

# In, Out, and Back INTO CLAY

by Allan Kluber

I was smitten with clay when I first took a ceramics class during my last undergraduate term at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. It was 1967, and all of us under 30 were going to remake the world for the better. Two weeks into the term I knew that my contribution to the revolution would be through making hand-made objects for the people. I ditched my newly-earned teaching credentials and found a production potter, Byron Temple, to take me on as an apprentice.

In a year's time I was an accomplished production thrower. That summer, through good fortune, I participated in the kiln-building festival that Paulus Berensohn, together with M. C. Richards and Karen Karnes, created on his farm. He had not yet written his book *Finding One's Way With Clay*, but everything about him spoke to the necessity of listening to one's authentic inner voice and following wherever it led. When I listened, I didn't feel that production-thrown pots were going to change the world the way





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1 Geologic form, 4 in. (10 cm) in height, colored clay, 2017. 2 Plate, 11 in. (28 cm) in diameter, colored porcelain, 1978. 3 Vessel 5 in. (13 cm) in height, clay, glaze, 1985. 4 Bowl, 7 in. (18 cm) in diameter, translucent porcelain, 1982. 5 Plate, 13 in. (33 cm) in diameter, colored porcelain, 1981. 6 Vase, 7 in. (18 cm) in height, porcelain, 2018. 7 Geologic form, 7 in. (18 cm) in height, colored clay, 2018. 1, 6, 7 Photos: Jonathan Smith.

I wanted. So, looking for a way to have a larger impact, I went to work in the mold shop at the Haeger Pottery factory in East Dundee, Illinois. Before long I could see that their focus was on glitzy glazes and lowering unit cost, not on humane design that would enrich ordinary lives.

By the next fall, I was enrolled in an MFA program at the University of Oregon in Eugene, with its then-focus on understanding ceramic processes. There I learned to explore clay as a process and to develop work as an interaction between my intentions and my growing understanding of the clay's properties. Having thrown Byron Temple's pots for a year during my apprenticeship, their forms had become so ingrained in my hands that I abandoned throwing. Wanting a clean slate, I chose to work only in porcelain and gradually developed a gray-scale palette and slab-based forming techniques. Because I taught a class as part of my graduate fellowship, I toyed with becoming an academic. But a tight job market and my lack of understanding of academic hiring processes more or less forced me to start a studio ceramic career, something I'm grateful for in hindsight.

### Developing a Studio Career

Compared to today, it was awfully easy then to make a modest living selling pots, especially in Eugene, where a weekly Saturday craft market that attracted plentiful customers had begun. I developed a line of plant-impressed functional pieces, and kept exploring and

expanding the way clay and I worked together. Over time the semi-production work evolved, first to include a gray scale and then a full range of color. Meanwhile I was exploring clay as a recorder of rhythmic forces and geologic references, and porcelain for its translucency and color. I was ambitious. I moved away from the Saturday markets and into galleries, received fellowships from the Oregon Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts, taught workshops, and served on percent-for-art juries as an invited artist.

As I passed 40, I had become externally successful, but internally things felt dissonant. I wasn't really making pots for the people, since even my production pieces were becoming increasingly expensive. The optimism of the 1960s had faded; the world hadn't changed as expected. At its worst, it felt like I was making playthings for rich people. And so when a small retrospective show ended in 1987 and I had no energy for work, I decided that rather than push through it as I had done in the past, I would just stop and listen. It was not an intention to stop entirely. I stopped because the work felt complete. I was at a point where my work began to feel predictable, and it was less interesting and vital for me. I wanted to pursue a form for that expression that was challenging, nourishing, and of value in the larger world through a more direct relationship with other people.

### Changing Focus

I completed a counseling degree, worked with injured workers at the local community college, produced a parenting education



8 Pair of mugs, 4 in. (10 cm) in height, made from one piece of clay, 2018. 9 Bowl, 7 in. (18 cm) in diameter, 2018. Photos: Jonathan Smith.

video series, became a mediator, and started volunteering daily with first graders who were having a hard time learning how to read. I felt myself being socially useful. I married, had two children, and divorced. And while I did, on occasion, miss being engaged with clay, when I listened, nothing told me to get back to work. I thought I was through with clay.

#### Unexpected Inspiration

But then two summers ago, nearly 30 years after stopping, a trip through Southern Utah reignited a vision through clay. I was deeply moved by the evocative rock formations and saw them in terms of what I knew about clay. I realized I could respond through ceramics to the millions of years of geology but within a human time scale, and I saw how I could embrace the expressive qualities of those processes and resultant forms.

Upon returning to Eugene, I quickly set up a minimal studio, began working, and found that my ceramic roots were still intact. The work flowed as if it had been waiting for spring. No longer focused on advancing my ceramic career, I felt a new freedom and a broader, richer perspective. There was an increased awareness of inherent metaphorical implications, and I was able to respond to them more consciously.

Now, as I am working again, I think about the present times in which existing social forms are rapidly changing into an unknown landscape. Norms, standards, values, agreements, and expectations are being eroded, and what is left in their place remains to be seen. Is it entirely a process of decay, or is it one of transformation and renewal? In the geological evolution of the earth, existing forms have been repeatedly eroded, destroyed, and recreated into new forms. How does this relate to our current turbulent times? Since all is transitory and our lives occupy a blink in time, how is the larger picture to be seen? While we are an insignificant part in a geological process, our own growth, evolution, and destruction is all we have. Are we passive observers or an active part of the process? So the work remains an open question, but within a new perspective.

#### Functional Pots Return

When I first finished this article over a year ago, I thought my path forward was clear, and I would be making small geological clay sculptures and contemplating their metaphorical implications into the indefinite future. But then, as I considered the work and how it had been received, I felt some dissatisfaction. This led me

to reflect on my original motivations for working in clay and the current successes and failures in achieving those goals. It also led me to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the geologic work. I was pleased that it broke new ground in using water erosion as a forming process. I was happy that there were rich metaphorical associations embodied in the work. It felt to be new territory barely explored; however, I was less happy with a dilemma of small sculptural work, namely that there is no natural place for it in most people's world. Usually a place has to be made, and this often is a barrier. By contrast, functional work has a natural home and can integrate seamlessly and unpretentiously into a person's life. This is one of the things that had drawn me originally to working in clay.

Another original motivation for clay work was its tactile experience, both in the forming process and in the use of the finished pieces. The geologic work, formed by water erosion and then pedestal mounted often under a Plexiglas case, completely lacked a tactile dimension. By contrast, a mug is an intimately and tactically made object that in use is handled and touched by hand and lips. My painter friend Peg Coe suggested that elements of the geologic work could be applied to functional work. I realized that I could layer the clay geologically with the colored strata embedded in a slab that could then be formed into functional shapes. I began to tentatively form some cups whose surface colors and patterns revealed the layered clay structure that existed throughout the piece. These showed promise and were quickly expanded to handled mugs as well as bowls and vases. The work is now progressing and maturing rapidly.

Today I am fully engaged in making functional work for galleries and shows, and when I'm doing it, it is all that matters. But when I step back it doesn't seem that important, especially in contrast to helping a struggling first grader learn to read, and perhaps open up a full and rich life that could have been shut down by early failure. I find that working with clay again is informed by all I have done these past 30 years. It's now a personal dialogue with clay in an exploration of the human and physical world. This is not what I expected, not at all 2 years ago, and not in this form a year ago. At an age (74) when I expected to be winding down I find that all the shackles have been lifted, and I am free to move in any direction at any speed. I learned years ago from Paulus Berensohn the importance of listening to one's self, but now I unexpectedly find myself doing it more profoundly than ever. Such a nice surprise.