

CONVERGENCE  
IN CLAY

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## Convergence in Clay

On July 18, artists will descend on the quaint hamlet of Jay, marking a unique intersection of an ongoing studio tour event and a brand-new ceramics "Invitational."

Story and photos by Seth Thomas

THE FIRST THING YOU'LL NOTICE about Sue Burdick Young's pottery is the way it looks. The lines and shapes on the tall vases are abstract with sharp, contrasting colors. Glassy pearl-white sections stand out against a deep, dull black. Streaks of soft turquoise blend into patches of reflective copper. These pieces look radiant just sitting on a shelf.

The second thing you'll notice is the way they smell. Bring them close and you'll breathe in a dark, sooty scent, the byproduct of its unique creation. Raku-style pottery achieves its signature appearance from thousands of chemical reactions firing off on its surface at once. Rather than allowing the vases to bake in a 2,230-degree kiln for half a day or more, it's forcefully removed after 45 minutes to an hour with metal tongs and welder's gloves.

"It's not the making of the pots, it's how you fire it," Young explains in an interview with the *Lake Champlain Weekly*. "It's a low fire glaze — it's got to melt. You're looking in the kiln through the top or through the peek holes on the side, and you can see the glaze start to bubble up. When it smooths out, it's ready."

The traditional Japanese method would end there, allowing the bowls to cool in the open air, resulting in a modest brown end-product. The Americanized version, made popular by Paul Soldner in the 1950s, adds steps that alter the colors of the clay and glaze dramatically. Once removed from the kiln, the piece is placed in a small metal garbage bin partially filled with hardwood sawdust or dried

leaves. The glaze, now molten-hot, ignites its earthen bed and more bedding is thrown on top. The barrel is covered immediately, leaving the pottery's surface to alter in the flames and smoke. "It happens very quickly," Young adds. "It's pretty insane."

Whatever side lands on the bed is cut off from oxygen, producing areas with a metallic luster. Any clay left unglazed will absorb the color of black smoke. After 15 minutes, the piece emerges from the burn barrel as something new. It heads straight to a water bath, quenching the piping hot piece to a touchable temperature before, finally, the pot is scrubbed clean. A thick coat of soot is removed to reveal a network of blackened cracks among the brilliant colors. Young fired one of her pieces, a human figure that was modified from a vase shape, a little over a week before the show, and it continues to carry a distinctive burnt aroma that will fade with time.

A native of Jay, Young initially set off to SUNY Potsdam for print making. She was required to take a three-dimensional art class to complete her degree and, as she puts it, "That was it. I've been working with clay ever since."

Selections of Young's Raku pottery from her studio at Young's Studio & Gallery on NYS Route 86 in Jay, which she owns and operates with her husband and fellow artist, Terrance, are just some of the local works that will be on display during the Jay Invitational of Clay, a three-day outdoor exhibit featuring more than 30 artists from around the region and beyond.



Norte Maar pitches its tent in Jay

"The North Country is noted for its ceramic artists," says Jason Andrew, who's coordinating the Invitational. "And I've never seen an exhibition that focuses on ceramics in the area."

Andrew is the co-founder of Norte Maar for Collaborative Projects in the Arts, a nonprofit organization that focuses on collaborations between visual, performing, and literary artists. It originated in Rouses Point in 2004 before branching out into Bushwick, Brooklyn two years later. "When we got there, there wasn't an art organization in the area at all," Andrew said when reached by phone. "I wanted to promote the scene."

The Norte Maar gallery is stationed in Andrew's apartment, occupying three-quarters of his living space. Over the years the gallery became influential in the area, and he now estimates there are fifty art spaces in his neighborhood.

The Invitational could be viewed as something as a continuation of what he's established in the city: a venue for the arts located right in his home. Andrew is hosting the Invitational under a 60-by-90-foot tent on his property in Jay, a venue he's dubbed "The Jay House."

Norte Maar's signature collaborative spirit is present in the list of invitees. With help of Jackie Sabourin, a retired teacher and Norte Maar board member, Andrew has gathered an assortment of artists from upstate New York as well as Brooklyn, Boston, and Chicago. "For the Jay Invitational, Jason asked me to curate this show since I am aligned [with] many local potters due to the guild and my involvement as an artist," Sabourin said. "I basically handpicked the artists who I know would be able to generate new work or would have recent work that they could choose."

Andrew noted that "the Adirondacks has a long history of welcoming artists to the area," adding that those from the city are excited to have their work shown outside of a metropolitan setting.

The event doesn't end at the Invitational, though. That weekend, another major arts event is happening in the North Country.

### Irides, Black-eyed Susans, and Fish on Tour

Saranac Lake Artworks is hosting the "Artist at Work" Studio Tour the same weekend as the Invitational. In the past, the event has been held exclusively during the month of September, but this year they've added a day in the summer. On Sunday, July 20, artists throughout Franklin and Essex County — from Gabriels to Jay — will be showcasing the process behind their work. On that day Cheri Cross and her husband, Lee Kazanas, will be demonstrating a portion of their repertoire of skills at The Jay Craft Center, on NYS Route 9N just across from the Jay Village Green.

A banner hangs outside their shop announcing their 40-year anniversary, but there's no greater evidence of their experience as potters than the way Cross shapes clay. Minutes after throwing on the wheel, she has produced a cylinder with a consistent thickness from lip to base. It will go on to become one of 24 custom-made mugs she is creating for Rock and River, a guide service in Keene, NY.

While her technique on the wheel is hypnotic as it is speedy, perhaps her most awe-inspiring skill is what she does after the vessel is formed. "My preference has been painted designs: irises, black-eyed Susans, fish, pine cones," Cross said. "The pottery is a surface to do those paintings."

Vibrant, ornate flowers are hand-painted with glaze and a steady hand. Before the pieces are fired, she scraps away sections of the leaves, creating depth among the bending greenery. Blue, pink, and yellow flowers pop out against a stark white background. The end result is precise and intricate.

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Her husband has an affinity for creating pieces that are less representational. A couple times a year, the Craft Center will partner with other potters who own wood fire kilns. A recent association with Joseph Sand Pottery in North Carolina has sparked their creativity. "It has afforded more exciting salt and wood effects than we've had heretofore," Cross said.

Kazanas's work is given a preliminary bisque firing, where the pieces are heated to 1,800 degrees, hardening the clay while maintaining its porosity. They're then packaged and transported to North Carolina, where they become part of a larger load inside a 40-foot-long kiln. His pieces are salt-glazed — a process by which common salt is thrown in the kiln as it reaches peak temperatures, resulting in a glassy finish. "The clay itself becomes the glaze," Kazanas explained.

The vases he creates have an unpredictable quality about them as well as a rippled textured across their surfaces. Some pieces go through an astonishing change in the process, taking on the appearance of an orange rind.

An assortment of Cross's and Kazanas's work will be featured at the Invitational. "They've all been made in the last few years with techniques that we've been working on for decades," Kazanas said.

The two artisans will also show off some of their techniques during the "Artist at Work" Studio Tour event.



Artists Inside the Blue Line, Ideas From Outside of It

The Jay Craft Center and Young's Studio and Gallery are half a mile apart, yet their selections are entirely different. As the distinction between these two galleries attests, the wide array of talents and interests involved in the Jay Invitational of Clay is what makes this event such an exciting prospect.

"I think it's important to show the breadth of what's happening in ceramics today," Andrew emphasized.

With the return of Norte Maar to the North Country, it is an ideal occasion to highlight the talent in the Adirondacks while simultaneously introducing new ideas from outside the region. Sabourin, who will be curating the event, says she likes to bring potters together. "They have a common bond, but their ideas, creativity, and processes are all so varied," she said. "Having an opportunity for dialog with each other is the icing on the cake...."

The opening reception for the Jay Invitational of Clay reception is Friday, July 18, from 5 to 9 p.m. On Saturday the 19th, the Clay Hearth, a mobile pizza oven and pottery gallery, will be stationed at The Jay House from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., and a pit firing demonstration will take place from 12 to 3 p.m. A Raku firing demonstration will take place on Sunday the 20th from 12 to 3 p.m. The exhibition is free.

The "Artist at Work" Studio Tour will take place Sunday, July 20, from 10am to 5pm. A map of participating studios can be found at [saranaclakeartworks.com/studiotour](http://saranaclakeartworks.com/studiotour). Another studio tour will take place on September 27-28. The tours are free.

Above: Jeff Schwarz of Brooklyn is one of the many artists participating in the Jay Invitational of Clay. His work pictured here, "Too Much" (2011), will be on view in the exhibit at The Jay House July 18-20.

Photo courtesy of Norte Maar

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