

Utilitarian Clay VII Symposium

Written by Shawn O'Connor

Community is rarely about place but, rather, more about people. With the advancement of technology and the internet humans across the planet can be connected to each other in real time. In 2016 a community was formed at the seventh Utilitarian Clay Symposium held at the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, TN. The community comprised of veteran artists, young students, and anyone in between, who gathered over their shared interests in the exploration of the utilitarian clay object.

"Human knowledge is created communally. If you decide not to compare your work or your ideas with those of other people then you withdraw from the culture of discovery, inventions, innovation, techniques, and insights. You give yourself the awesome task of having to discover everything on your own." (Peter Dormer – *The Art of the Maker* pg. 76)

Community encourages dialogue. The beauty that Utilitarian Clay symposiums provide is an open platform for discussion. Conversation during presentations, meals, and evening activities allows everyone to participate in dialogue. Talking with someone about ideas becomes contagious, and when those ideas ignite, they become a shared passion. Ideas are the most powerful outcome of this event. As ideas are shared with others, they become bigger than the individual as they disseminate throughout the community. What people or groups do with those ideas is what moves our field forward.

We saw a few ideas from the 2012 symposium evolve into physical contributions to our field: Objective Clay and Pots on Wheels (POW). Both of these collectives started as conversations and ideas that were followed through after the symposium ended. Objective Clay is comprised



Top: Work by Ole Jensen.
Image credit:
Robert Batey
Bottom: Work By
Takeshi Yasuda. Image
credit: Robert Batey



of, and was started by, the group of presenters from the 2012 symposium. "Through the open environment that Arrowmont provided we discovered a camaraderie in our shared paths and inspiration in our diverse ways of making and thinking. As we presented together and shared ideas across those three intensive symposium days, we found a comfortable space with like-minded makers to share concerns, ideas, and hopes. From our early conversations in that fall of 2012, a goal was born to support each other, foster our careers, and contribute to our community. In the years since our first meeting back in 2012, we have grown into a vibrant, open group of makers and educators." Objective Clay (objectiveclay.com) has changed the way individual makers think about being a working artist. As a collective, Objective Clay is able to divide the jobs of advertising, sales, workshop coordination, and more. This collective of artists has shown the larger ceramics community how working together can be advantageous and help strengthen the career of the individuals as well as the group at the same time.

Pots on Wheels was born during the return drive from the Utilitarian Clay symposium. "We spent the long drive home from the symposium discussing, among many other topics, the future and diversity of functional ceramics. We resolved to work on ways of broadening the community of people interested in pottery as a means to address both of those concerns: relative lack of diversity in the clay community, and the need to invest in craft education. We see the purpose of the organization as a playful, grassroots response to these two serious issues. As a group of artists who support ourselves primarily through sale of work (supplemented by workshops and other teaching engagements) we are all aware of the narrow base of support we depend upon to make a living.



Top: Ole Jensen demonstrating
Bottom: Takeshi Yasuda demonstrating



*Far left: Work By Peter Pincus Photograph by Robert Batey
Left: Work By Sean O'Connell Photograph by Robert Batey
Right: Peter Pincus demonstrating*

The conversation at the symposium focused on the fact that craft education is vital to the future of ceramics, and is something we all need to engage in to strengthen the clay community. We took that directive quite literally, and found a means to go off and make it happen, through crowd-sourced fund-raising and much hard work" (Hannah Niswonger). POW travels with their renovated 17 foot step van to communities around the country spreading their love of pottery. By bringing shows, projects, and collaborations directly to communities in their mobile gallery/project space, POW wants to reach new audiences who might never have touched clay, used handmade pots, or have any idea about how pots are made. P.O.W is growing the clay community with a grassroots approach, in areas of the country that may otherwise have been unreachable.

Almost all the presenters from the 2012 symposium recently received their MFA through the American University system. Objective Clay shows how tight a bond these presenters formed during the symposium, over their similar stages in life. This group of young presenters, clearly versed in their craft, delivered thorough and well-prepared demonstrations to the audience on their techniques and research as artists. The 2012 symposium coordinators took a big risk by comprising a group of lesser known and emerging artists. This decision gave the 2012 symposium an edgy quality, in content and legitimacy.

The 2016 symposium lineup of artists seemed a bit more crowd friendly. There was a good mix

of veteran, mid-career, and emerging artists from both in and outside of the academic world. There was also the inclusion of an international presence. This larger cross section of artists from the ceramics field provided diversity in opinion and approach to material. This mixture provided something for everyone when it came to demonstrations and discussions.

International artists Takeshi Yasuda and Ole Jensen, both veteran artists, offered the most unique experiences during their demonstrations. Ole, who considers himself first as a designer, gave the most interesting and unique demonstrations. He came into the symposium with no plans or preconceived notions about what he might do. Day One he set himself up with a problem to solve: public vs. private. Then he generated ideas with the help of the audience. Day Two, he fleshed out the idea with a series of rough clay mock-ups, and more discussion with the audience. A scale model of two possibilities for a final piece was created on the last day. Attendees who popped their heads in the door part way through were left perplexed by the wiry character darting around the room pinching lumps of clay into objects that might look like something that came out of a first grade art class. The participants who did stick around got a rare peek into the depths of Ole's creative process from start to finish. There was a lot to be gained from witnessing the intimate thinking and working of such a veteran maker. Takeshi, a master potter, captivated the audience with his effortless control of porcelain. His unique approach to material demonstrated

About the author

Shawn O'Connor is a wood fire potter and writer. He has been an Artist in Resident at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, in Gatlinburg, TN, and more recently Jingdezhen and Xian, China. He gained his MFA in 2010 in Ceramics from Syracuse University.



how he cuts, tears, rips, and even drops pieces to capture unique forms in his work. Attendees watched in almost complete silence as the soft spoken Takeshi moved about his work station, talking about his journey through life and his philosophical beliefs about making. His many years as a maker and mastery of material allows Takeshi to transcend the vessel and approach form from a unique perspective. There is a beautiful juxtaposition in his work as he captures a precise moment of energy when material rips, stretches, and fails, and the stillness of that moment frozen in the form.

Another presenter at the 2016 symposium, Pete Pinnell, professor at University of Nebraska, Lincoln, delivered a well-researched and well-prepared two-part lecture titled 'Hold it right there, how people and pottery interact'. In the first part of his lecture, Pinnell talked about ways in which culture changes. He gave us three examples: times of upheaval, times of religion, and fashion trends. In addition, he expanded on each throughout history, showing us the ramifications these cultural changes have had on the field of ceramics. Pinnell later discussed the two functions of pottery. The first being its core functions: eating, drinking, cooking, etc., and its other functions: ornament, enrichment, contemplation, etc. The point Pinnell was trying to make was that utility is our vehicle for making pottery, not the destination; finely crafted vessels offer much more than servicing our basic human need to nourish the body. Utility is a powerful platform for expression and communication.

The conclusion of Pinnell's lecture was to put to rest the question of whether pottery can be considered art. Pinnell believes yes, pottery can be considered art, and he made many strong arguments during his presentation to back up his statement. The most direct being "pottery is taught in *art* centers, *art* schools, and *art* departments, by *art* professors".

This type of critical and fact-based research will only strengthen the legitimacy of the ceramic arts community, to art historians, critics, and collectors.

The symposium's last formal event on Saturday afternoon was Potter's Favorite Pots. Peter Beasecker began the discussion by reading David Shaner's eloquent artist statement. It was Shaner's idea that sparked this portion of the program and has been a mainstay since the 1996 symposium. After the reading, the potter's favorite pots were slowly paraded in from the gallery, where they had been displayed for the previous four days, to the table on stage. The procession of gallery assistants wearing white gloves and cradling these objects created an amazing sense of importance and focus on these utilitarian objects. A few of the presenters quickly grabbed their pots from the table with a loving embrace, like seeing a long lost friend. The presenters then took turns walking up to the microphone and talking about their pot. There were insightful reflections on learning by using these objects. Many stories included personal histories with the object and/or personal connections with the maker. The symposium's openness and built-in social activities, allowed everyone to be at a wonderfully vulnerable and comfortable state by the time this event took place. This permitted raw honesty and genuine emotion as pots were presented.

The non-hierarchical structure of the symposium gives the audience an opportunity to direct the conversations in the demonstrations as much as the presenters. An audience that included past presenters, notable artists, and educators made for deep and insightful discussions. The entire community brought forth intimate moments and ideas that would normally be private, into a public setting, while connecting each other through common experiences. The clay community has always been robust, and that strength comes from the overarching mentality to share ideas, techniques, kiln space, studio, and the love of what we do. What will the community that formed during this symposium lead to, and what will we see develop in the field during the four years until Utilitarian Clay VIII? Only time and clay will tell. ■