

Elizabeth
MACDONALD
past and present

Sorting through my work of the past 30 years, I became aware that disparate elements in my life, primarily theater and painting, have been brought together through clay.

I grew up in Western Massachusetts in and around Springfield, where I lived part of the year in town and the rest in the country. My earliest and strongest memories were formed as I wandered alone through the fields and woods surrounding our house.

Not long ago, I came across Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Reverie*, which I opened at random and happened to see: "In his happy solitude, the dreaming child knows the cosmic reverie which united us to the world." Images from my early years flooded back in gardens filled with peonies, milkweed bursting against a blue sky, branches of apple trees as secret places.

After a year of theater training in London at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, I arrived in New York. Reluctantly, I found my way to a secretarial school, a detour that ultimately led to work in the theater, first as an assistant to a drama school director and later to working with a Broadway producer.

As I was living in Greenwich Village across from The New School, I signed up for evening classes in drawing and painting. I would spend half the night doing portraits of my friends because I had a need to paint what was behind their eyes. Soon I was asked if I would like a scholarship, which I accepted, but soon found it exhausting to work all day and paint each night.

Then one day I happened to be in the East Village visiting a friend. I'll always remember that third floor walk-up with the sounds of jazz leading me on. Inside there were gilt mirrors and canvas chairs but what I remember the most were the clay pots filled with ivy. My friend said she had made them at Greenwich House Pottery, I headed there the next day.

First I learned how to coil a pot following a template, which was extremely tedious. (Recently, I found my first pot, the rust of earthenware showing through an uneven green glaze very much like the surfaces I longed for many years later.) After I had grown impatient with handbuilding, I learned to form tightly thrown and trimmed bowls, then talked my way into a Peter Voulkos workshop. His powerful relationship with clay was exhilarating.

My English theater training led me to believe that if I could learn the outward skills, the inward ones would develop as needed -- that skills were simply the vehicle for expression. When I began to work with clay it seemed as if I were choosing the opposite approach -- concentrating on expression rather than skills. I considered giving up my ties to theater to go to Alfred University but at the age of 26 felt too old to start another life.

In 1963, I married an actor and we began our life together on a national tour, playing cities all over the country. Later, we settled down to work with the Seattle Repertory Theater, my husband as director and I as actress. I had always wanted to create a life, not a career, and suddenly my dream was a reality -- being paid to do what I enjoyed, acting in plays by Shaw, Shakespeare, Chekhov and contemporary authors.

We worked from early morning until late at night with breaks between rehearsals and performances. When a ceramics studio, Pottery Northwest, was set up on the floor beneath our rehearsal hall, I asked for space in which to work. It was perfect -- all of my passions were under one roof. With a key to the studio, I could work day or night, whenever I had a bit of time.

After several years, my husband received a Rockefeller grant to study at Harvard and I was able to continue my work in clay at a studio in Cambridge.

On a temporary return to the Seattle Repertory Theater, I worked in a studio next to a Swedish woman who was preparing for an exhibition. She was making porcelain miniatures of her larger pots. When I asked her for some clay, I was captivated by the sensuousness of this new material. Knowing I'd be going back and forth across the country, I too started making small forms. It was a good match for I developed a skill as well as a passion; and I could carry my pots in a suitcase.

By the late sixties we were back in New York City. Knowing that I didn't have the drive to pursue a theatrical career, I gave myself a year to make the transition from a public form of expression and communication to one more personal and private. It was painful to abandon one deeply held commitment for another, with no guidelines but a desire to create a language through another medium-- clay.

The transition was made more complex by also taking on a country home in Bridgewater, Connecticut and trying to work at both places. Fortunately, I discovered the Brookfield Craft Center, where I met other craftspeople, attended workshops, and became a board member.

Many people have helped shape my vision. Paulus Berensohn, with his commitment to material and process, has been a continuing presence in my creative life. Encounters with M.C. Richards, Gerry Williams, Toshiko Takaezu and Karen Karnes have also enriched my relationship to clay. Workshops at Penland with Byron Temple and at Haystack with Cynthia Bringle were invaluable in helping me to understand the demands of studio life. My dream had been to earn a living in the theater and do the rest for love, but I had to learn to put a monetary value on my pots.

My plunge into the economics of pottery coincided with the last year of the nonjuried Bennington Craft Fair. With wooden crates and a large spool to hold a tree with my hanging pots, I set up a stand. The stores bought; even a gallery or two took my work. I

knew then that I had found a material capable of containing and grounding my imagination.

Perhaps because of my repertory experience, I have never settled on a single focus. If I was throwing with porcelain, I was also handbuilding with rough stoneware. If I was striving for some kind of simplicity, I was, at the same time, allowing the clay to reveal imagery that seemed independent of my control. If I was waiting for a reducing gas kiln to transform my glazes, I was also building complicated surfaces that needed only oxidation firing in an electric kiln.

I would work for a year, then go off to the Northeast Craft Fair in Rhinebeck, New York. This approach allowed me to follow my impulses. Each year, as a result, there would be some sales, a few orders, as well as a show invitation or two, sometimes even an award -- just the right combination to give me the freedom to explore new work, yet enough pressure to keep me focused. I began to learn that clay was a pivotal teacher by turning experience into understanding, even revelation.

After five years in a primitive basement studio at my 1790s home, I moved into the garage. My architect brother had converted it into a workspace. The daylight gave me new confidence.

Now that I had a feeling for what happened to glazes in firing, I wanted to see what happened to clay, especially porcelain, with no glaze. After playing with smoke firing and raku, I decided to work solely within the kiln.

With a grant from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts, I experimented with patterns of flame that occur within a closed form. First, I got black pots with white lines from sawdust in a saggar. As the process evolved, I developed pots with gray tones and finally color by introducing different kinds of combustible materials, such as dog food and seaweed. Each pot, pure white, was polished to an alabaster sheen before I put it into the kiln. I did not seek a consistency of surface, but rather an ever-changing revelation of dark and light.

The fire of creation had become a confrontation with the other side. On my return, the surfaces of my pots became more complex, often the result of many firings.

Though clay was my chosen medium, my relationship to the theater remained. As fire created a surface narration, so I explored an internal narration by building forms reminiscent of stage sets, miniature spaces with elements of recognizable imagery. The impulse to create intimacy in relation to vastness has been a continuing theme.

After moving to the country, I discovered that my cat was a hunter. I cremated his offerings in closed containers when firing my kiln. For years I wondered how I could indicate the shape as well as the skeleton of a bird. Finally, I understood that wet clay would receive these impressions, and that through fire, fossilized forms would remain. Bones, egg and wings focus my attention on the vastness of the universe. Images of Icarus and the Phoenix rising give added meaning to these metaphors. Instead of decay, I

wish to indicate the eternal. Living between the unknown and the given, I play upon that edge.

Over the years, color became increasingly important to me. Though, for a long time, I had simply added oxides to porcelain, I felt the need for a more direct application; I longed to see pigment before (not just after) a firing. I even turned to weaving, but the process seemed too methodical. The painter in me wanted immediacy, as well as layer upon layer of color. Everywhere I went -- from the Caribbean to, best of all, China -- I was attracted to (and photographed) the ancient, peeling walls.

In 1982, after I had moved into a 20-foot-square carriage barn for added studio space, I received a second grant from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts to develop a modular form suitable for architectural applications. This was particularly practical, since I had hurt my back and needed to find a way of working in which size was not necessarily related to weight.

During that year, as I prepared for my grant exhibition, I worked with elements of translucent porcelain, waiting at the same time for the unexpected. Then one day, as I was cleaning up, I made a tile by pressing leftover powdered stains into scraps of wet clay that had been torn around a block of wood. The result looked like old parchment covered with layers of lichen. (I had been making paper and loved the deckled edge and rough surfaces.) I knew I had found a way to use color, as well as satisfy my need for spontaneity and surprise. This one tile contained all that I wished to bring together -- formal element with a ragged edge and layered pigments.

I realized I had arrived at a method of producing large-scale work, using the formality of a grid with an organic sensibility, where both delicacy and crustiness would dictate internal form. With each tile complete in itself, I could assemble the pieces and discover an image without knowing ahead of time what it would be like having a jigsaw puzzle without a picture on the lid of the box.

I have been working this way ever since -- sometimes reinforcing the geometric; sometimes emphasizing the subtleties of landscape, trying to evoke the light and depth behind a surface, as in the markings of ancient walls, clouds on a pond or moss on stone. Each tile becomes a reflection of time and a fragment of space. With this technique, I am able to make paintings, sculpture, wall relief or furniture -- large or small.

When I began to receive commissions, I expanded the barn studio. I had already invested in a slab roller, with some misgiving, for I enjoy making slabs by hand, stretching the clay for its own beauty. Knowing that a machine would change everything, I placed the roller at one end of the barn and added another 20 feet with basement and storage. Some of the tile constructions are very large. One, made for a hotel in Hong Kong, is 16 feet square; another in Washington, for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, is 35 x 4 feet. Others are more intimate, often only 11" to 14" square, made with one-inch tiles. I call them "A Diary of Days" because the palette shifts to embrace what my eyes

see. Bronze and ocher will replace peach and pale green. Skies will reflect the time of day and year.

With “Banacord”, a commissioned public artwork in Hartford, Connecticut, I repeated the rigid rectangular forms of the cityscape, varying the height of my three columns from 14 to 7 feet. Instead of creating an industrial facade, I made thousands of 3 1/2" tiles in soft and subtle hues. When assembled, they look like the reflections of sky and land in the windows of tall buildings. The surfaces shimmer in the light and suggest touching and seeing simultaneously. A small boy came by as I was completing the installation -- a boy growing up in the inner city. He traced the trees, the river, the mountains and the sky with his fingers and his eyes. These elements were all touched in his imagination. I couldn't have asked for more.

More recently, I completed “Wave”, a 78 x 14-foot mural using 11,000 tiles, for the exterior of a Chicago building. In 1999, I was pleased to be the recipient of the Governor's Award for Visual Art.

I now feel as if the public and private aspects of my creative life have merged. The internal journey that takes place in my studio can be part of a larger world. Remembered landscapes from my childhood can be re-formed in my work and something received can be something given.

ELIZABETH MACDONALD

1974 - 2002

CHRONOLOGY

- 1952-56 Studied theater at Chatham College in Pittsburgh.
- 1956-57 Attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London.
- 1959 Studied painting at the New School of Social Research in New York City.
- 1960 Began working in clay at the Greenwich House Pottery, New York City.
- 1960-69 Worked in professional theater, primarily in the cities of Seattle and New York.
- 1966-68 Worked at Pottery Northwest in Seattle.
- 1970 Set up a studio in Bridgewater, Connecticut.

PUBLICATIONS

- 1978 Ceramics Monthly, January 1982, pgs. 83-84
- 1982 American Craft, January 1982, pg. 64
- 1985 The New York Times, April 21, 1985, CN 21
- 1986 Metropolis, “From Tiles to Eternity”, October 1986, pg. 25
- 1992 Ceramics Monthly, March 1992, A Ceramics Monthly Portfolio

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1977 Greenwich House Pottery, New York City, New York
- 1980 University of North Dakota Art Galleries, Grand Forks, North Dakota
- 1981 Surroundings, New York City, New York

- 1985 Washington Art Association, Washington, Connecticut
- 1987 The Hand and Spirit Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona
- 1988 Silvermine Guild, New Canaan, Connecticut
- 1989 Benson Gallery, Bridgehampton, New York
Paris-New York-Kent Gallery, Kent, Connecticut
- 1990 Paris-New York-Kent Gallery, Kent, Connecticut
- 1994 Worth Gallery, Taos, New Mexico
- 1995 Paris-New York-Kent Gallery, Kent, Connecticut
- 1998 Kent School Gallery, Kent, Connecticut
New Arts Gallery, Bantam, Connecticut
- 1999 New Arts Gallery, Bantam, Connecticut
- 2001 New Arts Gallery, Litchfield, Connecticut
Ironwood Gallery, Ridgefield, Connecticut
- 2002 The Gallery at Dodds Hall, University of New Haven, West Haven, Connecticut

EXHIBITIONS

- 1974 Gimpel & Weitzenhoffer, New York City, New York
- 1975 The Fairtree Gallery, Miniatures, New York City, New York
- 1976 DeCordova Museum, New England Potters, Lincoln, Massachusetts
- 1978 Cornell University, Johnson Museum, Landscapes: New Views, Ithaca, New York
- 1980 The Elements, Works in Miniature, New York City, New York
Otis Art Institute, Westwood Clay National, Los Angeles, California
Parsons School of Design, New York City, New York
Designer Craftsmen, Tradition & Change, Houston, Texas
- 1981 Fitchburg Art Museum, New England Ceramics, Fitchburg, Massachusetts

- 1982 Holsten Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida and Stockbridge, Massachusetts
- 1983 The Elements, Architectural Clay, New York City, New York
Joseloff Gallery, Connecticut Women Artists, Hartford, Connecticut
- 1984 Cummings Art Center, Connecticut College, Sculpture Invitational, New London, Connecticut
The Twining Gallery, Stuff and Spirit: Art in the Craft Media, New York City, New York
Swan Gallery, Art for the Corporate Environment, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York
Museum of Arts and Crafts, World Triennial Exhibition of Small Ceramics, Zagreb, Yugoslavia
Aetna Institute, Mind to Hand: Connecticut Commission on the Arts Grant Recipients, Hartford, Connecticut
- 1985 Hammond Museum, Looking toward the East, North Salem, New York
Carr Gallery, The Architectural Impact, Houston, Texas
- 1986 Xe Biennale International de Ceramic d'Art, Vallauris, France
- 1990 Spaso House, Moscow, Russia
- 1991 Museum of Arts and Crafts, World Triennial Exhibition of Small Ceramics, Zagreb, Yugoslavia

Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, Walls: Large Scale Ceramic Sculpture, Logan, Utah

1992 School of Visual Arts, Beyond Craft, New York City, New York

1993 The Works, Color, Light and Motion, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
The Clay Studio, Architectural Clay, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

1994 Silvermine Guild, Masters of Their Craft, New Canaan, Connecticut
Mattatuck Museum, The Connecticut Vision, Waterbury, Connecticut
Monique Knowlton Gallery, The Domestic Landscape, Kent, Connecticut

1995 Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York
Massoni-Sommer, Chestertown, Maryland
Taiwan Museum of Art, 5th Invitational Shoebox Sculpture, Taichung, Taiwan
Cumberland Gallery, Invitational, Nashville, Tennessee

1996 Gallery Broken, Life Color Form, Tokyo, Japan

1997 The Silo Gallery, Textile & Clay: Color & Texture, New Milford, Connecticut
Mendelson Gallery, Invitational, Washington, Connecticut
Monarch National Competition, Florence, Alabama
Silvermine Guild, USA Craft Today, New Canaan, Connecticut
Guilford Handcraft Center, Ceramics 97, Guilford, Connecticut
Cumberland Gallery, Invitational, Nashville, Tennessee

1998 Connecticut Commission on the Arts Gallery, artist's Grants, Hartford, Connecticut
Bucks County Community College, Ten Contemporary Tile Makers, Newtown, Pennsylvania
Cumberland Gallery, Invitational, Nashville, Tennessee
Turtle Gallery, Invitational, Deer Isle, Maine
Mendelson Gallery, (2 person), Washington, Connecticut

1999 Del Mano Gallery, Invitational, Los Angeles, California
Contemporary Sculpture at Chesterwood, Stockbridge, Massachusetts
The Gallery of Art and Design, Cynthia Bringle: A Fiery Influence, Ashville, North Carolina
The Gallery of Art and Design, Cynthia Bringle: A Fiery Influence, Raleigh, North Carolina
Elena Zang Gallery, Invitational, Woodstock, New York
Mendelson Gallery, Washington, Connecticut

2000 The Works Gallery, (3 person), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Elena Zang Gallery, Woodstock, New York
Bachelier-Cardonsky Gallery, Kent, Connecticut

2001 The Century Association, Annual Sculptors & Photographers Exhibit, New York City, New York
Bachelier-Cardonsky Gallery, Kent, Connecticut

2002 The Century Association, Annual Sculptors & Photographers Exhibit, New York City, New York

AWARDS

1973 Artist Craftsmen, Juror's Award, New York City, New York
1977 CT Commission on the Arts, Artist Grant, Hartford, Connecticut

- 1979 Faenza International Competition, Gold Medal, Faenza, Italy
- 1980 CT Commission on the Arts, Artist Grant, Hartford, Connecticut
- 1983 Silvermine Guild, Art of the Northeast, Juror's Award, New Canaan, Connecticut
- 1985 Society of Connecticut Craftsmen, Master Craftsmen Award
- 1987 Art Quest, Los Angeles, California
- 1990 Kraus Sikes Inc., American Crafts Award, Washington, D.C.
- 1992 Department of Environmental Protection, % For Art Commission, Hartford, Connecticut
- 1996 Monarch National Ceramic Competition, Tile Award, Florence, Alabama
- 1997 Silvermine Guild, USA Craft Today, Memorial Award, New Canaan, Connecticut
- 1998 CT Commission on the Arts, Artist Grant, Hartford, Connecticut
- 1999 Connecticut Governor's Arts Award, Visual Arts, Hartford, Connecticut
- 2000 Agricultural Center of the University of Connecticut, % for Art Commission, Litchfield, Connecticut
The Society for Connecticut Crafts, First Prize

COLLECTIONS

- IBM, Williston, Vermont
- Faenza Museum, Faenza, Italy
- Hartford Arts Festival, Hartford, Connecticut, Permanent Collection
- Allan Chasanoff, New York City, New York
- The Lannan Foundation, Palm Beach, Florida
- Chubb and Sons, Warren Township, New Jersey
- 155 Federal Street (Lobby), Boston, Massachusetts
- Prudential Bache, New York City, New York
- Hublein Corporation, West Hartford, Connecticut
- Metro Media, Los Angeles, California
- University of Maryland Medical Center, Baltimore, Maryland
- Norelco, Stamford, Connecticut
- Nobu Restaurant for Rockwell Group Architects, New York City, New York
- US Trust, Stamford, West Hartford and Greenwich, Connecticut
- Mary Washington Hospital, Fredericksburg, Virginia
- Bristol-Meyers-Squibb, New Brunswick, New Jersey
- Pitney Bowes, Stamford, Connecticut
- Sheraton Grande, Tokyo, Japan
- Babson College, Wellesley, Massachusetts
- Phillips Petroleum, Tulsa, Oklahoma
- Aetna Life Insurance Company, Windsor, Connecticut
- Piper and Marbury, Washington, D.C.
- Shands Hospital, Gainesville, Florida (% for Art)
- Titan Corporation Corporate Headquarters, San Diego, California
- North Dakota Museum of Art,
Grand Forks, North Dakota
- Pacific Enterprises Oil Company, Dallas, Texas
- Chandler Performing Arts Center, Chandler, Arizona
- National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C.

Conrad International Hotel, Hong Kong
American International Group, New York, New York
City of New York, Coney Island Hospital (% for Art)
AARP, Washington, D.C.
St. Luke's Hospital, Denver Colorado
General Electric, Albany, New York
City of Hartford, Connecticut (commissioned by ITT Hartford)
Milliken and Company, Spartanburg, South Carolina
Yale University Medical School, New Haven, Connecticut
Boy Scouts of America, Dallas, Texas
St. Francis Hospital, Hartford, Connecticut
600 North Michigan, Chicago, Illinois
Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Charlotte, North Carolina
Dana Farber Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts
McGraw-Hill, New York City, New York
Bankers Trust, New York City, New York
Jennison Associates, New York City, New York
HBO, New York City, New York
St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital,
New York City, New York
Chubb Group, White Plains, New York