

THE CLAY STUDIO:
EDUCATION, INNOVATION, CELEBRATION

By Gail M. Brown

At 139 North Second Street in Philadelphia, a wall-to-wall picture window reveals a spacious gallery with a singular, enticing focus: clay. This is THE CLAY STUDIO, (TCS), a nearly thirty year old bastion of visual and tactile celebration of the ceramic arts. A busy street in Old City, the affectionately referential name of an eclectic neighborhood of historic sights, restaurant suppliers, galleries and theatres abutting the Delaware River, is home to the internationally known ceramic arts center.

For some, a first visit is a focused destination to the place they know from print and reputation. For others, it is a chance connection, just around the corner from the oldest residential street in the city still boasting cobblestones and tiny, colonial era houses. The audience for clay includes both the knowledgeable and a growing community of beginners who all quickly sense the welcome: the creative spirit and vibrant energy here echoes the inherent nature of the material itself.

Is the innate comfort due to a nonverbal memory of our own hands in this primal material, while simultaneously seeing it celebrated by the accomplished works in the Galleries? Clay “remembers.” It catches and keeps the unique imprint of each individual touch. It inspires and implements a remarkable breadth of human expression. Its nature and connection to the earth afford seemingly limitless possibilities. Clay also encompasses immediate material contradictions: being both soft and hard, appearing both fragile and strong, appropriate for exquisite miniaturization and surprisingly monumental scale, intrinsically rooted to the past, yet possible always to become something new, wearing a perfect, accomplished skin or reflecting the emotional and physical finger marks of each maker. Its variables allow and honor the panoply of human expression.

We can become part of the community of makers and appreciators almost intuitively. Clay beckons the maker. It invites experience, it binds the hand and the heart in a spiritual connection embracing history and inspiring innovation, rooted in the functional and the expressive. This medium and its realizations beckon the viewer, too; the objects, be they utilitarian or sculptural, seduce insistently and invite a shared encounter.

TCS was founded in 1974 when local artists- Ken Vavrek, Jill Bonovitz, Janice Merendino, Betty Parisano and Kathie Regan- sought a collective studio space first at a former spool factory on Orianna Street. Five resident artists quickly grew to fourteen through a jury selection. Classes were given to cover the rent, equipment and maintenance. As interest in working in clay drew others, the need for more space became a marker of its success and emergence as a community. In 1980, shortly after TCS moved to a larger space on Arch Street, an electrical fire destroyed the building. Undaunted, tenacious and clearly a dedicated group, TCS reopened six months later in modest quarters at 49 North Second Street.

Desire to educate and celebrate the field outside the studio walls grew. Interest in sharing work and ideas through shows inspired the *AMERICAN CLAY ARTISTS Exhibitions* in 1983, 1986 and 1989, mounted in multiple venues in the city; participation was by invitation to nationally known

artists, by juried acceptance to Delaware Valley makers and to celebrate TCS Residents. A Lecture and Workshop Series was instituted in 1986 inviting nationally known ceramic artists for information and dialogue. Simultaneously, Philadelphia was becoming a haven for artists working in craft materials. Degree granting programs in craft disciplines at the city's art schools brought artist/teachers and students to the area, the emergence of galleries celebrating craft were exhibiting local and nationally based makers and pivotal annual exhibitions, symposia and craft shows were conceived to entice and educate a growing audience for all forms of craft art. Philadelphia's reputation as a center for contemporary craft and clay, in particular, was thriving.

Jimmy Clark, a ceramic maker who had studied in Germany, became Director in 1986, bringing a wealth of personal contacts and broad knowledge of European artists working in clay. His strong interest in extending the outreach of the Studio focused particularly on international exchanges of people, ideas and objects. This widened access and opportunities for more artists and a growing, responsive audience. In 1990, TCS inaugurated a multistoried facility as the Second Street Art Building (at #139) renting spaces to other collectives. Studio, workshop, exhibition space and vision expanded. The intensity and sincerity of the mission and its implementation continued to attract and inspire a broadening community.

In 1992, with the Philadelphia Ceramic Consortium and generous support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, TCS hosted NCECA, the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts' annual conference. Thirty venues in the city and environs mounted shows celebrating the art of clay. The focal point was *CONTEMPORARY EAST EUROPEAN CERAMICS*, a survey exhibition at TCS curated by Clark, introducing the diverse creativity of that politically closeted world. It was comprehensive and eclectic, by invitation to artists whose differing techniques and aesthetic viewpoints could provoke and enlighten American audiences. It subsequently traveled to other venues, heightening interest in the power of clay as a vehicle of layered information.

Community support for TCS programs further blossomed. A generous grant program was transformed into a *Residency Fellowship* funded by the Evelyn Shapiro Foundation in 1991. The Foundation awards a designated studio space, monthly stipend, materials and a solo exhibition to an exceptional, emerging artist who demonstrates unique potential. Those thus far honored have continued to make cutting edge work and many have garnered national recognition. Some of those individuals choose to remain at the Studio in the *Resident Artist Program* after their Fellowship year.

The *Resident Artist Program*, begun by the founders, is an ongoing community of twelve, many from out of state, whose goals are professional development in the ceramic arts. They have individual studios on the fourth floor and may work for up to five years within this nurturing community- a slice of time and place which can fill an interim need, after or between formal education, before setting up a more permanent studio. TCS's reputation as a world class arts center has made this program extremely competitive. The Residents are a diverse group of younger makers who explore their personal vocabularies, interact and reciprocate by teaching at TCS School or in its *Claymobile Programs*. They exhibit in solo and group shows in and out of the Studio. They have, individually, received prestigious grants, university teaching opportunities and major gallery representation. These placements are juried from a national body of applicants who often choose to make Philadelphia a permanent home thereafter, further enhancing the vibrant, local ceramic population.

The *Associate Artist Program* is a collective studio on the third floor providing twenty five spaces to local artists, many of whom are serious Clay Studio students and others who are professionals in need of workspace. They, too, are individually and collectively committed to supporting TCS's efforts and programs. During the annual November Auction weekend and at other requested times, the third and fourth floors are open for view to acquaint the public with these highly energized environments.

Jimmy Clark, who served for sixteen years as Executive Director, worked effectively to expand visibility and outreach for TSC. *The International Guest Artist In Residence Program* has brought national and international artists from thirty countries to-date for one to two month stays, a time to create a special body of work. This affords TCS artists, students and audience the chance to witness the guests' artistic processes, while offering the visitors an opportunity to work with Americans in a communal setting. Integrating the visitors into the Studio's educational programs by slide lectures and demonstrations, is mutually enriching. Clay is truly an international language! Each summer, an exhibition, *MADE AT THE CLAY STUDIO*, shares work of the guest artists of the past year. Each visitor leaves one piece for the permanent collection, an exceptional visual record of this program.

The Gallery Program, offering two major shows each month, has over the years exhibited outstanding work at all levels of experience and intentions. There are juried solo opportunities introducing emerging artists, specific thematic shows, installations of aesthetic, social and political focus, sculptural works and functional objects, showing traditions referenced, innovations explored, unexpected mixed media with clay and mastery by the already well known and the upcoming generation. Some have introduced international artists; some have traveled. All serve to teach about the nature of clay and its seemingly limitless possibilities. TCS Shop focuses on functional objects of fine design that beckon hands and invite use, celebrating our ongoing connection to pre-industrial, utilitarian work.

In June 1999, visiting artist, Sadashi Inuzuka, created *RIVER*, a monumental installation in a suitable, adjacent space. The artist's interest in the fragility of the natural environment inspired this site specific work referencing the Delaware River in its post-industrial state. Sadashi created individual, altered biomorphic forms, mounted as patterned wall tableaux, accompanied by a deeply crazed, clay riverbed of dramatic proportion which filled the elongated room. This unique, timely document, conceived when the area was experiencing a drought and made possible by very generous support from a local foundation, garnered major visual arts interest beyond the ceramic community.

TCS School offers classes at all levels, with concentrations in particular, technical and aesthetic issues and workshops taught by Residents and visiting artists. It has educated and inspired hundreds of those who put their hands in "the mud" and appreciate thereafter its pleasures, potential and challenges. It nurtures skills and serves best to create an informed, instinctive audience who understand from experience how arduous it can be to make the final work look effortless.

The Lecture Series and individual symposia have thrived, energized by replenished lists of provocative speakers, which include an art historian or curator each year, and the presence of new audiences. The Series brings individual perspective and personal interaction with accompanying workshop opportunities that further engage the sense of a clay brother/sisterhood.

Another major outreach focuses on the youngest population. Many educational programs were begun to collaborate and share clay experience with diverse communities; it became clear quickly that transportation issues were a solvable roadblock to reach the most culturally needy. *The Claymobile*, a mobile ceramic education program for underserved populations, established in 1994, expanded the ability to provide arts education and “hands on” clay, off site, to children and adults by traveling to host locations at inner city cultural centers, after school programs, homeless shelters, programs for the aged and recreation department camps and schools. The van brings a teacher and all of the equipment and materials necessary for a class and is outfitted to transport the work back to the Studio for firing.

Kathryn Narrow, TCS Managing Director, a Resident Artist herself in 1978, who oversees all aspects of the building and the School’s educational programs, had originated the *Claymobile* idea and continues to choreograph its calendar. She understands the potential of the ceramic arts experience as an inspirational, healing tool. The annual exhibition of the *Claymobile* participants brings us full circle: the works resonate with the unselfconscious energy and creativity we bring as children to the creative process- joyous, non judgmental, intuitive exploration of our hearts along with the materials. This Exhibition draws on our personal memory banks of the seductive pleasures of working with a tactile material and following a process to an anticipated, yet always new, resolve.

Each program joins individuals with the larger clay community of artists and audience. Amy Sarner Williams, a resident artist in 1975, became TCS Executive Director in 2002; she envisions, as The Clay Studio nears its 30th anniversary, its continued commitment to expanding education and support for the ceramic arts through passionate leadership in the field. Jeff Guido, named Artistic Director in 2002, visualizes expanding opportunities to nurture and direct young artists and to build an appreciative audience of their peers. TCS is dedicated to promoting and developing the ceramic arts and elevating the stature and visibility for clay within the broader visual arts community. TCS is a reflection of the ceramic art it was created to serve. Clay promises a vital, individual experience for each participant. It offers a direct bond, sharing the voice within the work. We can revel in the individual connection and the collective community of which we become a part. The possibilities are still endless.

Gail M. Brown is an Independent Curator of Contemporary Craft. She has curated a number of ceramic exhibitions, including *Political Clay* at the Clay Studio in July 2000.