

# THROWING CURVES

*Martha's Vineyard ceramicist  
creates porcelain perfection*

By Haley Cote

Photography by Gary Mirando unless otherwise noted

PAIGE BIVIANO

In the basement studio of her waterfront Vineyard Haven home, ceramic artist Jennifer McCurdy is transforming clay into extraordinary, rather ethereal works of art. Crashing waves, soaring flames, branches of leaves intertwined—there are endless ways to interpret the intricate designs of her wheel thrown porcelain sculptures. To McCurdy, it's all relative.

"I'm just glad if you respond to it," she says of her work. "It's like my song; it's my expression."

McCurdy has spent the last four decades working with porcelain, a type of clay that is non-porous and translucent. During a visit to her studio this past summer, McCurdy demonstrated the meticulous process of crafting her porcelain pieces—or “vessels,” as she calls them. It’s a process that involves a unique, highly skilled approach. “I throw my porcelain very thin,” McCurdy explains, “and I do that because it’s the aesthetic of porcelain to be translucent and thin.” Porcelain in itself is difficult to throw, McCurdy says, as it absorbs water quickly and is more flimsy than other clays. While she uses some water in the beginning of her throw, she employs a technique called “dry throwing,” in which she shapes the clay with flexible metal ribs. Since these ribs have a smaller surface area than fingers, McCurdy says they encounter less drag on the clay, making it easier to properly form the piece.



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When a piece is ready to be carved, McCurdy says she only has a window of one to three hours, depending on the size of the piece and how much moisture is in the air, before that piece becomes too dry to carve. She describes the designs she carves as “iterations” of her previous designs. “I think about things in fractals,” she says. (Essentially, fractals are never-ending patterns that, on different scales, are variations of themselves.) “I remember in the late ’70s I discovered fractals, and it blew me away. I thought, ‘Yes! This is the truth of the universe,’ ” she adds with a laugh. McCurdy says she loves exploring how her designs can iterate to become something new. “I’m looking for patterns within patterns, movement around the form,” she explains. “It’s all about the integration of the form with the surface.”

Her work is completed once she eventually fires the piece twice in her kiln. From start to finish—whether it’s a smaller sculpture, like the 7-by-10-inch “Coral Nest,” or a larger one, like her latest design, the two-foot-tall “Radiatori Vessel” (“Like the pasta!” she notes)—it takes McCurdy about a month to complete a piece. “You could say a piece takes me about a month, or you could say it actually took me about 40 years, because that is literally how long it took me to develop the skills,” she says. “This is what I’ve done every day for all of those years.”

McCurdy, a native of Newport, RI, says the first time she ever threw on a potter’s wheel was in Birmingham, MI, during her sophomore year of high school. Her art teacher, she recalls, would always tease her—but in a loving way. “I know you’re back there, I see all of the dust coming up!” McCurdy says she would hear her teacher yell. It turns out



Top: McCurdy at work in her home studio.

Above: Radiatori Vessel is one of McCurdy’s latest designs, measuring two feet tall.

*This is your life and you know how to live it,  
This is your gift, and you know how to give it.*

WENDY MULHERN



her teacher never threw a pot herself—McCurdy says she initially learned how to throw from watching a film reel in class about pottery. But that was enough to get her hooked immediately, she says.

McCurdy went on to study at Michigan State University, then Florida Atlantic University. She and her husband, Tom, along with their three children, spent 15 years in Florida, where she routinely exhibited her work, doing 20 to 25 shows a year. In 1993 they moved to Martha’s Vineyard, re-establishing McCurdy’s roots—her family is originally from the island.

As their children grew older, she and Tom started taking her work on the road, doing national gallery tours. “I drive the van, and he works on his computer,” McCurdy says. Tom, owner of McCurdy Motorcars, assists his wife with her shows and handles any business-related matters. He even lends a hand during the creation of her sculptures, gilding many of her pieces. In 2017 alone, they traveled to over a dozen cities across the country to exhibit McCurdy’s work, including in Indiana, Colorado, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Tennessee, Ohio, and New York. McCurdy’s work is also part of permanent





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collections in a number of notable institutions, such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, The Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

“Jennifer is one of the few true nationally acclaimed artists on the Vineyard,” says Louisa Gould, owner of Louisa Gould Gallery in Vineyard Haven. Gould, whose gallery represents McCurdy, says she’s never seen anything quite like the ceramicist’s work, on both a regional and national level. To Gould, her work is more than just art. “She calls them vessels, and they are,” Gould says. “They hold energy—there’s movement, there’s form, there’s flow. They look like they’re living.”

That “energy” Gould refers to is ever-present in the pages of McCurdy’s first book, “Vessels: A Conversation in Porcelain and Poetry” (Schiffer Publishing). Released this past June, the 200-page book is a compilation of over 100 images of McCurdy’s work, accompanied by “inspirational” poetry written by her sister, Wendy Mulhern. “When you start reading it,” McCurdy says, “you see that the images actually illustrate the poetry—there is that clear correlation.” In addition to showcasing McCurdy’s work and Mulhern’s poetry, the book includes in-depth discussion of both women’s creative processes.

Even with her success over the past 40 years, McCurdy says she continues to have that struggling artist mentality. “I’m convinced that it’s part of the journey,” she says. “I would think that if you didn’t have that mindset you’d stop growing.”

“She’s continually pushing herself and her art,” adds Gould. “She pushes the limits, which allows her creativity to grow and her work to evolve.”

For more information about Jennifer McCurdy and her work, visit [jennifermccurdy.com](http://jennifermccurdy.com).

Haley Cote is the assistant editor for Cape Cod Life Publications.



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