

The OBJECT *of* OBJECTIVE CLAY

by Joe Molinaro

“The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.”

— Albert Einstein

Thinking of change, or at least the changing landscape for artists and how they approach finding markets and exposure for their work, is a dance that is performed on countless stages, each offering the promise of success for artists and the objects created in their studios. But for members of Objective Clay, a group of individuals working to maintain and expand a different model for how ceramic artists are represented, or better still, represent themselves and sustain a successful career making utilitarian objects in clay, this dance is being met with new ideas and challenges as they turn to one another for advice, encouragement, and vision. Looking backward and seeing

brick-and-mortar galleries that have dominated the marketplace, and more recently, looking to the Internet and how it, too, has spawned numerous online galleries and sites where artists are represented, Objective Clay emerges as a new and improved venue for sales, writings, support, and general representation.

While artists living in locations where potters have settled in close proximity to one another seek collaboration through community events for the promotion and sale of their ceramic work, it is clearly a model that works best for site-specific locations. As an example, concentrations of clay artists who live and work in regions of Minnesota, Virginia, Texas, California, North Carolina, and many other locations throughout the country, have allowed artists to join forces in promoting their work as a collective, providing concrete examples on how there is strength in numbers. Geography,

1 Objective Clay members (from left to right): gwendolyn yoppolo, Shawn Spangler, Bryan Hopkins, Jennifer Allen, Deb Schwartzkopf, Kip O’Krongly, Lindsay Oesterritter, Sunshine Cobb, Doug Peltzman, and Emily Schroeder Willis. (Not pictured: Brian R. Jones and A. Blair Clemo.)





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1 Deb Schwartzkopf's liquor cups, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain, glaze. 2 Brian R. Jones' tumbler with black flowers, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, slip-cast porcelain, terra sigillata, sgraffito, glaze, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, 2016. 3 Shawn Spangler's *Double Walled Vase*, 20 in. (51 cm) in height, fired to cone 8 oxidation, 2015. 4 Works in progress during a group workshop organized by Objective Clay members.

in these cases, is what binds the artists together to create a locational ethos, and while it allows for the presentation of some of the finest pottery locally available, it also limits sales to those either living in close proximity or to others willing to travel a distance to experience an event and potentially walk away with valuable purchases.

In a very different scenario, and leaning on the strengths of physical galleries, community, and the Internet, Objective Clay hopes to redefine how artists work both as individuals and together.

Objective Clay was formed as a result of sharing the stage as presenters at the Utilitarian Clay VI Symposium at Arrowmont Center for Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, in 2012. After several days demonstrating, lecturing, and sharing thoughts with each other about how their work is marketed and presented to the public, twelve artists (Jennifer Allen, A. Blair Clemo, Sunshine Cobb, Bryan Hopkins, Brian R. Jones, Lindsay Oesterritter, Kip O'Krongly, Doug Peltzman, Emily Schroeder Willis, Deb Schwartzkopf, Shawn Spangler, and gwendolyn yoppolo) committed themselves to one another to see if they might discover a new model for exposure, interaction, and sharing. Knowing the difficulties associated with being in parts of the country where greater exposure is limited, the frustrations of solitude, and having few opportunities to interact with the buyers of their work, they made a commitment to explore

how the energy they were experiencing at the symposium might be sustained beyond the four-day event in an online destination.

The goal was to create a new model for how they and their work might move into the future through the creation of a group dedicated to sustaining a successful career making utilitarian objects in clay. After the symposium, the group met once a month via conference calls (they now use video conferencing). They also had smaller group committee meetings to work on specific tasks like the website, administration, and outreach projects.

The new paradigm they now work in has allowed (or forced) them into discovering different views that challenge them individually, and as a result, brought them closer together.

"Who buys your work?"

Initially the members of Objective Clay—a name settled upon after extended discussions, and one that embodies the idea of the utilitarian object—established its goals based on the question of "Who buys your work?" From that simple question, other goals came into view, that embodied the notion of establishing support for one another; utilizing social media and Internet resources (primarily through the creation of a web site, <http://objectiveclay.com>, that also offers an online sales gallery); posting informational videos and member written articles;



5 Jen Allen's syrup pitcher, 6½ in. (17 cm) in height, porcelain, fired to cone 10, 2016. 6 Lindsay Oesterritter's bowl, 12 in. (30 cm) in diameter, iron-rich stoneware, wood fired to cone 10, reduction cooled, 2014. 7 Emily Schroeder Willis' *Celebration Vase*, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, porcelain, underglaze pencil, glaze, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, 2016. 8 Bryan Hopkins' vase, 14¼ in. (37 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain, texture applied using bisque molds, fired to cone 11 reduction in a gas kiln, 2015.

and most importantly, maintaining a venue where they might have opportunities to have direct interaction with the buyers of their work.

Seeking control of their individual careers by not being tethered to gallery locations and limitations, Objective Clay set its sight on working both collaboratively and cooperatively, with each member taking on a specific task within the group. Tasks rotate regularly among the members—with turnover happening once every year, or every two years for positions requiring ongoing learning experiences—which further supports the goal of maintaining a shared responsibility. Each member spends between 2–10 hours per week on tasks related to Objective Clay, depending on the position and upcoming events.

Results

The successes of Objective Clay are substantive and provide ample evidence that they are doing something right. Relationships between the artists have grown, an internal community has been nurtured, and a sense of commitment and responsibility to the greater field of ceramics has been sustained. As one member of the group explains, “Objective Clay has provided a model for how artists can work together to create an online and in-person presence in the field. We are opening up new venues and opportunities for people who are devoted to utilitarian ceramics.” While individual voices continue to shape the content of their group, differences are also carefully addressed despite the challenges one might suspect coming from artists’ with variable visions and opinions.

Adapting to Stay Connected

With all the success Objective Clay has experienced during the formative period of their existence, that does not suggest there are not growing pains that have emerged. Issues such as how they conquer logistical difficulties like staying connected despite being spread out across the country, including as far away as Hawaii, is a serious obstacle to overcome. As one member states, “just finding a time when we can video conference across six time zones is a minor miracle!” To help solidify the bonds they share within the group, there is now a more concerted effort to hold in-person regional gatherings and workshops, something that has furthered their goal of having a personal connection between the artists themselves and to the larger arts community.

Outreach is an important element of contributing to the larger community. Some members feel that establishing a scholarship program for artists wishing to attend workshops is one way to move forward in a giving sense. Additionally, they have offered some free workshops as a group (one in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and another in Indianapolis, Indiana). They also feel their website, by offering writings, product reviews, and how-to information, is a way to give back to the community. Lastly their model for how artists can work together to create a community and an online and in-person presence in the field is somewhat unique, and perhaps this is how they ultimately are giving back—by providing a new paradigm for success.

Another concern for the group is how members working in academia find a mutual goal with members working to make a liv-

ing through their studio practice. With the divergent perspectives of the studio potters making a living entirely through their work versus the academic potters having the security of a regular paycheck, who knows how that will play out in time. While the need for sales may appear more important for one group versus the other, finding common ground on how Objective Clay uses its resources, time and energy to meet its goals remains a concern and a priority.



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9 Kip O'Krongly's *Farm Animal Trio*, to 5¾ in. (15 cm) in height, earthenware, slips, underglaze, and terra sigillata, single fired to cone 04, 2016. 10 A. Blair Clemo's *Everyday Objects Series: Mugs*, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and assembled red stoneware, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, 2016. 11 Sunshine Cobb's *Traskets*, to 14 in. (36 cm) in length, handbuilt mid-range red clay, glaze, fired to cone 3.

They are young as a group, and seem to be able to resolve differing views and opinions amicably through their monthly calls. Some did say that getting together for workshops, sales (at the NCECA conference), and other events has helped a lot since they are able to do face-to-face meetings. This type of personal interaction empowers their ability to work together in a more cooperative manner. Although there may be division within the group on some issues, the bonds they established from the onset when they first formed as a group at Utilitarian Clay VI have provided the strength to work through difficulties and embrace the goals that continue to define them today.

Expansion and Diversification

As with other concerns both large and small, one in particular that all members see as important is how they can expand, and in doing so, how diversity among its members might improve. While there is currently a gender balance in the group, each member has expressed a desire to seek more racial and cultural diversity. They

Starting an Online Collective

The Objective Clay Model allows individuals to work collaboratively as a group to advance their careers. Here's how it works:

- Using a group website as a destination for other artists, current patrons, and the general public who are interested in their members' work, with the goal of nurturing more immediate and personal interactions.
- Vehicles for achieving direct communication with the audience include bios on each artist, an online shop, a content area where members publish articles on processes and techniques, current issues in clay, and information on upcoming events.
- Staying connected to one another and staying on task on shared projects via the Internet and social media, and regular FaceTime, Skype, or Google Hangouts meetings.
- The duties, which rotate between all members on a one- to two-year schedule include: annual budgeting for projects and base budget for maintaining the business structure of the group, organizing annual retreats, website maintenance, writing blog posts/articles, updating sales pages, posting videos, planning and coordinating workshop events, updating social-media accounts, accounting (for group expenses), planning and implementing marketing strategy and tactics, organizing exhibitions, organizing the Expo booth and housing at NCECA conferences, and finding ways to incorporate the larger community.



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12 Objective Clay's NCECA Expo booth setup during the conference in Kansas City, Missouri, March 2016. 13 Gwendolyn Yoppolo's double sauce pot, 11 in. (28 cm) in length, porcelain, matte-crystalline glaze, fired to cone 6, 2016. 14 Doug Peltzman's two yunomis, 3 3/4 in. (10 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown porcelain, fired to cone 8.

see addressing this lack of diversity as an important issue, not only for their group, but for the overall field of ceramics in the US. Although there is an increased awareness and desire to expand and diversify their membership, they realize establishing their presence and solidifying their goals and objectives must come first.

With everything considered, the work of Objective Clay and its 12 members spread across the US serve as a good model for future artists in any field, something for others to consider, adapt, change and ultimately expand upon.

So, perhaps Albert Einstein had it right when he claimed that the process of our thinking cannot be changed without changing our thinking. Objective Clay offers fresh change to our thinking, and in the wake of their thoughts, a new paradigm worth consideration may be emerging.

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Subscribers can visit <http://ceramicartsdaily.org/ceramics-monthly/subscriber-extras> to see the June/July/August 2013 issue's Spotlight article on Objective Clay.

