



Above: Bryan Hopkins. *5 Cup Set*. 2012. 17 x 10 3 in. Cups: wheel-thrown translucent porcelain with platinum lustre band; plinth: handbuilt porcelain, all fired to cone 11 in a gas kiln, reduction environment.

Photo by Tim Barnzwell.

Below: Past presenter and invited mentor, John Neely, talks with symposium participant.

Photo by Jill Green.

## Shawn O'Connor describes the sharing of ideas at the symposium



UTILITARIAN CLAY VI: CELEBRATE THE OBJECT, AN INTIMATE SYMPOSIUM held every four years since its inception in 1992, took place on 19–22 September, 2012. Limited to 200 participants, it honours the pursuit of utilitarian pots and the potters who create them. The event consisted of 16 demonstrating ceramics artists, six exhibitions, two moderated forums, a two-part historical lecture, “The Art of Drinking” by Pete Pinnell, a keynote address by Wesley McNair, poet laureate of Maine, and closing remarks by Mary Barringer. The concluding presentation was the potters’ favorite pots. The colloquium is the brainchild of Arrowmont’s program director Bill Griffith who has been with

Arrowmont for 25 years. He coordinates this symposium with longtime friend and fellow potter, Peter Beasecker, associate professor of art at Syracuse University.

Its impressive 20 years of history provide us a glimpse into this field: where it has gone in recent years and, we hope, insight into its future. Whereas veteran and mid-career artists dominated prior symposiums, the focus this year was on notable emerging ceramics artists. This young group is indicative of how academically driven our field has become. All but one presenter earned his or her MFA through the American university system.

How has this academic training affected the course of the utilitarian object? Certainly, individual craftsmanship has risen to extraordinary levels. Current academically trained practitioners have an extensive technical tool belt at their disposal, which they utilise to create their individually styled work. The endless variety of form, surface, texture and techniques was evident in the work and demonstrations by the presenters.



Above: Lindsay Oesterritter. **Blade Vase.** 2011. Iron rich stoneware, slab construction, woodfire reduction cool. 10 x 11 x 2.5 in. Photo by Tim Barnwell.  
Below: **Participants enjoying social time.** Photo by Jill Green.

This shared American academic background, however, seems to limit the perspective on our field. Where is an international presence? Where do we see a view from outside academia?

Shoko Teruyama, unable to attend the event for personal reasons, was the only one in our lineup who could claim any non-American identity. Born in Japan, she has lived in the US since 1997 and was formally trained in our American university system. There are great potters making work outside the university system and it behooves us to examine their viewpoints. Have our field and academia become inseparable? If so, what are the advantages and/or the consequences of this development?

The symposium's limited number of presenters creates an intimacy allowing participants to engage in meaningful dialogue. Unlike NCECA with its numerous five-minute conversations, this platform enables us to go deeper into a subject. It was clearly explained why this event was a symposium, not a conference. The word symposium derives from the Greeks and Romans. It refers to a gathering of intellectuals who would discuss and debate specific topics and enjoy food and drink. Utilitarian clay was set up to foster the sharing of ideas and its platform made it





Above: Nicholas Bivins. *Coffee (2)*.  
2012. Tabletop set, slipcast porcelain,  
decorated with a subtle two-tone glossy  
white on semi-matte white glaze motif,  
delineated by a decal line.  
12 x 15 x 10 in. Photo by Tim Barnwell.  
Below: A Blair Clemo demonstrating.  
Photo by Jill Green.

accessible for everyone to contribute to the dialogue. Beyond the more formal activities, there were many social interactions such as a gallery reception, evening campfires, bluegrass music and dancing under the stars and, of course, mealtimes where we all ate together, where presenters and participants could connect in significant ways.

The six exhibitions on campus featured 221 works from 118 artists. In the main exhibition space, the 16 presenting artists were represented by multiple examples of personal works. Work by invited mentors was shown nearby allowing viewers to see obvious connections with the presenters, where they existed. Arrowmont's gallery director Karen Green selected work from the school's impressive clay collection to curate a show in the loggia gallery, which included pieces by Karen Karens, Michael Simon and many other past Arrowmont instructors and resident artists. Griffith curated a show comprising past utilitarian presenters in the Jerry Drown wood studio gallery. It represented some of the outstanding potters in our field, both past and present. Two smaller exhibitions up only for the duration of the symposium included the display of the potters' favorite pots and pottery from invited assistants.

All this work made clear the limitless interpretations of the utilitarian object by individual makers. The removal of the hand from the creative process appeared to be an apparent trend among the younger presenters. Nicholas Bivens and Shawn Spangler are prime examples of individuals who go to great lengths to conceal evidence of the hand. Like many of their peers, their work is clean, tight and reveals little evidence of construction methods. With technological advancements rapidly finding their way into our everyday lives and studio practices, this raises the question of how relevant the hand is to what we do. As a field



we seem to be viewing and embracing technology and industry as the way of the future. Isn't this move somewhat contradictory since our field arguably started out and exists as a movement against industry and technology? Why are some now changing that?

The most functional pots our field has championed in recent years appear to be moving further away from what many would classify as good utility. They now seem to be more vehicles for expression of form and surface than objects created to assist the basic human needs of consumption. The pot has become a surface for imagery and pattern. Although potters have been using surface decoration since the beginning, the emphasis on utility first came out of a practical need; surface applications came later. Some early human culture pots did possess more sculptural forms and promoted utility; most, however, serviced a need well enough. They often had specific ceremonial rituals associated with them. They were not everyday pots. Having our daily morning cups of coffee may be considered a ritual, yet is a far cry from a religious ceremony. Few contemporary potters in our field seem to be considering all aspects of the utilitarian vessel in the final product. We hear much about how the handmade pot can enter peoples' lives through everyday use and thereby speak about human emotion. But as makers are we paying attention to how these objects will exist in the real world, off the pedestal, off the cover of *Ceramics Monthly* and in the hand of the user?

Andrew Glasgow, former director of the American Craft Council, moderated the two forums: "Studio to Market" and "Where do we go from here?" both consisting of a selection of the presenters. Their youth and emerging status was quickly apparent, as more questions than answers were articulated. At first the forums appeared to be disappointing but the conversations that ensued among presenters and participants during mealtimes and in the studio emphasised the substance of the subjects. Academia, in its good and bad aspects, was touched on in both forums. In the marketing panel, the efficacy of the university system was questioned: does it prepare you for a career in the arts? According to the panel reaction, it does not. The second forum discussed multiple ways in which education is the strongest tool we have to ensure the survival of our profession.

Pinnell gave an in-depth, two-part lecture entitled "The Art of Drinking". It was similar to the lecture he delivered at NCECA last year in Seattle as well as the youtube video he did a few years ago called



Above: Jennifer Allen. **Apple Green Pitcher.** 2012. Porcelain. 10.5 x 7 x 6.5 in. Photo by Tim Barnwell.  
Below: **Jennifer Allen demonstrating.**





Above: Shawn Spangler. 2012. *Oil Ewer and Salt Cellar*. 2012. Cone 8 porcelain fired in oxidation. 14 x 7 x 7 in. Photo by Tim Barnwell.  
Below: Kevin Snipes demonstrating.



“Thoughts on Cups”. This stimulating lecture was a digestible presentation of years of research and multiple lectures. He offered participants insight into the role that ceramic objects played in the human species shift from nomadic hunter-gathers to domestic farmers. By focusing on the drinking vessel, Pinnell was able to show evolution in form and surface, highlighting cross-cultural influences spanning hundreds of generations. The drinking vessel was also used as a platform to discuss the power that our work has to build human connection. He summarised his talk with this final paragraph: “Artists have long been lead to believe that utility provides only limitations and is an almost impenetrable obstacle to creativity. Those of you who employ utility also know that it is a most effective way to get your creative efforts relegated to the back of the artistic bus. Even a cursory look at history, however, reveals an interesting truth: that utility is, in fact, a powerful vehicle for both expression and communication, and as a vehicle it is capable of carrying almost anything.”

Pinnell’s summary brings to light the largest issue our field has struggled with for generations: our desire to be recognised by the rest of the art

world as legitimate artists. Our inability to develop a critical dialogue in which to evaluate and discuss our field seems to foster this lack of legitimacy. Pinnell’s type of research and scholarship is a step in the right direction. Our field needs more such compelling insights.

Closing remarks by Mary Barringer, soon-to-be former editor of *Studio Potter*, magazine captivated the audience. She spoke of how storytelling has become an integral part of what we potters do. We use it as an educational tool for the public (such as the Artstream public library) or as a marketing tool (such as Ayumi Horie’s pots in action). Artist Michael J Strand uses storytelling as a platform for the work itself. The collecting and sharing of stories informs us about the value of work beyond servicing basic needs of consumption. As Barringer said “the world does not need us to make handmade pots” and this is true. Basic survival needs will be met whether or not potters exist. But the human spirit would suffer if we abandoned aspects of our society that service us in ways beyond primitive survival needs.

The potters’ favourite pots presentation was the final and most anticipated event, a perfect way to end the four days. The 16 demonstrating artists were asked to bring a favourite pot from home and have a roundtable discussion where they shared the reasons the objects were their



*Above: Monica Ripley demonstrating.  
Below (left to right): Bill Griffith, Wesley McNair and Peter Beasecker.  
Photos by Jill Green.*

favourites. Their stories, body language and raw emotion revealed how valuable these objects are to them. A majority of the presenters talked about the people in their lives associated with the pieces, the makers themselves, a friend, or family member who had secured the work for them. This connectivity and community, which are symbiotic to the pots we make, is a basic human desire we all crave. As studio potters today we have a device to bring more to the table than servicing the basic human need of consumption; we facilitate connection and build community with our objects, we create visual pleasure, we incite physical interaction, we invoke emotions and we create bonds between people.

Overall, as indicated earlier, this symposium appeared to raise more questions than answers. For better or worse, the focus on the academically driven utilitarian pot underscores how this system is not preparing us for life as a studio potter. Now comes the important task of determining what we do with this information. How do we fix the identified problems, how do we move forward? What can we resolve in four years so we do not need to have the same conversations at the next utilitarian clay symposium?

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