



Candice Methe

The Maturation of a NOMADIC POTTER

by Andrew Buck, EdD

Candice Methe's story as a ceramic artist exemplifies the satisfactions and struggles of working within the tradition of vessel making in an era where advancing technology reshapes our daily lives and a vast proliferation of diverse aesthetics inform artmaking. Her journey as a potter reveals a significant, yet relatively recent, transformation of her relationship with clay. To me, this reflects a transformation or maturation of her creative self. Behind these changes appear themes of adaptation, survival, discontent, and love.

Entry

Methe entered the world of clay peripherally about 20 years ago as a youngster, helping a commercial production potter deliver finished goods to customers and other outlets. Not having any other particularly strong direction to move toward, she began to acquire the skills of the trade in production pottery. She eventually learned how to create functional work that moved well in the marketplace. Her tableware production pieces typically utilized animated, layered surfaces that wove together design motifs and recognizable imagery. For her, production pottery was all business. She labored successfully in the business for approximately ten years. However, Methe realized there was a personal disconnect with the work. Her personal relationship and emotional investment in the work was minimal. There was something missing or lacking; seeds of discontent started to grow.

Turning the Soil

Methe made a decision to attend Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. She completed her undergraduate degree as an adult student majoring in ceramics with a minor in art history. She notes that she was the first college graduate within her family. She was attracted to Northern Arizona because of the vital wood-firing program. Located amidst vast pine forests, she absorbed images from nature, developing a repertoire of simplified floral motifs, which persist in her work.

Additionally, Methe's interactions with local Native Americans on campus and on their ancestral lands awakened her to notions of ritualistic as well as unencumbered, indigenous folk pottery. This direct personal experience helped her see ceramics through a different cultural lens.

Growth

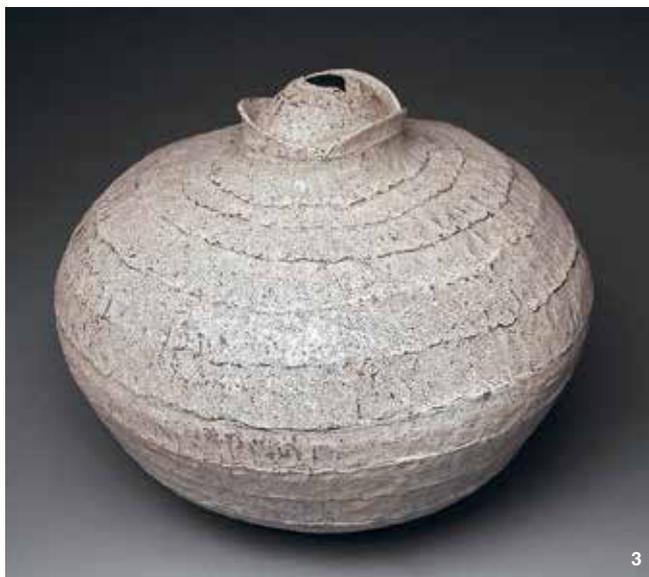
While Methe's undergraduate experience stoked her embers, her experience as an MFA graduate student at the University of Minnesota provided the critical turning point in her transition from working as a production potter to making one-of-a-kind work at a slower pace. During the first year, as many former and current MFA students can attest to, there is a great deal of angst about presenting your work for the first critique. It is easy to flounder and get pushed hard. From what I have seen, the MFA experience entails struggling to find out what is really important to you as a person and as an artist, and then finding ways to have that take shape in a personally distinctive aesthetic form.¹ At least this seemed to be the case with Methe. During one of her early critiques wherein she presented a host of functional pieces, it seemed that she was hiding behind her work. One of her professors jokingly asked, "Do you even like this work?" He hit the nail on the head. The truth poured out. At the end of the day, Methe asked the critical question, "Well, what do you suggest I do next?" The paradoxical answer was, "Do the opposite." At that point, she got off the wheel and started to handbuild.

Grounding Within the Contemporary Terrain

Bernard Leach, in his American workshop tours with Shoji Hamada in the early 1950s, commented about the lack of a deep tap root in our culture.^{2,3} It is part of the dilemma and remarkable opportunity of working in a culture shaped by Western expansion, innovative entrepreneurialism, immigration, and diversity. As part of an experimental or open-ended art culture, there is no mandate or one way to go about making pottery. Furthermore, contemporary culture puts the onus of creative work on individual artistic genius. Today's emerging artists have an automatic pass on being traditional and are expected to innovate (albeit from an informed point of view). This leads to two critical questions: "Why are you making pots or vessels?" and, "For whom are you making the work?"

Methe found answers in part during her MFA thesis exhibit.⁴ This exhibit consisted of relatively large-scale, hand-built, vessels which served as water containers. The idea of a vessel as a container grounded in its original use—to carry and store water—brought her work in touch with ancient ceramics and indigenous folk pottery, which spans the globe. Something else had visibly changed too. There was a new presence to her work, a new vitality. She was learning to create work that contained her presence. Her relationship with clay had changed dramatically. This came from slowing down, and I mean really slowing down. Giving more time and self to each piece meant more involvement; more touch; more

thinking about the meaning or the imagined significance of a piece; observing more carefully the emerging nuances of shape and form. It meant pinching, coiling, cutting, opening, and rejoining the clay walls of the vessels from the ground up. It also meant working and reworking the surface. Drawing upon her repertoire of skills in layering glazes, oxide washes, and using terra sigillata, Methe experimented with multiple firings, sandblasting surfaces, and multiple passes at hand-sanding when sandblasters were un-



1 Footed pouring vessel, 16 in. (41 cm) in height, terra sigillata, washes, slips, fired to cone 4 in oxidation, 2017. 2 Footed mug, 5 in. (13 cm) in width, terra sigillata, washes, slips, fired to cone 4 in oxidation, 2017. 3 Wasp Nest Storage Vessel, 23 in. (58 cm) in width, terra sigillata, washes, slips, fired to cone 4 in oxidation, 2015. All pieces are made with Laguna B-3 Brown cone 5 clay, fired multiple times between cone 04–cone 2.



available. Her goal is to make one-of-a-kind vessels that are imbued with feeling. These works become ritualistic celebrations of individuality.

Today, the beauty of her work reflects a level of harmony she has achieved in relation to her creative process and herself. She knows herself well, which means that she knows what works best for her: sunlight, space, plants, a working knowledge of a good-sized kiln, and a few close pottery friends. Why does she work in clay? It is part of her way of living harmoniously in the world.

Sustainability

There is nothing easy about the messy business of being an independent ceramic artist. Methe has had residencies at Red Lodge Clay Center (2015) and most recently at the Archie Bray Foundation for Ceramic Arts (2017). She received a Warren MacKenzie Advancement Award from Northern Clay Center and traveled to Ghana, West Africa (2016). The trip was both disillusioning and enlightening. There, the importance of clay and traditional folk pottery appeared to be eroding, giving way to cinder-block huts with tin roofs, aluminum cookware, and plastic storage containers—a far cry from pottery’s omnipresence in Ghana 40–50 years ago.

This experience solidified Methe’s understanding of what makes her process and work important. She realized that as a contemporary ceramic artist, she operates outside of a local folk tradition. However, she is located within the ceramics world and, by implication, the fine arts world where value adheres to that which is unique and distinctive. While she may have ambivalent feelings about these large worlds and systems, she is clear that her primary goal is to sustain her practice with the goal of making unique work. As Methe’s work has become freed from purely functional demands, the expressive and spiritual nature of pottery making has formed the center out of which her pieces emerge.

Maturation

Methe’s capacity to sustain her work and flourish reminds me of Darwin’s generalization about birds and crustaceans on the Galapagos Islands; those who adapt to their environment are most likely to persist or survive.⁵ For Methe, at this point in time, most of her adaptations are external, such as moving to different studios to sustain her current momentum. She has found a consistency in her relationship with clay that finds expression in new, vital forms each time she enters the studio. There are lines and spirals of continuity in her practice since her transformative MFA experiences. This serves to remind us that transmutation is part of the creative process where new material emerges from existing content.

Methe finds that the studio acts as a buffer against the outside world. The studio offers more than tools and space. It serves as a sanctuary for her to be alone with her thoughts, which dance in her mind as she slowly shapes each vessel by hand.



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4 White storage jar, 35 in. (89 cm) in height, terra sigillata, washes, slips, fired to cone 4 in oxidation, 2017. 5 Sandstone basket, 36 in. (91 cm) in height, terra sigillata, washes, slips, fired to cone 4 in oxidation, 2016. 6 Red storage vessel, 29 in. (74 cm) in height, terra sigillata, washes, slips, fired to cone 4 in oxidation, 2017. 7 *Fat Bottomed Girl*, 36 in. (91 cm) in height, terra sigillata, slips, washes, fired to cone 4 in oxidation, waxed wool yarn, 2017. All pieces made with Laguna B-3 Brown cone 5 clay, fired multiple times between cone 04–cone 2.

She finds deep, intrinsic satisfaction in the making of work. In that sense, she makes work for herself. She also creates work as offerings for those who take interest in objects that contain or suggest life essence. While it may sound cliché to say that hers is a labor of love, Methé's work has a vibrancy that is born out of moments of being.

Methé's maturation as a ceramic artist may be characterized by her capacity to imbue work with a strong individual presence. Her pieces also tend to resonate along primal dimensions, which places them into a broader yet relatable context.

Aesthetic and Conceptual Integration

Fat Bottomed Girl (7), which humorously takes its name from Queen's similarly titled rock song, offers us insight into the dynamics and complexities that are woven into Methé's precious objects. The piece stands about 2½ feet high with a clearly articulated base that raises and elevates it off the floor. It has standing if you will. The work makes obvious reference to the female human form in terms of its overall proportions and generous use of curves of three-dimensional form.

In terms of the vessel's overall design, the surface is marked by repeated fingerprints. The presence of the hand is quite visible. The bold, flowing, curved lines serve to unify and activate the bottom, middle, and top sections of the piece. The narrow areas separating the wider chambers are animated with carefully bound black string. The string serves as ornament yet signifies constriction. The vessel holds liquid, so Methé constructed a lid to protect its contents. The lid has a long conical taper, which goes unseen, deep below the inner resting lip.

The surface treatment takes advantage of layered oxide washes, terra sigillata, multiple firings, and extensive sanding to create the appearance of a soft, soothing exterior. Methé adds the sigillatas, slips, and washes on greenware and fires it a number of times between cone 04 and cone 2, adding more layers with each successive firing. She intermingles oxidation and reduction firings depending on how she feels about the piece.

Issues of fecundity permeate the work. It is a not so subtle nod to Paleolithic Venus figurines.⁶ The work manages to be referential without being derivative. For Methé, in a contemporary context, the work becomes a placeholder for questions about motherhood. The work raises questions about images and expectations of motherhood, fertility, biological timelines, and implications of parenting. Substance, form, and surface are integrated. They are signs of Methé having achieved a personal voice and vision for her work as she pursues her journey as a ceramic artist.

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Footnotes:

- 1 "A qualitative multiple case study of four graduate ceramic art students enrolled in different master of fine arts (MFA) degree programs." Buck, Andrew. Teachers College, Columbia University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2015. 3704458.
- 2 www.leachpottery.com/history.
- 3 www.chipstone.org/article.php/154/Ceramics-in-America-2004/Bernard-Leach-in-America.
- 4 "Underlined Action:" UMN MFA Thesis Exhibition. April 7–25, 2015.
- 5 *Charles Darwin's Notebooks, 1836–1844: Geology, Transmutation of Species, Metaphysical Enquiries*, Charles Darwin, Paul H. Barrett, Peter J. Gautrey, Sandra Herbert, David Kohn, Sydney Smith.
- 6 www.britannica.com/topic/Venus-of-Willendorf.

Handbuilding Techniques with Candice Methe by Andrew Buck, EdD

Methe draws upon tried and true coil-building techniques to form her generously sized vessels. She uses a banding wheel as a work base. Initially, she centers a lump of clay on the banding wheel, opens it up, and draws up a short vertical wall (1). She compresses the bottom of the clay to prevent cracking and lets it set up to stiffen.

Working on the vessel wall facing her, Methe begins to pinch upward (2), keeping in mind how tall she wants the initial base section to be. As the piece progresses, she makes decisions about the direction and curve for the wall of the pot. She then rolls out large coils (3), scores the rim of the vessel with a serrated rib, and feeds the coil onto the pot (4). Her hands do the work: pinching, pushing down with her thumb (5), rubbing with her knuckles (6).

She continues to build height, maintains an even thickness of the walls, and accentuates the shape (7, 8).

Her forming process becomes a repetitive ritual. It is a balancing act between listening to and directing the clay.

When the vessel is about $\frac{2}{3}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ of its final height, Methe departs from building outward or upward to start a process of dismantling and reassembling. She draws lines into the surface of the clay body to establish an overall integrated design. She then uses a short, sharp knife to cut into the clay at a bevel, removing one section of the pot at a time (9, 11). Afterward, she scores, adds slip, and reattaches each piece of the pot back together (10, 12). However, in the process of re-joining, she leaves a raised edge, a slightly elevated overhang, that serves to demarcate the line even further. Her finger marks are left visibly on the finished surface.

After she is satisfied with the shape and linear design on the body of the vessel, she forms the neck (13), throat (14, 15), and rim using the coil technique. She brings the piece to completion by incorporating the drawn, cut, and raised linear designs on the top section of the vessel. She gives the rim some final attention (16) with finishing touches before the glazing process dresses each piece.





1 Centering a ball of clay on a banding wheel, then opening it up and forming walls via pinching. **2** Pinching the walls upward to thin the clay and form the straight section of the base before flaring it out into a bowl-like shape. **3** Rolling out a coil to add to the top of the pinched base. **4** Scoring the top of the rim and feeding the coil onto the top of the pot. **5** Joining the coil to the rim using a downward motion with the thumb to move clay from the coil onto the wall of the vessel as the coil is placed. **6** Compressing the seam between the coil and the rim using the knuckles while supporting with the other hand on the outside. **7** Smoothing the join on the outside of the pot and evening out the wall thickness using a pinching motion. **8** Pulling the walls up and further refining them using an upward pinching motion. **9** Cutting a section of the pot out prior to reassembling it to create a raised seam line. **10** Reattaching the cut section, leaving a slight overhang, after slipping and scoring the seams. **11** Cutting an additional section following the same contour curve as the first cut. **12** Reattaching the section, again leaving a raised edge to create a linear pattern along the seam lines. **13** Creating the neck of the form by adding coils and blending them with the wall of the vessel. **14** Working on the throat of one pot while the rim of a second pot is covered in plastic to keep it from drying too much. **15** Changing the direction of the curve at the throat by placing the coil in from the edge and pinching inward as well as upward. **16** Finishing the rim of the form after incorporating cut patterns to the top section above the neck and throat.