

Joyce Salvage – Ceramic Tiles

By Brian Lynch

This is another in a series of interviews with Historic Kenwood artists as part of highlighting our “Neighborhood of the Arts” and our soon to be Artist Enclave Overlay district.

How did you begin making ceramic tiles? What drew you to this medium and style?

I grew up in Boston (metro). As a child, I spent a lot of time creating with sand and dirt. In our side yard, we had a dirt play yard where we created whole cities, roads, and terrain. My first little neighbor friends were boys, so they brought their cars and trucks over. We lived near a pond, where we went swimming, and I loved playing in the sand, digging, mixing with water, sculpting and exploring the possibilities. My grandma and sometimes the family went to the South Shore beaches when we could. When the waves came in and slowly dissolved my creations, I learned about the power of nature to do what it will with what we make. My father had a green thumb and enlisted my help in the garden. There I was playing in the dirt again!

I like clay because it sticks together, feels so cool and smooth, and it smells like earth. I like the way I can experiment, change or erase and start over, even recycle a piece that has already dried. If I decide to return this clay back to rock by firing it, I realize what a responsibility that is. Thousands of years from now, our fired creations could be discovered by someone digging around to see how we lived, what technology we used, or even what was saved and what was tossed out in a trash heap. That’s deep.



My first “class” in pottery was at Girl Scouts when I was 10. We had a real potter for a teacher. He gave step-by-step instructions to make a turtle. I made my cat Ginger instead. He came over and said, “How do you know cats so well?” He honored my originality and gave me descriptive feedback on the muscles and haunches. He even invited me to visit his studio. My mother took me there on Saturday, and he let me choose a glaze for one of his pots. It was supposed to come out as this beautiful turquoise, but instead it turned a yucky mustard color. He told me, “We can’t always control what the fire does.” I never forgot that. It adds to the excitement every time when opening the kiln. Like when you’re a kid on Christmas morning.

If you could change one property of clay, what would it be?

Nothing! I accept it. It is what it is, and I came to it loving all its properties.

What do you like best about working with clay?

It’s the most versatile of media. It has strength and memory, but let’s you shape it into anything within the limits of physics and the limits of your imagination and repertoire of technique. I’m interested in texture and form. I like bare clay and simple surface covering that enhances structure and texture. I am not a “painterly” potter, though I like to draw and paint on smooth surface tiles and pots occasionally.

What do you like least?

Only that moving the materials, kiln shelves, and boxes of what is produced is heavy work. Moving dry bags of clay and glaze chemicals, or pre-mixed clay is difficult. Not being able to roll up one’s tapestry to work on the train or in someone else’s living room, such as fabric crafts, for example -- that’s the only constraint that I dislike.



How has your work developed through the years?

I liked carving sculptures in Jr. High. As a young adult, I started formal study in clay modeling of the human figure at Cambridge Adult Community Center. Later, at Cal State, L.A., I took a ceramics class using the kick wheel. After I graduated from UC Berkeley, I belonged to the Berkeley Potter's Co-op, and took a workshop there with Al Johnson of Scott Creek Pottery, Davenport, CA. I decided to study with him in an 8 week production pottery apprenticeship style program through UC Santa Cruz. Al had studied at Alfred in NY and with Marguerite Wildenhain (Bauhaus artist) at Pond Farm in CA.

I made a deal with our landlord in Berkeley to set up a little workshop in the basement of our apartment building and shared kiln space with a friend. I studied glaze technology and Raku at the DeYoung Museum on Saturdays and sold through local shops and as a street vendor. After we moved to Maine, I taught pottery classes, fired a large gas kiln, and ran the pottery studio at H.O.M.E., a rural low-income co-op for adults who had lost jobs and for at-risk teens. I sold my work in the co-op outlet.

I became inspired by Moravian Tileworks, PA (Henry Mercer), and set up my first real studio in a cabin and started my own business – “The Good Earth Tileworks” in the 80's. I've mostly done clay tiles and sculpture since. I like throwing, but not for production scale anymore. I am getting back to it after retiring from teaching (which was my “real job” that gave us the salary to help raise a family).

What has been inspiring/influencing your work lately?

Florida flora and fauna. Also, LinkedIn ceramics network.



Do you create art in other media?

Yes, conceptual collage with found images, fabric block printing and batik, drawing with pen/ink and charcoal.

Where do you sell your work?

In the past, retail stores, craft fairs, street vendor license, through craftsmen association events. Now, I'm working on building an online business, as well as local markets.

How did you approach venues about selling your work?

Joined craft associations, applied for juried entry into craft shows, wholesale/retail, co-op craft outlets. Publicity for advertising. Now, using Facebook and LinkedIn and will develop a webpage soon.

Who are your favorite artists in your field?

MC Richards (Centering), Marguerite Wildenhain (sculpted pottery vessels) Paul Berensohn (Finding One's Way with Clay), Bernard Leach (A Potter in Japan), Roger Roberge (Boston Museum School), Frank Giorgini (tilemaker – Parson School of Design), Al Johnson, master potter

What else would you like to say?

For me, there's a spiritual, meditative aspect to working with clay, whether centering, sculpting, or carving and just dealing with its ways. It feels sentient to me. It lives and has a mind of its own. I have to merge with it, to let it come to me – it's rather cat-like in that way.