

Kate McGraw / For the Journal

Ceramic artist Matthew Metz grows restive at the hierarchy people try to establish between and within various genres; i.e., a bowl trumps a plate trumps a cup.

“The experience of art should not be separated from our daily existence,” he said. “A coffee cup has as much capacity for meaning as any other form of expression. People just want to line things up. A cup has its own power. They really reside in people’s lives; they’re there in the cupboard and people reach for them every day. They become sacred.”

The Minnesota-based Metz is among the more than 100 ceramic artists whose cups and mugs are featured in Santa Fe Clay’s annual show of such vessels, called “Handle with Care” and opening today at the Railyard district gallery.

A second, smaller show is from the collection of the late Hazel Sara Greenberg, a longtime educator who amassed a large selection, especially of teapots, in more than 40 years of collecting ceramics.

If you go

WHAT: “Handle with Care” and selections from the Hazel Greenberg Collection
WHEN: Today through Dec. 8; reception 5-7 p.m. today
WHERE: Santa Fe Clay, 545 Camino de la Familia, in the Railyard
CONTACT: 505-984-1122

Matthew Metz

The 51-year-old Metz has been making pots since college, 30 years ago. He works in porcelain and fires with wood, and creates items that are functional “with a range of use that runs from the really pragmatic – cups, bowls – to more precious things used on special occasions: vases, boxes, platters.

“For me, it was the connections to everyday life that attracted me to ceramics,” he said.

“There were two things that drew me to ceramics: first, that the people who did ceramics, the people I interned with, seemed to be independent, self-employed people who could construct their own lives. And when I worked with the clay, it felt more grounded and real to be making objects that people use every day in their lives,” Metz said.

His influences include Asian pottery traditions, Greek and Roman pots, early American decorative arts (quilts, face jugs) and other folk traditions. His pots are carved and drawn. They are decorative but still “relevant to contemporary life.” The images are often abstract, but deeply personal.

Metz received a BFA from Ball State University in Indiana and an MFA from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. He has been a guest lecturer and teacher throughout the country and his work can be found in the Arkansas Arts Center, Minneapolis Institute for the Arts and the Archie Bray Foundation.

“My work comes out of many varied influences,” Metz said. “The images on my pottery are decorative. Our culture tends to look at decoration as embellishment without complex meaning – roasting on the cake. While I resist applying direct narrative and literal definition to my iconography, the patterns and images I choose come from my life and experience. Interests in nature (evolutionary biology, ethnology) and history (archaeology, physical culture) find their way, obliquely, into the work,” he said.

Blair Meerfield

Meerfield’s work returns to his home country for the Handle with Care show. He was born and raised in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado, and first saw potters turning clay on wheels visiting Taos with his parents as a child. The work fascinated him.

“When I was in high school, I had a very good art teacher: Butch Jones. He was the football coach and art teacher in that little school,” Meerfield said, laughing. “There was a potter’s wheel in the corner of the art room. I’d seen potters in Taos. I just had to get on that wheel. I started it with the encouragement and support of Butch Jones, and got a scholarship to

Adams State College (in Alamosa, Colo.).

“At Adams State, I learned under Cloyde Snook, a wonderful potter, kind of a hidden jewel. He ran that department at Adams State for 35 years. Because it was a small school, we did everything. It was just hippies and farm kids doing everything, making our own glazes and all, and therefore we learned with a pretty fast curve. I was older when I realized that other schools didn’t have as much. It was a very good environment to learn pots. I just kept at it.”

Meerfield received a BA in Art Education from Adams State College. He attended the University of Maine, Farmington, and Montgomery Community College in Rockville, Md.

He worked as a ceramic engineer for companies in Albuquerque and in the Washington, D.C., area and then maintained a 25- year studio career in Saguache, Colo.

For the past three and a half years, he has been the Ceramics Department Chair at the Art League in Alexandria, Va., associated with the Torpedo Factory, a large art center in the D.C. area.

“We have about 250 students,” Meerfield said. “I love teaching. I like watching people struggle at first, because it’s always harder than they assumed it was going to be. The great part is when they’re starting to get it. When they can sit down with an idea and succeed in making it. Basically in ceramics, the learning never quits.”

Meerfield makes pots at his Art League studio and at Highfield Pottery, a studio he shares with his partner Allison Severance in northern Maryland. He exhibits nationally and internationally.

“A successful body of work to me is a composite of the forms and shapes that are part of my life and surroundings,” he said. “These things are often old metal or wood ‘service containers,’ mechanical, landscape or architectural forms – and sometimes human. (The handles of his cups sometimes look like a human arm, hand resting on hip.)

“Other things I draw from are early German and American pots,” he added. “My work will usually borrow a lip, edge or contour from one of these and a handle or foot from another. All these influences seem to contribute to or become part of the work, many times without my really seeing it until later.”

The Hazel Greenberg Collection

Hazel Sara Greenberg, who died Feb. 2 after a four-and-a-half-year battle with cancer, left a large collection of ceramic art by some of the finest artists in the country.

Greenberg spent 30 years as a high school teacher and 10 years as a director of the American Forum for Global Education, fostering international cultural awareness through education and travel.

Selections from her ceramics collection are organized in a special show accompanying the Handle with Care show. The exhibit, which includes several of the fantastic teapots she collected, is in the Second Gallery.

Greenberg’s companion Linda Arkin was along on most of the collecting trips, which began in the ’70s. “We lived in New York City, so we went to all the best shows and galleries,” she recalled. “Hazel always had much more taste than money. Part of it for her was the thrill of meeting the artists. There are a number of pieces from the early ’80s. She always had a great eye.”