

CERAMIC ART TRENDS, TOOLS, AND TECHNIQUES

# CLAY TIMES

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**Defying Gravity:  
Jennifer McCurdy's Carved  
& Pierced Porcelain**

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# Defying Gravity

Jennifer McCurdy's Carved and Pierced Porcelain



*Jungle Leaf Vessel #2. 12" x 12" x 12".*



STORY BY K.T. ANDERS  
PHOTOS BY KATHERINE ROSE

One of the first thoughts that come to mind when you encounter the work of Jennifer McCurdy is, how does she do that? How does she swirl and whip porcelain into delicately rising, wafer-thin flames that seem to defy gravity? How can she create such intricately pierced designs and yet maintain graceful and flowing forms? This is porcelain, for heaven's sake, famous for slumping and cracking.

As with all work, McCurdy's techniques have evolved over time. She has been a potter since the age of 16, selling at art fairs and in galleries. "Clay is all I've ever been competent at," she says. "My dad said I couldn't make a living at it, but as soon as I got my B.F.A. from Michigan State University, I got a job with clay." It was at a restaurant that had once been a historic pottery along the route of the Underground Railway in Pennsylvania. "I was the entertainment. People would come in dressed to the nines and I'd be there at the wheel in my overalls, covered with clay. They sold my work in the gift shop."

A move to Boca Raton brought graduate classes with John McCoy at Florida Atlantic University, and an introduction to porcelain. Mugs, mixing bowls, and art shows filled her life. "Things got less functional gradually," notes McCurdy. "I began to look for ways to incorporate motion into the form. I was interested in using the line on a surface to describe the volume of the piece and to move around the work. At that point I wasn't cutting the pieces or altering them, I was using line to create movement on traditional spherical forms. Movement has been my impetus in developing pattern. I worked for a long time nailing the forms before I ever contemplated cutting them up."

Carving was a natural outgrowth of working with porcelain and celadon glazes, influenced by Japanese tradition. "I wanted integration of the form with the surface," she explains. But as she began altering and carving more, McCurdy found she liked the work better before glazing it. "I felt that if the glazes were weighing down the piece and ruining what I was trying to create, then I should let go of them. It sounds simple now, but at the time it felt like a huge decision."

McCurdy uses Miller 550 clay by Laguna. "I throw my porcelain very stiff," she says. "I let



*Butterfly Wall Sconce. 11" x 9" x 6". Oxidation-fired porcelain.*

it dry a lot out of the bag. After I've thrown the cylinder up, I don't use any more water at all, just two metal ribs, one inside and one out, to kind of coax out the shape." Bottles, of course, require a little moisture to collar in. To get the wide rims of her fluted shapes, McCurdy speeds the wheel a little faster to let centrifugal force move the piece outward.

### Adding Strength through Altering

McCurdy says that in her early work she can see the germination of her altering ideas, but she didn't know how to do it. "I had to have higher-level throwing skills before I could even begin to alter well," she confesses. "And I had to be able to alter well before I could carve as intricately as I'm doing now. I'm relying on

the extra strength that the alteration gives to the form to be able to carve away that much."

An hour or two after taking a sphere off the wheel, McCurdy uses her index finger to sketch the lines of alteration she wants in the piece, then uses her thumb to deepen the lines into creases, pushing from the outside only. "You have to kind of ease the piece into those creases," she notes. "I'm pushing pretty hard at the end to move the clay. The piece is still a little wobbly, so I have to support it with my other hand at all times."

The ridges McCurdy creates during this process give strength to the form, much in the way the ridges in a pumpkin make that form stronger than a basketball shape. "It's sort of like how arches in a church add strength





*Wheat Bottle*. 8" x 6" x 6". Wheel-thrown and carved porcelain.



to the structure," she notes. "With my alterations, I'm adding more arches into the piece and thus more strength. I'd never be able to carve away so much of the form if I didn't have my arches in place." Once the piece is creased and on the soft side of leather-hard, she carves using a Kemper® #R3 tool, or pierces with a #11 X-Acto® blade.

Although she once-fires most pieces, forms that are deeply cut away need support while drying, and then are bisqued.

### Playing with Light and Shadow

McCurdy's pieces have a dynamic sense of energy, at once projecting movement and volume. Light and shadow play an important part. "I don't think of the porcelain as white, I consider it to be light and shadow," she says. "Different types of light and shadow give movement. For example, the shadow running across the curve of the alteration is a smooth shadow from light to dark. Where I've cut is a sharper shadow, and where I've carved away completely, it's a whole other shadow. I want my eye to move around like a vortex, swirling around the piece."

Movement in the pierced pieces comes from the interplay between exterior and interior. "Your eye focuses on the outside of the piece, but if you even think about the inside, your eye shifts focus to see the interior. That to me is a type of movement," says McCurdy. "That's why on all of my closed pieces I'm so interested in accessing the interior of the piece. It's not so much seeing through the piece, but being able to have a sense of the movement and simultaneously accessing the convex and the concave surfaces."

### Working with the Molecular Stages of the Clay

Process is what fascinates McCurdy. "I'm interested in how far I can push the clay in all of its molecular stages," she explains. "The first stages are a continuum as water evaporates and changes the properties of the clay. I interact with the piece at various stages. When the clay is plastic and the particles slip along the water, I can bend it. When it's leather-hard and I can't bend it any more, I begin to cut it, making sharper edges. I come back again when the piece is completely dry greenware, and I sand all my sharp edges. I almost have to burnish the piece because, with no glaze, nothing



*Cut Wheat Vessel. 10" x 12" x 12".*





*Cut Wheat Vessel #2. 12" x 12" x 12". Unglazed porcelain fired to cone 10.*

*"My biggest challenge is how to get the piece from greenware to vitrification. If I cut away too much of the strong arch support, the piece will collapse when it becomes almost plastic again at cone 10."*

— Jennifer McCurdy



can be hidden. Then the piece has to be fired into another molecular stage—the molten stage. My biggest challenge is how to get the piece from greenware to vitrification. If I cut away too much of the strong arch support, the piece will collapse when it becomes almost plastic again at cone 10."

Most potters give up control of the clay once it is in the kiln. Not McCurdy. "One of the things I've been doing recently is experimenting with directional firing," she says. "I sometimes fire pieces upside down on stilts. I know I'm going to get a lot of movement in the clay as it melts." This simple inversion changes the shape of the spheres that McCurdy has carved. "During the upside-down firing and melting process, the whole shape of the piece changes: the clay slumps downward, and the cut sphere uncoils like a Rene Magritte painting." And of course, because she doesn't use glaze, it's not a problem to position a piece over a kiln post cushioned with a little Kaowool™.

"I'd never be able to get these forms if I weren't working with that melting state during the firing," says McCurdy. "It's so exciting. In every kiln load, I want to push it further. It's a constant state of discovery of form."

"When clay is in a plastic stage, whether from water or fire, it can still move. It fascinates me." @

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Wave Candle Vase #2. 6" x 6" x 6".