

CERAMIC REVIEW

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Emmanuel Cooper

Potter, writer, educator, critic



JULIAN STAIR

Carefully grouped
vessel objects

SARA MOORHOUSE

Brightly banded bowls with
an optical twist

MICHAEL DOOLAN

The darker side of
fairy tales

An Island Aesthetic



Karla Araujo investigates the thrown, altered, and carved porcelain of Jennifer McCurdy.

She coaxes, pulls, pinches, carves, and ultimately defies the nature of porcelain in her extraordinary work. Ceramic artist Jennifer McCurdy lives on what she calls the 'magical island' of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, USA, just off the coast of Boston. Her translucent sculptural vessels, bowls, and vases seem to reflect the beauty of her natural seaside environment in their contrasts of strength and fragility, light and shadow, movement and stillness.

A potter since her teens, McCurdy, now 54, has been working with porcelain for over twenty-five years. Her efforts at the wheel began with functional glazed stoneware mugs, mixing bowls, and goblets and evolved into today's decorative porcelain vessels, candle vases, eggs, bowls, and sconces. She was drawn, she says, by the material's beauty and simplicity, as well as its ability to reflect abstract concepts.

'I can create soft and hard shadows, shape it, distort it, and test its limits,' she says. The results are confounding, even to other ceramic artists. 'People always ask me how I do it. Other artists ask me about the tools I use. I'm happy to share my ideas. By the time

people become technically proficient enough to do this type of work they've developed their own style.'

SEA AND LIGHT McCurdy's translucent white pieces catch and reflect the light, compelling the viewer with their graceful swirls, lacy textures, and bone-like smoothness. She is inspired, she says, by the patterns she sees in nature. 'Pieces of coral, fish bones, anything that shows structure fascinates me.'

A New England native, she has lived in Rhode Island, Michigan, Florida, and Massachusetts, but considers Martha's Vineyard her home. Her grandmother, Zeona Cassel, was an Island resident, a watercolourist and flower arranger who passed along her passions for *ikebana*, or Japanese flower arranging, and painting to her granddaughter. McCurdy says she has vivid memories of her grandmother teaching her about the things she loved.

Each morning, as she has for years, McCurdy sets forth on a twenty-mile bicycle ride around the Island. 'I'm inspired by the Vineyard landscape – the shape of shells and other natural objects,' she explains. Time passes slowly in this environment. 'We have to ferry everywhere so there's no instant gratification.' Living on what she calls 'Island time', the serenity of her world affords her the patience and quiet needed for her exacting, delicate work. Surrounded by the sea, McCurdy believes she is influenced unconsciously by light and the movement of light on the water.

1 *Afternoon Out*, porcelain, 2010, H33cm max. Photographed at Katama Beach on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts
2 *Flame In Hand*, porcelain and artist's hand, 2010, H13cm
3 *Celebration Egg*, porcelain, 2009, H36cm
4 *Porcelain Ebb*, porcelain, 2010, H33cm max. Photographed at Katama Beach on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts



5 Peony Bowl, porcelain, 2010, Ø25cm
6 Flame Vessel Study, porcelain, 2010,
H18cm max 7 Coral Nest, porcelain,
2009, H23cm



She also credits the Vineyard's 'wonderful community of creative people' for supporting and nurturing her endeavours.

Working with Miller #550 porcelain by Laguna Clay, McCurdy starts her process by air-drying the clay in an arch to stiffen it. She then wedges the plastic porcelain one hundred strokes to prepare it for the potter's wheel. Throwing on the wheel, she quickly pulls the clay up into a traditional cylindrical shape. Next, using an Asian technique called 'dry throwing', she coaxes the cylinder into a sphere with two metal ribs in hand, one inside the piece and one outside, applying no additional water.

When she is satisfied with the shape of the piece, she removes it from the wheel. She then alters it with her fingers, pushing and folding the clay. Once it becomes leatherhard and feels 'like chilled butter', she uses a #11 Exacto Knife and a Kemper R3 trimming tool to cut, trim, and scrape, carving patterns to establish what she refers to as 'energy and counterpoint'. Finding just the right moment (too dry and the piece will crack), she works surely, quickly, and cleanly, spending about forty-five minutes carving a small piece. After two firings in her kiln, the second at 1288°C (2350°F), the piece vitrifies, becoming nonporous and rock-hard. The result: sculptural, gravity-defying works that appear extremely fragile and yet, as McCurdy says, 'are so durable they should last at least 10,000 years'.

With each piece she creates, she explores and pushes the structural limitations of the medium, a process that has taken half a lifetime to master. 'I had to spend years on the wheel learning how to incorporate movement into the form. You have to have high-level throwing skills to be able to achieve a piece that you can successfully

alter. Then the alterations must impart enough strength to the form so that it can withstand the intricate carving.'

She is challenged every day, she says, by every aspect of the work. 'I sit down and throw each piece as finely and as thin as possible, and in as perfect a curve as I can achieve. The work is moving, changing, getting finer and more open, but under control at all times.' Central to its success, she points out, is proficiency in throwing on the wheel. 'It took me twenty years to begin to carve through my pieces structurally, I was so intent on mastering the spherical, wide form.' Each piece is instinctual, built on the work that preceded it. A successful piece, she says, reflects balance as well as visual tension.

At work in her home studio, down a quiet sandy road in the historic New England town of Vineyard Haven, McCurdy continues to push her artistry. 'I'm very interested in more complex shapes. I'm constantly striving to replace positive space with more sculptural forms.' 



Making Sequence See page 64

Photography Gary Miranda and Casey McCurdy

Exhibitions *Naked*, Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, Houston, Texas, USA, until 5 September 2010; American Craft Exposition, Evanston, Illinois, USA, 27-29 August 2010; Long's Park Art & Craft

Festival, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 3-6 September 2010; St Louis Art Fair, Clayton, Missouri, USA, 10-12 September 2010

Stockists Shaw Cramer Gallery, Martha's Vineyard; The Museum Shop, The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, USA

Collections McCurdy's porcelain work is in collections in museums across the US,

including the Smithsonian Institution's Renwick Gallery, Washington, DC, USA

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Jennifer McCurdy in Practice



1 Centring the porcelain



2 Throwing the form



3 Altering the thrown form



7 Inside view of cut piece



8 Removing the cut pieces



9 Cutting the bevel edges



13 Sponging away the scrubby marks



14 Carefully sponging through some supporting connections



15 Greenware ready to be bisque-fired



4 Footing the bottom



5 Marking the pattern



6 Carving the pattern



10 Finished until dry



11 Top view of finished until dry



12 Sanding the greenware



16 Bisqued to cone 06 and balanced on stilt for cone 10 firing



17 Fired to cone 10



18 Finished piece with unfinished piece