

Ceramics
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Rooted in the Gut: Chris Gustin's Eloquent Vessels

Written by Leigh Taylor Mickelson

With much fanfare, Chris Gustin's solo exhibition opened at Saratoga Clay Arts Center in Saratoga Springs, NY in November of 2019.

While we chose the word "eloquent" for the title of the exhibition, Gustin's work is not short on appropriate adjectives. Expressive, stirring, fluid, powerful, luscious and articulate also come to mind. The woodfired surfaces, rich in depth from a combination of glaze and ash, feel alive, with gravity pulling the glossy pools down and around each subtle curve. Wheel thrown and hand-built, each piece is one-of-a-kind and made unique by Chris's intuitive process and the unpredictability and magic of each atmospheric wood firing.

As I walk through the gallery I am pulled around each piece, drawn to touch the voluptuous surfaces and fondle the hills and valleys. On closer inspection, the work is full of body references. There are round hips, craned necks, soft bellies and curved spines. The titles were also a clue: *Vessel with Neck*, *Dimpled Bowl*, *Vessel with Dimple and Fold*. The work is contemplative, quiet, internal. Though understated, there clearly is a story in every piece. To fully understand, I first had to learn Gustin's story.

Clay – he's always been around it. Gustin's family ran several industrial clay businesses in California, distributing giftware and manufacturing pottery since the early 1940's. His first job was cleaning one of their factories in LA, and by the age of 19 he was running Wildwood Ceramics in Pasadena, overseeing production and managing the business. His Mom collected trompe l'oeil and he started making her presents, for fun. He knew he was being groomed to take over the big factory in West LA with over 300 employees, but after two years of managing the factory, he realized that he wanted to go to art school instead.

He followed his brother to Kansas City Art Institute, where Ken Ferguson, Victor Babu and George Timock entered his life. It was the early 70s and pots ruled. The Leach tradition and the history of Asian and European ceramics merged with his incredible industrial clay background, and he was hooked. Next, he went to Alfred to earn his MFA, where Wayne Higby, Bob Turner, Ted Randall, Val Cushing and Tony Hepburn left their mark on Gustin. But it was Kyllikki Salmenhaara, a sabbatical replacement from Finland who made the biggest impression. She talked a lot about the body, and when he put his work out for critique, she'd dance in response. Gustin still thinks about that.

Cloud #1902,
44 x 39 x 37 in
(112 x 99 x 94 cm).



Its an easy thing to diminish the vessel, and take it less seriously than other forms of working in clay. From culture to culture, the vessel is imbued with that culture's identity, whether functional or metaphorical. It's an amazing art form.





Opposite:
Platter #1903, 2019,
 23.5 x 26 x 5 in (60
 x66 x 12.5 cm).

Above:
The Eloquent Vessel,
 installation view.

After school, he moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where his brother had just graduated from the Master's program in painting at Yale, and with his sister-in-law he built his first studio. He was there from the late 1970s through the early 80s, an incredibly innovative time in the field of ceramics. Colleagues such as Arnie Zimmerman and Barry Bartlett were also in the area – working, teaching and exhibiting in New York, Connecticut and Boston. Gustin had his first solo show at Greenwich House Pottery in 1981. Both the Hadler/Rodriguez and Garth Clark galleries in NYC moved onto the scene and clay was hotter than ever, with pots being elevated to the art object. Everything was radical, and everything you saw was new. Gustin started teaching at Boston University in 1980 and then in 1985 moved to Massachusetts and started teaching at the Swain School of Design in New Bedford, which merged into the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, where he taught until 1999 and then retired.

With newfound time to really think, we see a shift in Gustin's work. He started exploring with the wood kiln he had built for his students in 1997. He scaled up and began making three to five-foot-tall sculptures, specifically for the wood kiln. Then in 2001, two monumental things happened; Gustin's younger brother was diagnosed with MS and 9/11 occurred. His perception of reality was knocked off track and conversations about life, death, and the meaning of it all quieted his work down. Gustin shared, "It came down to what do I want my work to talk about? The answer was human contact. Touch. Emotion. The evolution of my work really came through personal loss. It was not political, not angry. It was the opposite of angst, the opposite of confrontational. I wanted the work to be internal, not external – inside of self. When you lose someone close, you reevaluate everything. It wasn't therapy but it was drilling down to how I want to be in the world. It all came into the studio with me."



Cloud Jar #1818,
2018, 20 x 18 x 18 in
(51 x 46 x 46 cm).



Vessel with Neck,
2015, 24 x 12 x 12 in
(61 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm).

But his main question throughout his process always goes back to “how do you bring somebody in to touch it or... maybe want to lick it?”



I am comfortable in the unknown. It’s like the first time driving in Manhattan, you don’t know where you’re going, but around every corner is awe.”

Cloud #1801, 28 x 33 x 24 in (71 x 84 x 61 cm).

About the Author

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So, why the vessel? This question brought out the educator in Gustin. He said, “It’s an easy thing to diminish the vessel, and take it less seriously than other forms of working in clay. From culture to culture, the vessel is imbued with that culture’s identity, whether functional or metaphorical. It’s an amazing art form.” He explained further about how as he grew up, the vessel had always been important. It was part of his upbringing in his family’s clay businesses, and then in his art education; the vessel was truly center stage. Like many artists of his generation, such as Akio Takamori, he started with pots and then moved into abstraction. “It didn’t just happen. It was a thoughtful and exciting era where you had to find a belief system and figure out what’s you. For me the vessel is a container of ideas. It lets something in. That always had power to me. It was always more than a container. I chose the history of ceramics as a boundary to push against. You have to stay in it to push against it.”

Gustin also looked at a lot of figurative ceramics at this time and was especially inspired by the Japanese Haniwa tomb figures. “They are amazing yet simple figures four feet tall, and they sat in front of tombs. They were so powerful and emotional – nothing to do with pots. Clay has a vast history to pull from in terms of expression. There are some very good pots being made now, yet a lot of what I see in today’s expression regarding the vessel feels limited. It seems all about surface and decoration, but there’s not a lot of exploration of form that generates nuance to spark a conversation between them. It’s that conversation that creates a personal connection, which speaks to something greater than just the individual who made it. My work is obviously about me, but I try to put it out there in a way to make associations that are really deep; that are not intellectual. I want people to feel something through an object that’s deeply rooted in the gut. It only comes to mind afterwards.”

As for his process, Gustin moved off the wheel in early 90s, took the axis off center and started coil building. Using a stoneware body that he developed for high-fire gas and wood firing, he throws the first three to four inches to create a base, and then starts coiling and shifting the vessel towards the asymmetrical. Playing with scale, he would see a tea bowl and wonder what it would look like if it was three-feet tall. Putting larger work in the wood kiln allowed a lot of real estate for things to happen. Firing pieces all around the country in different wood kilns, he gets a wide variety of results. Each kiln is different, and he never fires his own kiln the same way twice. “It’s taken years to figure out and I’m always learning. I like to explore the possibilities.” While the glazes are completely different for each kiln, Gustin works to maintain the integrity of the surfaces. He looks for shift in color relationships and a wide range in color from a single glaze. He has eight to ten glazes that are made to run. “It makes a mess, but there’s something interesting in the chaos,” he says. But his main question throughout his process always goes back to “how do you bring somebody in to touch it or... maybe want to lick it?”

In 2015, during a month-long residency at the Archie Bray Foundation, Gustin set himself a new challenge. The new question he asked was “what if I start everything with an oval instead of a circle?” He soon realized that while the work was still about interior space, he couldn’t make a vessel from this starting point. He began to make sculpture and his *Cloud* series emerged. Gustin describes them as “big rambling bulbous objects with energy on the inside that is trying to get out.” Working in three or four scales to see how the forms change, he “almost feels like a beginner again” and is loving it. “With the vessels, I really knew what I was doing. Moving from the circle to the oval, it changed everything, and I suddenly didn’t know what I was doing. I was going back into a beginner’s mind. I have made some good ones and some not so great. I like being in that place where you don’t know what’s going to happen. I am comfortable in the unknown. It’s like the first time driving in Manhattan, you don’t know where you’re going, but around every corner is awe.”

The new *Cloud* series are just the next step in the evolution of Chris Gustin’s work. He now has two bodies – *Clouds* and *Vessels*, and for Gustin, there is no hierarchy. “The *Clouds* developed because they had to close in. An object tells you what it needs, and you just have to figure out how to listen to it. Often what it wants is really uncomfortable. It is a whole new understanding, and you just have to be in it.” ■