



Inspirational Legends and the Watershed Experience

By Judith S. Schwartz



A.

Watershed's commitment to residencies affords artists undisturbed time to concentrate on their work and a unique opportunity for collaboration, experimentation, and the exchange of ideas. Artists work, eat, and live in an intimate community where the very core of creativity seems to spring to life.

To be an artist working in the retreat-like atmosphere of the Watershed studios has, over the years, evolved into a coveted time slot. This is especially true during the time of a unique program called Artists Invite Artists residency.

During this extraordinary two-week period, an artist is given the opportunity to invite other artists with whom he/she will share the working session. Some artists invite artists who they know or want to get to know better. Others invite artists who they have never met, but may know only through the language of the ideas in their work. In either event, these sessions become memorable; for while the normally peaceful and informal atmosphere of Watershed seems to remain, there is also an unmistakable and special vibrancy that seems present as well.

To celebrate the spirit of this program, Watershed is honoring three artists who have expansively imprinted ceramic tradition with the language of their work. Bill Daley, Karen Karnes and John Mason challenge existing tradition, inspiring us to re-think form, shape and content by their fresh and insightful art forms. While these artists have never been to Watershed, they have nevertheless inspired many in the field who have.

I asked five artists: Mark Shapiro, Nancy Selvin, Mary Barringer, Ruth Borgenicht and Chris Gustin, who have experienced the Artists Invite Artists sessions at Watershed to share their thinking about the three honorees by posing the following questions:

Do you ever think of yourself as being part of a ceramic continuum? That is, do you think about heroes or legends in relation to your work and/or working style as an artist?

Do you like to read interviews or biographies of artists and, if so, have they effected your development as an artist?

How do you feel about mentorship and do you need to actually be in close contact to be mentored, or can you be inspired from afar?

What is it about the Artists Invite Artists sessions at Watershed that are meaningful for you?

Who has personally influenced your way of working and thinking?



B.



C.



D.

A.
Various Watershed moments

B.
Karen Karnes
Untitled
2006

C.
John Mason
Figure, Soft Grey
2000

D.
William Daley
Crossed Vesica 4
2007

Mark Shapiro

I do think of my own experience as part of a stream that continues to flow. Each generation has to figure out how to negotiate questions of beauty, relevance, and position within economic and social communities. The outstanding figures that have come before us offer models—both fruitful and cautionary. I do feel that Karen Karnes is a hero (shero), the trajectory of her career larger than that many of us follow. Karen has influenced me in so many ways. Her steadfast sense of who she is and unwillingness to compromise to please others. Her pioneering of a model in which household pots (for her, casseroles) symbiotically coexist with distinct bodies of gallery work. Her sustained commitment to community and her ferocious sense of privacy.

Interviews and essays have been absolutely central to my development. All those interviews that Gerry Williams did in *Studio Potter* over the years were great to read and gave a sense of the possibility of my becoming part of a bigger world. Edmund de Waal's recent biography of Bernard Leach was also great to read as it opened up a reevaluation of many incipient questions that have been floating around about the man for a long time.

Mentorship can come from just seeing an artist's work, but more personally from a relationship over time. These are different experiences and each can be powerfully transformative. I personally would not call reading history/biography "mentorship", but it certainly can give clues and encouragement in choosing a direction and moving forward.



E.

F.



Nancy Selvin

As a second generation Californian, I am aware of being part of a ceramic continuum as well as a broader artistic West Coast tradition: influenced by contemporary design, California architecture, an outdoor living style and the omnipresent light and color of the landscape. As a student of Peter Voulkos in the 1960s, I was exposed early on to John Mason's ceramics. Mason's eccentric color palette, the scale of his work, the muscularity of both his and Voulkos' working methods influenced my attitude - no tweed jackets and lab aprons here, Levis and work shirts for us. Mason and Voulkos' total emersion in their material, and the work ethic they embodied, has guided me ever since.

I read biographies and interviews, to revisit and reflect on my own era. The *Washington Post's* Katherine Graham and Bob Dylan autobiographies are two of my favorites. A recent interview with Grace Hartigan was wonderful. She touched on the politics of her artistic beginning in 1950s New York with the Abstract Expressionists, revealing the inner strength it took for her to ignore her initial success and change to figuration. I enjoy peeking inside a writer's life where I find insights that parallel the career of a visual artist.

Since leaving teaching, I have mentored young artists by hiring them as assistants, a responsibility on both our parts which goes beyond plain hard work in the studio. I do think effective mentoring comes through personal contact and a working, conversational relationship. The Watershed experience enhances a similar sense of community - working together, learning from one another, contributing to the understanding that the ceramic field is greater than the sum of its parts.

Chris Gustin

I am aware of the continuum and of the history clay artists come out of. I was lucky enough to be part of a generation of artists that looked to those 'heroes' that were breaking new ground with their work. I studied with Ken Ferguson, who made sure that his students knew who was doing what. Seeing the work of Rudy Autio, Warren McKenzie, Peter Voulkos, Robert Turner, Howard Kottler, Robert Arneson, Ruth Duckworth, Lucie Rie, Shoji Hamada, Bernard Leach, Richard Shaw and Robert Hudson, filled me with excitement for the possibilities clay had to offer.

I grew up in LA and actually studied for a year at UC Irvine when John Mason was teaching. I would go to the LA County Museum and see his big crosses on display in harmony with the architecture. This was the stuff that connected. Mason was one of those early heroes that still resonate within.

I remember a visit as an undergrad to Philadelphia where I met Bill Daley and saw his work and drawings for the first time. I was totally taken with the man, his exuberance and generosity of spirit. His support for younger artists is one of his most important gifts. He has been one of the big ones for me, for I learn something new whenever I see his work or hear him speak.

I love reading biographies about artists. The twists and turns of people's lives and careers add a human element to things, helping connect a person's work to their life experiences. I am not sure that I think about it much regarding my own development, but it has influenced how I talk about my work.



G.



H.

I am a believer in mentorship. I am lucky to have had a few mentors in my lifetime, people who believed in me and asked hard questions at important times. I think mentorship is an active thing, an engagement of sorts, so contact is important. My belief is so strong that I started a program of mentoring in my studio, bringing young people each year to work with me. Mentorship is a conversation, a dialogue over time that can be both intimate and confrontational.

I think Watershed shares the idea that we are all in this together; the thread between generations, backgrounds and cultures connects us all by what we make. Working alongside others is a powerful thing; bringing people together, engaging in conversations, connecting as artists and people. For younger people, working alongside someone who has been in the field for years can be a huge thing, because it can break myths and bring things to the human level. Relationships form, hierarchies fall, and understanding develops.



I.

E.

Mark Shapiro

Bottles

2006

F.

Nancy Selvin

Requa

2005

G.

Mary Barringer

Basin with Green Pour

2007

H.

Chris Gustin

Vessel with Neck

2006

I.

Ruth Borginicht

After Gerhy

2007

Mary Barringer

Karen Karnes was enormously important to me when I was first learning to make pots and considering the possibility of making a life as a studio potter. My teacher at Bennington College, Stanley Rosen, had brought in her work to show us, pointing out in particular her lids and the way the work's weight was distributed, saying that, rather than striving to be thin or "finely potted", they conveyed a sense of rightness, balance, and generosity in their weight. That stayed with me as I went out to hone and prove my own skills, though it was many years before I really had a good feeling for "where to put the clay."

More importantly, though, I went to Karen's studio at a pivotal moment in my learning, and saw the example of a woman engaged in the life of a potter and artist in clay. I cannot overstate the impact this had on me. At this time - the early 1970s - most of the well-known exemplars of the burgeoning studio pottery movement were men. I knew of a few women potters, but the experience of seeing the workspace of one opened a door in my mind. It made a far greater impression than names and images in publications, and made something that had until then been my own private notion, seem concrete.

I would say that this type of role model is no longer necessary, except that I have noticed in my own teaching that many of the ideas about how to live the life of an artist—especially in academia—still come in the form of men, men's styles and options, and men's priorities. So I think that exposure to many different ways of living this life is still vitally important to students and young artists. Meeting actual people is the best, of course, but I also think that biographies can play a part. It probably sounds a little self-serving of me to say this, but many of the interviews in *Studio Potter* also influenced me, and that is part of what I hope to continue providing to a new generation.

Ruth Borginicht

I am more a part of a ceramic community than a continuum. Working outside of academia, I have the benefit (or detriment) of not feeling constrained by its influences and boundaries—both aesthetically and technically. Of course technical limitations are learned quickly, but the aesthetic ones are fairly plastic (elastic).

I'm equally inspired by a Milton Avery painting as I am by a rock. I would not refer to Avery as a hero as much as I would not consider rocks legends (exempting Plymouth and Gibraltar). Yet, Milton Avery gave me license to create a pink porcelain sky, and a Costa Rican volcanic rock ended up magnified, in terra cotta, and hung at eye-level.

To elaborate on the comment about being part of a ceramic community rather than a continuum—the Watershed community is a continuum—nothing profound here - every time I am able to get up to Watershed, I am amazed how the staff and artists' networks are so tightly intertwined and ever expanding. People return many times to Watershed in some form—artist, staff, visitor, supporter...or just stopping by while cruising Route 1.

Personal influences include: Jeff Mongrain for his generosity in inviting artists to use the Hunter College studio, and his support of fellow artists by recommending show opportunities and curators; Betty Woodman - inspirational is her work ethic, as are the fabulous socks she wears. I worked for her for a couple of years in her Chelsea studio and learned by observation what it takes to be an artist of her caliber.

These five artists demonstrate, in universal and appealing ways, that one's work, growth, challenges and even direction can, and often are, shaped by the influences of others. A close encounter with an extraordinary person can, by a word or deed, forever inform or invigorate a way of thinking or a behavior. And after all, isn't the life of interaction, interconnection and communication the life worth living?

Watershed honors this human trait and, in so doing, honors the artists who help us see the best in ourselves as a reflection of others.

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