

Functional Pots Highlighted at SF Clay

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Kate McGraw / For the Journal

The daughter of a successful illustrative artist, Donna Polseno always assumed her future was in one-dimensional art, paintings on paper, board or canvas. Then she saw the ceramics made at the Kansas City Art Institute.

“I went to art school thinking more about painting and drawing because my father was a painter and illustrator who supported a family of four with his artwork and I had been the one of the four who spent my youth in his studio,” Polseno said in an email interview.

“Just as I was thinking that I might drop out in my freshman year, due to the serious hippie life I was leading, by some quirk of fate I went to see a slide show from the ceramics department professor that literally changed my life. I decided to stay in school and study ceramics. I knew absolutely nothing about it except that those pictures of ancient Asian and Persian pots blew me away. As fate would have it, one of the professors turned out to be the very influential Ken Ferguson,” she added.

Polseno is one of three East Coast functional artists being highlighted in a show opening today at Santa Fe Clay. She joins David Eichelberger and Sam Taylor in the exhibition.

If you go

WHAT: Three-person show of functional ceramics

WHEN: Today through March 2; reception 5 to 7 p.m. today

WHERE: Santa Fe Clay, 545 Camino de la Familia (in the Santa Fe Railyard)

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“What has kept me working in clay is the same thing that drew me to it in the first place,” she said, “but it also

turned out to be a wonderful material that you can do anything with and it gives you these gifts all the time when you open the kiln or it gives you terrible mistakes that make you have to be stubborn and philosophical to carry on, which may not sound like a good thing but it is.

“I have been lucky enough to travel and teach or work in many of the places that I fell in love with their pottery all those years ago, like China, Turkey, and Italy, and it still fills me with awe,” Polseno added. “I have always tried to blend my love of the ancient with my own personal interpretation that is an expression of their qualities of simple beauty.”

Polseno said her process is predetermined, even after all these years and all these studies. She doesn’t start working with the clay without an idea where she’s going. “My process is usually to start with an idea, often a sketch, but I almost always see a piece completely finished in my mind from form to glaze finish,” she said. “I use a slip-casting technique, so for my simpler forms I have already made the complete form first in clay, from a drawing. Then I make a mold of the piece, so that I can make a series of a similar form.

Her painterly glazes cover the surface with nature motifs: leaves and grasses wrap the contours of her pots while birds perch above them.

Polseno is the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts grants for individual artists. She lives in Virginia, where she and Richard Hensley are ceramic teachers at Roanoke’s Hollins University.

Sam Taylor

Sam Taylor lives and works in Massachusetts where he owns Dog Bar Pottery, named for the Dog Bar Breakwater in Gloucester. He is a mostly self-taught potter who works on a treadle wheel, and fires his work in a traditional Japanese Noborigama wood kiln, a process more interesting, labor-intensive and harder to control than conventional gas firing. Taylor’s pots are defined by simplicity, clarity, durability and functionality. He paints in slips and stains organic motifs on his stoneware surfaces.

“I was just called to the clay, called to the studio, called to make stuff; it was fate,” Taylor said in an email interview.

“Plus there was my grandmother’s china demitasse cup and saucer set when I was a child. That was big: they are so

'style-ly' and incredibly great to use. It was instant specialness any time we used them.

"I am attracted to the magic of clay," he added. "When I was little it was easy to believe in all sorts of cool stuff: Santa, omniscience, the beauty of good and the ugliness of evil. Making pottery is my own personal journey back into a universe filled with magic, mystery and infinite possibility.

"I have been firing my pots in a wood-fired kiln for the past 25 years," Taylor said. "It is the MOST magical, MOST intimate ... well, it is a really cool thing, a wood kiln. You have a kiln filled with hundreds of pots, months' worth of work, tended all day one stick of wood at a time until it (or he/she) comes fully alive – a roaring, fire-breathing thing, whose power is not really controlled but harnessed.

As to whether he starts with a plan or sketch, Taylor said airily, "Some days I start with the chicken; other days, the egg. I'm very grateful to have choices."

David Eichelberger

David Eichelberger grew up in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. He creates functional ware to connect with the familiarity that comes with utility and use. A recent MFA graduate of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, Eichelberger is a resident artist at Penland School of Crafts in Penland, N.C.

"My work is composed to create pause," Eichelberger said in an artist's statement. "Functional qualities, visual rhythms, and exaggerated proportions are some of the elements I employ in the objects I make to quietly challenge our preconceived notions and our expectations. Upon investigation, a codified order both mysterious and liberating emerges in my work, and makes it resonate with my intentions. The objects I make are equal parts anthropological study and artistic endeavor, and incorporate an attempt to understand the world we live in, through making.

"The importance of genuine utility in my work is precluded by the desire to borrow a certain quality of functional items: familiarity. Pottery has an implied invitation," he said. "The intentional placement of openings, lids, and handles in my work conveys the specificity of function, clarifying that the objects I make have an intended purpose. The exact function is less obvious, and a situation is created that pairs a sense of knowing with a sense of mystery. The desire to identify the purpose of an object is an open invitation for continued exploration. Scrutiny and inspection reveal both undulations in edges once considered straight and subtle variations on flat planes. These details act as rewards for a heightened level of engagement."