

# Ceramics

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Babu's ceramics career began in the mid 1950s, when he took his first class at DeWitt Clinton High School. His first art teacher encouraged him to pursue ceramics, saying, "You have no business doing anything other than ceramics." This same teacher told him about two great ceramics programs: one at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and the other at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. He chose the latter, earning a B.F.A., then an M.F.A.

After graduation in 1963, he returned to New York City, where he worked "in a men's clothing store during the day and Mama Leone's Restaurant at night, and made do for about six months." Finally, Ted Randall, one of his teachers at Alfred, came to his rescue and recommended him for a job at a ceramic lamp factory in Cleveland, Ohio. This job was "a very strange thing," according to Babu. He had trained to be and had every intention of becoming a ceramics artist, but he found himself working in a factory as a staff designer—not quite the career he had hoped for.

Most of his classmates' career paths were in education, he recalls. "I don't remember the faculty pressing the issue of going out and building a studio, and making functional pots, because they really didn't. Teaching was the path, and there were so many teaching jobs; all these programs were building in America. There were opportunities everywhere."

In 1965, Babu left the lamp factory to begin his teaching career at the University of Texas in Austin (again, after a referral from Randall). He loves to tell stories about this first teaching job—how nervous he was and how "those students that summer broke that young teacher in very well." He laughs heartily when he remembers the boots, the hats and their generous nature. One can only surmise how the Texans must have viewed this young New Yorker, with his big-city attitude, his wide-open energy and his Yankee accent. It would be an obvious understatement to say that both teacher and students had their horizons broadened.

After teaching in Texas for three years, Babu got a call from Ken Ferguson, whom he had known since his undergraduate days at Alfred. Ferguson had been a grad student at the time and became both mentor and friend. He was looking for a teacher to partner with him at the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI).

Babu interviewed for the position during the summer of 1968 and began teaching there that fall. The KCAI ceramics program was in its early stages of development. Together, he and Ferguson continued building the department. Five years later, George Timock joined them as a welcome asset and colleague.

These three teachers formed a productive relationship. Their individual talents as teachers and artists complemented one another. Babu explains that "if one of us could not answer the needs



Charger, 29 inches (74 centimeters) in diameter, porcelain, with black slip/glaze and resisted sprayed glazes, reduction fired to Cone 9, 2002.



Charger, 28 inches (71 centimeters) in diameter, porcelain with sprayed and brushed glazes, fired to Cone 9 in reduction, 1994.



Ewer, 16 inches (41 centimeters) in height, with saturated-iron glaze, fired to Cone 9 in reduction, 1986.



Charger, 25 inches (64 centimeters) in diameter, porcelain, with brushed and sprayed glazes, reduction fired to Cone 9, 1983.



Canister, 9½ inches (24 centimeters) in height, porcelain, with brushed and sprayed glazes, 1994, by Victor Babu, Kansas City, Missouri.

of a student, someone else could jump in and connect.” Before long, KCAI was recognized as having one of the best undergraduate ceramics programs in the United States.

“The years here [at KCAI],” says Babu, “caused me to mature and to understand who and what I was about, not only on the teaching level, but also as a human being who establishes a rapport with other people. It was a magnificent opportunity to meet and have dialogue with very gifted people in and outside the ceramics department.”

His teaching style was to make sure each student felt he or she was special and being noticed. This was not always easy in a department that could have as many as 60 ceramics majors. Often, he would walk up to a student working at the wheel, offer a few words of encouragement, then just walk away.

Walking away from teaching after 33 years is not easy. The opportunity to take it easy is welcome, but Babu will miss the contact with the students. “I’ve learned one very important thing,” he says. “You are teaching people to become professionals...I accept no credit for the success or failure of any student. I refuse. They are inventing themselves. All I am doing, which is my gift, the gift passed on to me, is interceding into their lives for a while. That is the gift they’ve given to me. That is the reward of teaching.”

An old Chinese proverb says: “Teachers open the door, but students must walk through.” During his career at KCAI, Babu opened doors for literally thousands of students. To his credit (and because of the dynamic environment he helped create), many of those students walked through those doors and went on to become gifted teachers and artists.

# Adrian Arleo: NATURE STUDIES

by Marnie Prange

Montana sculptor Adrian Arleo lives in a spacious log house on 8 acres tucked up against the nation's largest wilderness, the Selway Bitterroot. Through her land, Lolo Creek winds to the Bitterroot River. Across the valley to the north is an ancient Indian footpath, the same trail followed by Lewis and Clark as their "corps of discovery" crossed the continent. Weather changes in this valley are often sudden. A quiet fall morning can yield to a howling blizzard by afternoon. Mid-summer temperatures may vary 45°F between dawn and dusk. Wildlife abounds; Arleo has spotted deer, ermine, fox and mink during walks on her property. Moose and bear also lumber through, using the

"Pretending," 30 inches (76 centimeters) in height, coil built, 2000.





PHOTOS: CHRIS AUTO, DAVID BROWNE

"Wasp Nest I," 17 inches (43 centimeters) in height, coil-built and glazed clay, with wood, 2003.

creek as a corridor to the river below. Within the large fenced yard enclosing her house, domestic animals roam, including two horses, two dogs and a flock of chickens.

Here, the natural environment is elemental, uncompromising and charged with meaning. Through this larger-than-life landscape, Arleo moves with her senses on full alert, exquisitely attuned to her surroundings and her response to them. "During the long winters, we are enveloped by bare branches," she notes. "The branches are bonelike, skeletal, totally external. I'm drawn to the fact that we see past them, the way they encase things, as opposed to caging them, enclosing other forms in a benevolent, protective way."

Arleo points to a work in progress influenced by cliff swallow nests under the eaves of her studio. Although the "poppy" texture of the swallows' nests was not the initial idea for her surface treatment, it became part of the creative process. "In my mind, it added another level of the narrative to the sculpture. What if this was something created by these birds building up this piece? And why would that have happened?"

Central to Arleo's work is the exploration of the blurred boundaries between human and nonhuman. A woman's bent legs transform into sentinel dogs, poised and on the defensive, perhaps even ready to attack. Or a woman's rib cage houses a bird instead of a heart, with the nestlike ribs suggesting nurture. Whether exploring large archetypal themes or rendering enigmatic psychological states, Arleo charges each object with ephemeral meaning and mystery. "As we become more and more detached from the natural world, and do it more harm, the connected vulnerability of animals and humans has grown undeniable," she observes. "Our efforts to hear again the little understood messages that owls, turtles, deer and raven bring from other conditions of life may be crucial to our efforts to save our own lives. The animal world can't be separated from our experience as humans."

Arleo's studio is in a converted garage, from which she can observe the horses in their corral. Daylight spills in from several large windows, landing on an assortment of gathered objects (shell, bone, bark, the textures of the natural world) and on a wall covered with images (a postcard of a Yaqui deer dancer, another of Bryce Canyon, and a photograph of eggs in a nest). Arleo is a born browser, on the lookout for raw material to fire her imagination.

As a child, Arleo grew up in a world of two disciplines—her mother is an artist and her father is a psychologist—and both exerted an influence on the direction her art has taken. Both parents, however, supported her artistic bent. When asked as a child what she was going to be when she grew up, Arleo would answer, with some consternation, "Well, an artist." But I already kind of felt like one. It wasn't like something was going to happen, then suddenly I would become an artist. I was always an artist."

She received her first formal training at Pitzer College in California, where she majored in art and anthropology. A summer spent at an archaeological field school excavating early habitation sites in the Pacific Northwest was a turning point, she notes, because she began to consider "the context in which objects are found and what that context might reveal about them," a constant theme in her work. Her earliest pieces were psychologically oriented. A typical work is of a woman curled into a fetal position, the cactus spines from her back symbolic of defense mechanisms. But in this sculpture, as in others of this period, the personal messages were overwhelming, and Arleo felt self-conscious and exposed by people's reactions to them.

Her attraction to the spine imagery continued at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), now in the form of palm tree branches, in which she built up layers of different textures. These sculptures also were meant to reflect emotional or psychological layers, Arleo says, but (perhaps to protect her privacy) the pendulum had swung too far in the opposite direction. To her, the work had become overly cerebral, shunning rather than inviting interpretation.

Arleo identifies three artistic turning points during her study at RISD that set her on her current path: an introduction to terra sigillata as a surface treatment; the influence of instructor Jan Holcomb, whose free associations during critiques of her

"Creating Darkness Between Light," 48 inches (122 centimeters) in length, clay, with glaze and wax encaustic, 1998.



work inspired her to pursue content-oriented art; and instructor Jaquelyn Rice's appraisal that her sculpture was "tight" and "rigid," a criticism that stung.

While she questioned Rice's advice at the time—switching from slab to coil construction—Arleo now credits the coil-building technique for making possible the sculpture she creates today. Perhaps more importantly, the fluidity of the coils suggested the human form. An early figurative piece, a seed pod that intimates a woman's torso, gave way to a series of sea forms (Arleo calls them giant sea slugs) that capture the sensual movement of coral reefs.

A course in watercolor, while working with a model, yielded further experiments in form and surface treatment. Still, looking back, Arleo expresses her dissatisfaction with the work. "They were beautiful objects and they had figurative elements to me, but I don't think anyone else was seeing that."

Two residencies in the Pacific Northwest, one at Oregon College of Art and Craft and the other at Sitka Center for Art

and Ecology, led to breakthroughs. Immersed in the dramatic landscape, Arleo began incorporating elements from the environment into her imagery and to more overtly explore the relationship between outside and inside, human and nonhuman. In these works, it is difficult to say whether a figure in the process of change is emerging or being subsumed.

After meeting and marrying novelist David Duncan, Arleo moved to Portland, Oregon, where her work became less specifically connected to nature, and more intensely psychological and personal. Still, there is the merging of forms. Figures were often arranged in the fetal position, turning inward in a pose that was introspective and internal, rather than engaged in what's outside, Arleo notes. Similarly, the figures' eyes were almost always closed, so that the viewer was not confronted by a figure looking out, but a figure engaged with her inner life.

With the births of her children, Arleo's work intentionally became less psychological, less dark. "I didn't want to scare the

"Annunciation," 38 inches (97 centimeters) in length, clay, with glaze and wax encaustic, 1992.



baby," she jokes. Now, magic, myth and images of nurturing are incorporated with animal forms. There are whimsical hints at biblical stories, fairy tales and nursery rhymes as well.

The move to Montana in 1993 brought increased animal imagery to her work. In the pieces made in Oregon, the figure often emerged from a form in nature. In the Montana work, figures appear to be metamorphosing into animals, as though the animals were somehow conjured by the unconscious. The images are often disturbing and indicative of a deep yearning to know the other. Indeed, "attraction" is a word that appears often in Arleo's conversation.

There is a certain fearlessness in working so close to the bone, so close to self-exposure. Arleo is well aware that she risks sentimentality at every turn. "When I feel any apprehension about a piece being corny or sentimental or saccharine, I'll just give it some little edge or attitude that makes it a little creepy."

Often, that edge is the surface treatment. From the beginning, she has made an effort to make her sculpture look as though made of natural materials—rock, water, wood, sticks, coral—because this makes the gesture and image "more potent, metaphorical and mysterious." Arleo recalls, with humor, an instructor at Pitzer who was astonished to find her gluing cactus thorns to a sculpture. She has also been known to create a desired texture by sanding through layers of terra sigillata with a cotton swab to which she attached steel wool and bits of bristle snipped from a whisk broom.

In her most recent work, the surfaces are just as meticulously articulated; however, the references are less specific. The movement of lines across the sculpture might suggest water, but the surface may be dry, as opposed to glossy.

Conversely, as her surfaces become less referential, the faces are becoming more specific. "They kind of look like someone," Arleo muses, as she considers several figures in progress throughout her studio. Eyes that would have been downcast or closed in earlier pieces are now becoming a focal point.

She is drawn to these faces, she says, and speaks of recognizing them in both senses of the word—as familiars and as acknowledgment. "There's something powerful about having this presence, this person, come out of the piece, that I didn't feel with previous work."

"Horse with Swallows," 32 inches (81 centimeters) in length, clay, with glaze and mixed media, 2003.



"Blue Deer with Interior Figure," 41 inches (104 centimeters) in length, glazed clay, 1997.



Arleo is also experimenting with humor. "It's challenging to make a piece that's subtly funny and really easy to make something obvious—put a stupid nose or ears on it."

She points to two unfinished figures on a worktable, a man and a woman, overweight but not grotesquely, so not a parody. The notion of "recognition" surfaces again. Here are Mr. and Mrs. America, quintessential, fast-food-fed figures, displayed in a pose open and unabashed, with a certain dignity in its forthrightness. They seem absolutely familiar, except that their forearms are the forelegs of a deer, utterly useless to a human being. Here, the message seems not so much one of metamorphosis, but of possibility. The deer legs underscore the contrast between all that is wild (speed, alertness, intuition) and lost to these obviously sedentary humans; but the potential for the wild is also present.

Living in Montana has its rewards and punishments. Arleo faces the usual paradox of the artist who works alone, where

isolation can both nurture and starve. Her situation is compounded by the physical distances between cities and even between neighboring towns. "Sometimes my life feels too small," she says. And she longs to visit a museum somewhere other than on the Internet.

At the same time, she is also tuned in to the benefits of her isolation. She is less caught up in herself and in what other artists are doing, and there is time to relax into her family, and consider what love and nurturing mean to her life and her work. Isolation also allows her greater focus.

A slight movement catches her eye. It is a palomino mare milling about the corral outside her studio window. Watching the mare flick her ears, Arleo notes that the gesture is one she recently gave to a doglike figure, though she doubts anyone would recognize the horse's ears at first glance. In her work, the first glance registers the emotional impact of the image; the second look, often a double take, registers the mystery.



"Consider," 33½ inches (85 centimeters) in length, clay, with glaze and wax encaustic, 1999, by Adrian Arleo, Lolo, Montana.