and enticing the viewer to have them think about doing something with the work."

Marsh sees coding as a way to get artgoers to be involved with the art. "It's hard to have viewers interact with the work. Museums shy away from that. Coding has viewers interact with pieces — at least on a conceptual level."

Decoding is the major theme of Marsh's work and the reason why her show, which opens Jan. 9 and has an opening reception at 4:30 p.m. Jan. 19 at the Gallery at Penn College, is called "Cipher."

The word "cipher" has multiple meanings, one of which is "the key to a secret method of writing." It's not hard to see how it relates to Marsh's project, since her goal is to have people unlock messages through Morse code.

She's equally interested, however, in another definition of cipher: "Something of no value or importance."

Her use of this meaning is a reference to the fact that language has no value when its deprived of its context — in other words, words don't mean anything if we don't agree upon what they mean.

The word "tree" would be useless if it didn't bring to mind a picture of a tall, wooden thing with leaves.

This irony, that language is the only way we communicate meaning but is inherently devoid of it, intrigues Marsh and drives her work.

Something else that every linguist is fascinated by is sound

(which happens to be a crucial component of Morse code as well) and Marsh is no different in this respect.

Her ceramic vessels also are rattles, albeit ones that you can't shake.

The artist likes the idea that her forms hold the potential for sound even if the viewer can't hear it.

The "unheard sound" adds another hidden layer and makes people think of the objects in a different way. Instead of being seen as fragile, they're seen as something to be used, played with and danced to.

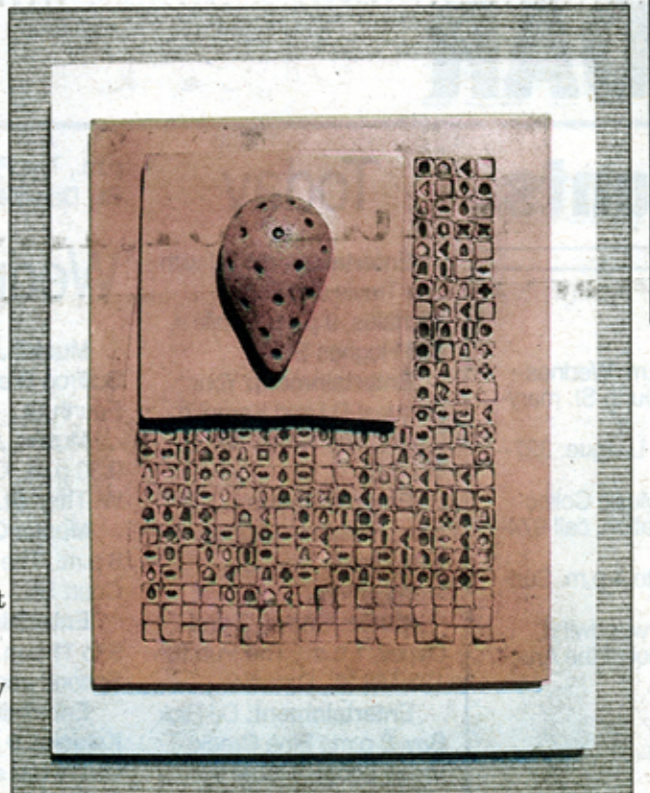
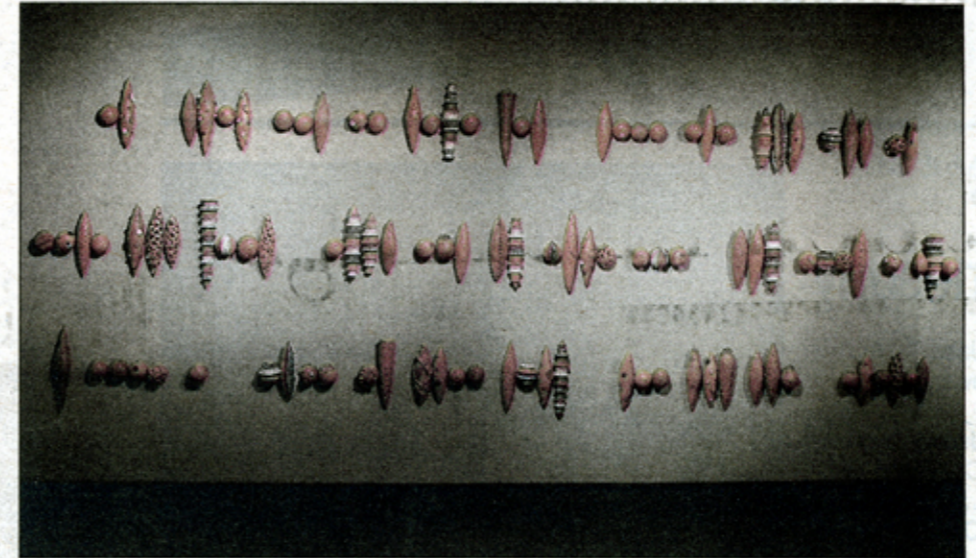
All of this sounds complex, and it is, but Marsh's project tran-

scends its complexity because it's pretty.

If you don't know anything about Morse code (I don't) and if you're not interested in decoding, you'll still be able to appreciate how well-made the objects are on their own.

When asked if she expects people to understand the intricacy of her work without hearing her talk, Marsh said, "Not entirely."

But that is something that doesn't really bother me. It can be appreciated on many levels. One person going into the gallery could come away with something different from what I intended and stuff different from what I thought of. That can happen



"They work well with loud, blaring music," she said.

And she can't read enough of art history. "It's a wealth of knowledge that I have only barely tapped [into] in my life. In this day and age, there's so much we have access to and there's so little time. I look forward to learning more."

The artist lives in Lancaster, where she says there's a strong art scene. "We have regular First Fridays, a gallery row ... There's an art museum and a thriving artist community. I moved here 10 years ago when it was just starting to bud. It's fully flowering now."

Marsh submitted slides and an artist statement to Penn College and was selected by the review committee to have a show at their gallery.

with any art — not just art that's conceptually complex."

Even though rhythm is a big part of her work, Marsh isn't actively interested in music. "I don't listen to music that much. I listen to NPR. It's crazy."

"You'd think I'd be interested in music and I do love what's on. I take mixes from friends, I hear

my husband's music, I always hear the heavy metal guys a few doors down, etc. All of those things are enjoyable ... but I don't seek anything."

Marsh lists Kurt Vonnegut as her favorite author but admits to "reading junk novels at the gym."

