

Applauding Creative Clay Imagination Among The Young

The Significance of the 2011 Kindergarten–12th Grade (K12) Exhibition

at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA)
meeting in Tampa, Florida

YOU NO DOUBT REMEMBER THE DELIGHT THE FIRST TIME you touched clay. As you dug into that hunk of wet, soft, malleable stuff, a response was ignited. The material seemed to react to every nuance of finger, fist, intent – as you poked, pounded, rolled, tore and built. Animals, images of your mom and dad, recreations of familiar environments, dream worlds; all there, the products of a strange, absorbing interaction between you and this ancient and most basic of



materials. When such innate and intimate experiences are enhanced by the skilful mentorship of a competent teacher, the memory of these joyous acts remain forever.

Frank Gehry, the architect, commented that art making is all about free play; where the creator casts caution to the winds, experiments and remains child-like. It was this sense of playfulness, daring, joy and

*Left to right above: Amanda Sedaska. **Amanda Panda Bank.** Creative Ceramics. Instructor: Kristin Davis, Sherman Oaks, California. Rut Cacique. **Chuco.** Grade 2, St Elmo Elementary. Instructor: Nalia Me Muir, Austin, Texas. Lynne Sipprelle. **Giraffe Milk Goblet.** Grade 3, Horace Mann School. Instructor: Shelia Feri, Bronx, New York. Grace Hilscher. **My Bulldog Asia.** Grade 4, Des Moines Art Center. Instructor: Nancy Briggs, Des Moines, Iowa.*

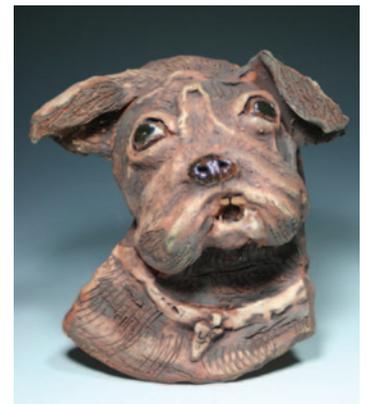
experimentation that set the tone for the Fourteenth Annual National K12 ceramics exhibition held in conjunction with the 2011 NCECA conference in Tampa. It proved to be memorable.

Under the passionate leadership of Bob Feder (the K12 Foundation's president and founder) and Leah Schlieff-Freese (Director of the Exhibition) an unprecedented 1,136 entries were submitted. This is considered somewhat amazing when one recognises that little more than 20 years ago, this



space-guzzling, time-consuming, energy-demanding medium was on its way out of the art curriculum in the public schools.

How did such a fortunate turnabout occur? There seem to be at least two explanations. First, behind the exhibition and the K-12 Foundation's dedicated board members are the suppliers, manufacturers, sponsors and donors who provide funds and product awards that help to motivate art teachers to keep clay as an important medium of artistic expression in their classrooms. NCECA, too, provides the host venue for the annual exhibition, thereby playing a critical role in facilitating and supporting this important initiative.



The second reason for this turnabout, I would like to think, was the "Case for Clay" symposium held in 1988 at New York University (NYU). The symposium originated under the watchful eye of Gerry Williams, then Editor of *Studio Potter Magazine* and was co-sponsored by The Studio Potter Foundation and NYU. Bob Feder, the K12 Foundation's eventual president was in attendance at that symposium.

The rationale for the symposium was that Williams and I, as co-organizers, had been alarmed by the fears expressed by administrators, teachers and artists that the use of clay was experiencing a disproportional decline in the public schools due to cut-backs in funding. Even more alarming was the lack of research in the field of art education on the specific value of working three dimensionally. This was also the time when discipline-based arts education (DBAE) was gaining popularity and the experimental and explorative aspects of making art were being devalued in favour of learning about art within its historical, social and critical contexts.

The three-day symposium at NYU brought together a distinguished group of art educators, teachers, administrators, artists and university-based scholars. Awards were given for innovative programs and, as was so typical of *Studio Potter* initiatives, a grass root network was begun. In fact, the proceedings

It forcefully supported the importance of political advocacy to persuade constituencies of power to continue curricula using the three-dimensional media in elementary and secondary education."

Now, 25 years later, in the current worldwide economic turndown, it is not only art curricula that are at risk but educational systems worldwide that are being threatened. Teachers are being fired, salaries are being cut, class sizes are being increased, budgets for materials and supplies are being slashed and the sciences are being pitted against the creative arts as though they are mutually exclusive.

In too many situations, the art classroom of today is located on a cart that is wheeled from room to room by an 'outside' art specialist (someone contracted to work art into the curriculum of other subjects as a means to enhance learning). The cart takes up the least amount of space and is limited to flat, that is, two-dimensional experiences.

What role can the ceramist play to increase awareness that exploring this most basic three-dimensional medium is in itself a valuable aid to learning? While clay's historical, cultural and social contexts are rich enough, its mathematical, chemical and cross-cultural (anthropological) implications are equally powerful. And for many children with learning disabilities, short attention

A Review by Judith S Schwartz, PhD



were not only published in *Studio Potter* (Vol. 16 Number 2) but a special supplement was printed for The National Art Education Association (NAEA) and distributed to its 20,000 members.

Williams set the tone for what I believe greatly contributed to the success and reinstatement of clay and, indeed, made the case for clay so that it could, should and would remain in the curriculum. He stated: "The symposium concluded its presentation with a resolve to form a strong position of support for clay in elementary and secondary curricula. It recognised the importance of leadership at the university level in the need for increased cooperation between lower and higher educational institutions. It voiced encouragement for pursuing such future opportunities – germinated at the symposium – as might present themselves through publications, networking and substantive academic dialogue.



spans, or those just not being intellectually challenged, clay is often seen in the hands of skilled teachers to be one of the most effective materials for enhanced learning today. Even as technologies invade and vie for time in the school, it is this act of 'messing' around that is seen as a productive,



Left to right above: Tawney Staley. Puffin. Grade 5, Britton Elementary. Instructor: Becky Rehbeck, Hillard, Ohio.

Julia Sachs. Elephant Teapot. Grade 6, Ladue Horton Watkins. Instructor: Guy Sachs, Ladue, Missouri.

Zehui Ni. Rose Vase. Grade 7, Highland Middle School. Instructor: Tammy Podbelsek, Louisville, Kentucky.

Aaron Ali. Sunset. Grade 8, American Heritage School. Instructor: Shannon Calhoun, Plantation, Florida.



creative and intuitive counterpart to the clean, passive, rote and addictive behaviour of the two-dimensional computer interface.

An example of this was found at a lecture at NCECA's Tampa conference given by Peter Wilson, Senior Lecturer in Creative Arts at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst, Australia. Via email correspondence subsequent to the conference, I asked him to reflect upon how he felt about the special qualities of working with clay in the classroom. He answered:

I have always used clay as a means with which to engage children in learning. The sheer sensory delight that children/people of all ages take in using clay is something that needs to be seen to be believed. I am sure you are aware of this. I have taught all age groups and I can walk into a room of the rowdiest youths, young offenders, children and others and, without saying one word, walk around and put a tennis-ball sized lump of clay in front of each of them and have them fully engaged for at least 30 minutes. It is because of the multi-



on their projects.

I use this philosophical background and experience as a basis for what I do. I usually bring in pictures from popular culture, such as Lord of the Rings characters, Harry Potter and so forth, TV creatures, we discuss these, they do

sensory engagement required, that is touch, sight and the imagination. Problems must be solved. Where does this fit? Is this in the right proportion? How am I going to join that and so forth. Usually the students punch and Kung-fu it for five minutes but after that sense of tension has been dissipated, they work away quietly, fully engaged

drawings and then, after several sessions of playing with clay and, depending upon their ages (as each age/stage of development requires a different focus, either process or product-oriented) we start building their favourite characters. This means teaching a few skills in rolling slabs, cutting and joining, making coils and so forth. Their creations then become the focus for talking about what they have done. This morphs into writing and the other teachers then get involved with developing word banks and the writing is an inherent part of the Mud Club. We then use Picture Book (I think it is a free software), we upload images of their pieces and they write stories about their characters. We

put several together and they have to write about them, conversations and so forth. These become their readers and away they go.

Of course it is not all plain sailing but they do develop a sense of self-esteem from the encouragement and success of their pieces and their improvements in writing. They respect the work of others because, when they put in

so much effort on their own pieces, they appreciate what others have done."

I think what made the K12 exhibition so lively was seeing in each of these young artists works that demonstrated ownership, imagination and lively manipulation. While it is well documented in developmental research literature that children ages six to eight generally focus upon animals, real and imagined, it was nonetheless delightful to see just how lively a panda, chicken, giraffe, dog, pelican and elephant were rendered among the entries in this age group. Likewise, as children mature and both awareness and dexterity grows, their work gets more skilled and conscious. It was also evident from the show how strong, witty and provocative the figures, portraits and vessels were within this age group.

Of the more hilarious works were those of Brooke Kauffman, a 12th grader and Beth Allen, a 10th



*Left to right above: Tatlor Ferdianandsen. **Silence the Violence.** Grade 9, Clovis West High School. Instructor: Barbara Beasley-Eggbrouwer, Fresno, California.*

Beth Allen. Rex. Grade 10, Villa Duchense. Instructor: Laurie Blaes, St Louis, Missouri.

Adam McBride. Voluminous Vessel. Grade 11, Bryan City School. Instructor: Brandon Knott, Bryan, Ohio.

grader. Kauffman created a trompe l'oeil *New York Times* front page headline which read, "Young Artist Cures Cancer", a charming narrative, perhaps about herself, surrounded by junk food commenting on a daydream. Allen, anthropomorphised a sneaker in another trompe l'oeil work, turning the sole into a ferocious jaw-toothed devouring animal.

But we can do more to popularise clay for our children. We can learn a lesson from two countries (Taiwan and South Korea) that recognise the enormous pleasure children get from manipulating clay. Perhaps it is their centuries of ceramics tradition that engenders a sensibility of respect for the material that is so great that they want to instil it in the early development of their young.

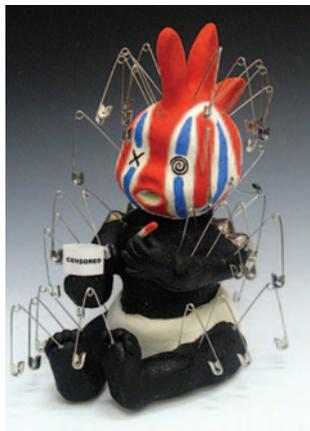
One is the Yingge Ceramics Museum, in New Taipei City, Taiwan. While this modern museum is



stomp and plunk down into the material, experiencing it first hand. In addition, water flowed along the 'clayground' allowing children to experience many different activities with water and clay.

These two countries are on target for presenting a context for the appreciation and education in ceramics for the young in a way that is engaging, exciting and fun while, at the same time, enabling the children to learn about the world themselves and the material of clay.

The K12 exhibition at this year's NCECA conference demonstrates the core value of ceramics education. Clay, with its problem solving and decision making activities, cultivates a deeper understanding of the world because it encourages creative and independent thought. In the hands of skilled teachers, children are encouraged to ask good ques-



impressive, with its large holdings of contemporary and historical ceramic traditions, there is also an enormous space devoted to working with clay for children. The children's area is cleverly and thoughtfully designed to enhance a wide variety of clay experiences. One of the best and, surely, the most unique is a large circular tile floor where children pound and stomp clay into diverse bisqued

textured surfaces. The floor is flanked with pint-sized scaled furniture, ceramic sculpture to climb up, on and around and a waterfall for washing their hands and feet.

Another setting is during the World Ceramic Exposition Foundation (WOCEF) biennale in Icheon, Korea, (now known as KOCEF). In the several times that I have attended this biennale, I witnessed hundreds of school children arrive at the ceramic museums to look, see and explore. Then, outside the museums, clay parks were set up where the children were encouraged to get into the thick of it, as areas were set aside for the kids to romp,

solve interesting problems in innovative ways, tell stories, use their intuition, work in unknown three-dimensional territories and pay attention to details and make choices (skills that can only serve and enhance a lifetime of learning). Seen from this perspective, all of us share the responsibility of maintaining initiatives of this sort, not only on a continuous basis but also on an ever-expanding one.



Judith S Schwartz, PhD, is curator, artist and author of *Confrontational Ceramics* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) and Professor in the Department of Art and Art Professions at New York University. She directs the Craft Media area and teaches studio courses in ceramic sculpture for art education and studio art majors.

Left to right above: Adrian Jimenez. *Birth Control*. Grade 12, Oak Harbor High School. Instructor: Frank Jacques, Langley, Washington. Brooke Kauffman. *Morning News*. Grade 12, Solanco High School. Instructor: Candace Ryan Rakers, Quarryville, Pennsylvania. Morgan Hamilton. *The Deep Jungle Mystery Cup and Contextual Saucerthing*. Grade 12, Oak Harbor High School. Instructor: Frank Jacques, Langley, Washington.