

Paul Andrew Wandless



I'm a storyteller and I use my artwork as a vehicle through which my voice can be seen. As an artist, craftsman and writer, I want to engage the viewer both visually, intellectually, aesthetically, and technically. The more areas in which my work can interact with the viewer, the better it can connect with the viewer. My personal theories, concerns, and musings manifest as allegories, philosophical statements, or short stories, which then take form as visual narratives through figurative sculpture and prints.

In my sculptures and prints, I use ceramic processes, printmaking methods, sculptural techniques, glaze experimentation, and a variety of firing approaches. I pride myself on being a life-long learner and am always discovering new materials to broaden the visual vocabulary of my work. Every year I challenge myself to learn a new technique, process, or material. This allows my work to keep evolving and changing as I add more tools in my creative toolbox. Clay, printmaking, stone carving, mold making, leatherworking, metal-smithing, wood carving, drawing, and painting are all mediums that I currently use to make work. Each adds its own unique contribution to a piece. Each new process also makes me a more complete artist and craftsman, which is a joyous pursuit for me.

Writing has also been a constant and purposeful focus of my studio practice. My sketchbooks (visual journals) are a combination of drawings, notes, collage, photos, short stories, philosophies, myths, and musings. Over the years, my written ideas and my visual ideas began to naturally influence each other. I now embrace this confluence of works and words as my creative process. My workflow typically starts with me diving into the material and getting started. When reaching a point where I need to think about the next steps with the piece, I'll turn to my sketchbook and start investigating my aesthetic choices through writing. I'll advance the narrative or idea of the work-in-progress, with words on the page. This allows me to further immerse myself in the message I want to communicate. Writing gives me a deeper understanding of what I'm creating and this in turn allows me to be more nuanced, specific, and detailed in a piece. The words inform my hands of what to do next in the work.

1 Studio shot: painting black underglaze lines on plaster bats for new clay monoprints. Plaster bats, black underglaze, drawing tools, brushes, Photo credit: Paul Andrew Wandless  
 2 Studio shot: carving linocut of *Potters of Earth and Sea*, Linoleum, carving gouges, Photo credit: Paul Andrew Wandless



Stories, allegories, myths, fables and musings have long been subject matter for works of art that resonate well past the time period in which they were created. There's a natural and almost primal appetite to digest information this way. Written content forms an even stronger connection when words are brought to life through physical materials like clay, stone, wood, leather, metal, or paper. Ideas, tales, characters, events, and places in stories are easily seen in our minds' eyes. But when these words are physically manifested and come to life through artworks, our imaginations become something tangible and real. Works and words, when purposely combined, make for a more indelible experience.

Sometimes the workflow starts with a fully written story or idea. The writing will act as the resource for a piece or a series of pieces. If it's a story or idea I've been writing for a long time, it can lead to a group of works that flow from the same thematic approach. These are usually writing projects in the 60,000–100,000 word-count range. Short stories (5,000–10,000 words) or collections of individual musings (500–2,000 words) lead to individual works. The making of the work will now advance the narrative or idea being investigated and take it to new places creatively. The writing doesn't dictate what I make, it fuels what I make.

I enjoy working with different mediums, techniques, and processes to express my ideas in a more complete manner. Each medium and combination of fabrication methods offers a different vehicle to best serve my ideas. Each chosen material imbues the

natural qualities they possess into the piece, thus making tactile, emotional or psychological contributions that are unique to the material. For example, wood provides rich colors and patterned grains that add a natural warmth to a work, while stone brings a classical or timeless feel with its hard, yet smooth surface. I want the use and choice of material to be relevant, important and celebratory. I don't want to camouflage or hide the material. My intent is to purposefully integrate a material to add its inherent qualities while staying true to its own nature.

As much as I enjoy other mediums, my favorite material and primary medium is clay. The malleable, versatile, and the almost magical nature of clay allows me to mold, fabricate, sculpt, cast, or model it into whatever I can imagine with just my hands. Clay is always where my ideas start, and often it's all that's needed to make the piece. If a piece requires other materials to fully execute the idea, clay can easily incorporate other materials, techniques, and methods from other fields of art.

My clay prints and prints on paper are the most direct interpretations of my narratives and allegories. The pictorial format of prints allows me to use compositional geometry to embed multiple layers of my philosophy, symbology, and iconography as coded information. I want the viewer to decipher and interpret what's presented in the image or even see themselves in the narratives contained in the allegorical scenes.



Relief printing, screening and monoprinting are what I combine with ceramic materials and processes. I also take full advantage of test tiles to create custom underglaze palettes to paint my imagery. It's important to approach the use of color for clay the same as a painter would approach the use of color for a canvas. The visual aesthetic of a clay print is a unique look, only achievable through the combination of printmaking processes and ceramic materials, where the final result is a printed image on the surface of clay. The way line and image made with ceramic color sit on a clay surface is different from how line and image made with ink sit on paper. Since this unique look can't be replicated any other way, I consider clay printing to truly be its own category of printmaking.

My sculptural works bring my musings, allegories, or philosophical ideas into the real world as three-dimensional forms to physically interact with the viewer. Subject matter in a two-dimensional format can be powerful in how it can emotionally move you. But subject matter that exists three-dimensionally and commands its own space has a different kind of power. Sculpture

identity, history, attitude and personality on display for the viewer to contemplate and resolve. The figure is also where I usually incorporate other materials like stone, wood, metal, and leather. This helps to individualize the figure even more with a specific presence and aesthetic from the additional chosen materials.

With all my work, I hope to leave you, the viewer, with something to think about. You may be moved by a sense of commonality and understanding from what I'm sharing. Or be provoked and challenged to consider, reflect, and contemplate what I'm communicating. You may appreciate the pride I take in my hand-skills and craftsmanship of the work. Or you may just get lost or spirited away in the allegories, stories, characters, and places I'm introducing. You also may simply enjoy my aesthetic and sense the love and joy that went into the creation of the work. These experiences are just a few possibilities of the potential of my art and how it may engage with someone. Ultimately, I hope I've created something that will continue to resonate over time from the shared experience you had with my works and words.



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has the power to physically move you. The physical engagement of moving around a sculpture to investigate its surface and form creates a particular relationship of engagement. The viewer and the sculpture have an active space between them that needs to be negotiated, navigated, and shared.

As the artist, I use this activated space between the viewer and the work to tell my stories in a different visual format. My clay heads have scenes and images that flow around the piece, a scene at a time. I introduce the narrative in a gradual and deliberate manner. The story unfolds as you physically circumvent the piece and discover new visual information with each step. The large clay heads are where I take advantage of the continuous narrative format.

My clay figures occupy space in a different manner. Instead of presenting the viewer with a continuous narrative, the figures present a physical presence to reckon with as a statement, or a manifestation of a singular, resolute idea. The figure has an

**Paul Andrew Wandless** is a sculptor and printmaker. His sculptures and prints feature ceramic processes, printmaking methods, and a wide variety of sculptural techniques and mediums. He uses clay, printmaking, stone-carving, mold-making, leatherworking, metalsmithing, wood carving, and painting in combination or individually for creation of his narrative works.

**3 PAUL ANDREW WANDLESS, Hayden's Study, 2021.** Clay monprint Cast earthenware, underglaze, watercolor underglaze, leather, and wooden frame, 18.25" x 40.5" x 2". Photo credit: Paul Andrew Wandless

**4 Studio shot: Four steps of casting and pulling a clay monprint.** Pouring casting slip, top left. Removing clay walls from firmed up cast slab, top. Flipping the plaster bat with drywall board, bottom left. Remove plaster bat revealing clay print on drywall board, bottom right. Plaster bat with finished underglaze image, casting slip, drywall board, wax paper, fettling knife, Photo credit: Paul Andrew Wandless







Jing Huang

## The Unknown Scenic

If the distance between China and North America is 7723 km, then what is the distance between the previous me and the current me? If there are 12 hours between home and here, what time is it now?

I wrote these two questions in Chinese when I first arrived in Canada in 2013. I translate and continue to reflect on them still, to remind me of who I am, and how this journey began.

I was born and raised in a small tourist city, Guilin (桂林), in southern China. My journey in ceramics began as a young student in Jingdezhen, known in China as the “porcelain city” since the Song Dynasty. Intensive study there at Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute for four years helped me gain a range of skills rooted in an understanding of Chinese traditions in ceramics, such as the strict requirements of techniques, subtle aesthetics, and a high respect for tradition and history. In 2013, I brought my art practice abroad to Canada and later to the US in 2018. Integrating the complexity of North American culture and people through hands-on and academic study and residencies shaped new aspects of my personality and mindset, and further influenced how I make my work. In North America, not many others shared my background—I had both negative and positive experiences living in Toronto, Ontario; and Alfred, New York, as a Chinese woman.

I’ve been asked not to speak my native language while talking with my Chinese friend in a restaurant; but I’ve also been encouraged to speak up and add my diverse experiences to discussions. Over time, I began to understand that my background and identity can bring a fresh voice to the community, and I should not suppress it. My figurative works made between 2013 and 2018 were inspired

by the feelings of living in an unfamiliar landscape, meeting different people and my immersion in new cultures.

This is my ninth year living away from my country. Nine years could be short. It is too short to be able to adapt myself to the environment here. Nine years could also be long. It is long enough to nearly get lost in the city where I grew up. Last time I went home to Guilin and visited my family, everything looked different and obscure compared to my memories of people and places. My boundaries are blurring—I am questioning what is ‘new’ and ‘unfamiliar’ to me. Old, new, familiar, unfamiliar, I am constantly searching for myself somewhere in between.

Amid the dislocation and ambiguity of being neither here nor there, I anchor myself by tracing the liminal space between my ‘past’ and ‘present.’ I explore nature, identity, sense of place, and cultural displacement. Nature continuously changes. It moves, as I have moved. Mountains, clouds, and rivers appear frequently in my work. These three elements coalescing from memories of my hometown, also speak of different relationships to place. Mountains are distinctive of certain locations. Clouds, however, are the same even though I see them from different parts of the globe. Rivers flow down the hill in response to the topography and gravity. Recalling and abstracting these elements in my memory gives me the ability to interpret, imagine, and graft them together into a poetic ceramic moment.

I pull elements from my past, and rebuild them in the present. Instead of the linear way of making a sculpture from a sketch, design,



1 JING HUANG, *Workshop with Advanced Ceramics class at UNC Charlotte, 2022*. Photo credit: ChengOu Yu  
2 JING HUANG, *Loop #5, 2022*. Glazed stoneware, 15.5" x 16" x 13". Photo credit: Jing Huang

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or prototype, I handbuild my work part by part without a blueprint, and assemble them together once I have plenty of components. For a sculpture that needs to stand upright, it is my intention to build it horizontally from the beginning in order to achieve an unknown structure. In this case, the greenware is usually too fragile to move; therefore I can only find its place through the completion of the process and reorientation. I approach this system as a way to rethink and rediscover my past in order to be able to create new meaning, and to make things that move beyond my imagination.

I reference the Chinese scholar's rock, inspired by memories of my father gathering strange stones while hiking. Displayed in our tea room or living room, I thought they were simply souvenirs from my dad's trips. Later, I realized that his collection of "respected stones" reflected a traditional practice. During the Song dynasty, the

Chinese literati took a piece of rock from nature as a representation of the actual landscape, to observe and experience, to display and appreciate in their studios. Their wonder mirrors my feelings and early memories of my hometown's landscape, my culture and tradition. When I was young, my parents taught me that we should navigate our life out of detours and dead ends. In their eyes, the key to reaching the destination or being successful in

life or career, is efficiency. I have started to question

this point of view. Stepping away from one's origins can intensify focus. Until I moved from home, I had little conscious appreciation of my environment. This natural appreciation of my past and my own culture is something I only developed through a long-term departure and quite a bit of wandering. There was no efficient shortcut.

My recent body of work, the *Loop* series, is based on this idea of an amorphous shape that indicates no beginning nor end, but instead places emphasis on the winding path itself. Turning around, up and down, my life experiences accumulate into a process of change and discovery. For some destinations, you can only arrive by making a detour.

The karst limestone mountains from my hometown shrink down to a rock form, embellished with rivers, and clouds, becoming the basic building block for me to create a sense of place. My work and explorations spring from my culture and Chinese heritage, but develop under the influence of being caught in the spaces among different surroundings, languages, and cultures. Unlike the traditional manner of displaying the scholar's rock on top of a wooden base or table, my forms might be installed against a wall, on an architectural platform, with a found object, or on a metal frame. Each sculpture offers an 'environment.' In *Given*, the large ceramic rock can only stand with the support of its surroundings. A tiny part of the rock attached to the wall, together with the pedestal, balances the rock in this idiosyncratic corner.

Reminiscent of my early experiences practicing traditional Chinese painting in childhood, I use a soft color palette and velvety glaze surfaces to mimic the Chinese pigment: azure

blue (天青蓝), gamboge (藤黄), malachite (石绿), and ochre (赭石), etc. Inspired by the



ways of using color in Chinese painting such as color washes, wet underpainting and layers of color, my work also comprises multiple layers of ceramic materials. I fire my sculptures suspended on stilts, letting glazes run and pool with gravity and form, inviting a sense of nature and flow into the work.

During the unconventional and unpredictable processes of making, firing, and installing, the position of my work shifts and changes to contribute new gestures and unique scenery. Unlike languages, art is a universal vehicle that allows me to express myself without barriers. My diasporic experience, of moving from China to travel and live in different cultures, has taught me how the power of interacting in diverse communities can affect an individual's growth, values, mindset, and creativity. Diversity and inclusion, to me, are not just things to be theorized about, but have been central to my life and art practice. As an artist, I strive to use my work to generate hope, power, and meaningful conversations for other artists who are facing the same challenges or who share similar experiences. In 2021, facing increased awareness of social tension, violence, injustice, and Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) hate, I co-curated an exhibition titled *Here, There; Now, Then: In Between Journeys* that brings together nine artists inspired by their cross-cultural understanding and interpretation between the cultures of China and the US. Acknowledging our lives and histories, we foregrounded new and evolving voices, a transformed power, and the potential for integration of cultures in the entire ceramic community. Working at this difficult time in history has given me the opportunity to learn to respect and understand others I meet in life, as well as myself. As a perpetual shifter and seeker, I'm drawn to explore environments, 'landscapes' and new 'contexts' for myself to be and the work to become. I consider my work to be neither a representation of my hometown nor the view of any specific location; it is a process of

seeking a deeper understanding of my identity and experience in the world. No matter if the scenery echoes my past or present, East or West—in the transitional space of my work, landscapes co-exist.

Born in Guilin, China, **Jing Huang** is a ceramic artist currently living and working in Charlotte, North Carolina. She earned degrees from Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute (2012), Sheridan College (2015), and Alfred University (2020). Huang has lectured, curated exhibitions, conducted workshops, and exhibited extensively throughout the US, Canada, China, and the UK.



3 JING HUANG. *Given*, 2019. Glazed stoneware, painted MDF board, 44" x 16" x 30". Photo credit: Jing Huang

4 JING HUANG. *Installation Image of Liminal Exhibition*, 2022. Glazed stoneware. Dimensions variable. Photo credit: Jing Huang

Katie Bosley Sabin

## Carving and Piercing Dynamic Surfaces

I have always been drawn to skillfully handcrafted objects. One of the reasons I value these objects is for the immense time and effort poured into the making process. In my work, I combine dynamic forms and dimensional surfaces to create porcelain vessels that are striking at first glance and reward further inspection. Carefully repeated pierced patterns and hand-carved components communicate my care for the object, asking the viewer for the same care in return.

enjoy the process of carving porcelain. I find working reductively instinctual and incredibly satisfying.

Many of my pieces start on the wheel, and others are handbuilt. Forms I carve and pierce have walls anywhere from ¼–¾ inch thick. Carving and piercing successfully starts with having the right tools. I use a variety of different loop tools for carving but especially rely on my P-1 Curved V Tip Carving Tool from DiamondCore Tools. When it comes to piercing, the



1 Planning my design to scale on paper using a grid 2. With a matching grid on the platter, I then trace repeated shapes using paper templates

My architectural vessels are constructed with an emphasis on symmetry and structure. Instead of applying 2-D decoration to a prepared form, 3-D patterns and structures are embedded into the clay through carving and piercing, blurring the line between surface and form. These designs are often continuous, repeated on the backs and fronts of bowls or platters, providing a sense that the pattern has transformed into a 3-D object.

Like many ceramicists, my process gives significant content to my work. It's not just about what I make, it's also about how I make it. I currently choose to make my highly-detailed vessels without the use of molds. For me, precision takes on added significance because it is achieved skillfully by hand each time. It's important to me that my work communicates an investment of time in the making process and my connection, as the maker, with each object I create. I also work this way simply because I

size and stiffness of a knife will affect how it functions. Having two to three different knives in my tool kit allows me the nuanced control necessary when piercing a wide range of porcelain forms.

Much of my carving is done in stages, progressing from one tool to another, or following up behind a loop tool with a sponge (to soften) or metal rib (to sharpen). I also make sure to bevel or soften the edges of pierced components. For my work, I prefer a finished look that conceals the mark of the tool. In this way, I work to make objects that are labor-intensive, but also seemingly effortless in their finished state. This dichotomy has been part of my approach to making for as long as I can remember.

In both form and surface, symmetry is ever present in my work. Satisfying order and patterns are used to entice and mesmerize. Precise repetition is also employed as a mark of intention; little or

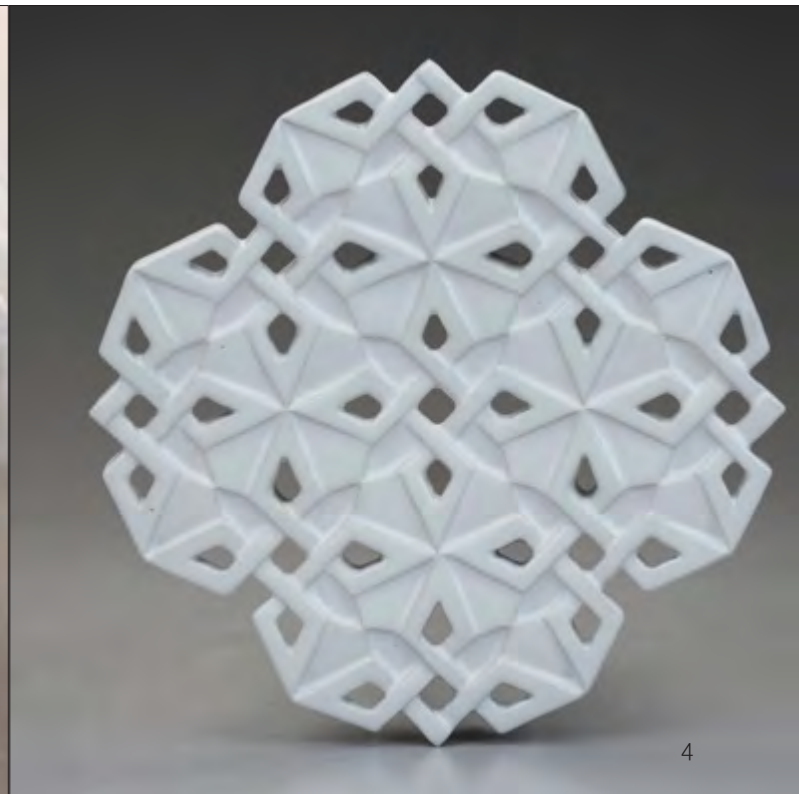


nothing is left to chance. The medium is controlled; all marks are deliberate. Inspiration for surface designs comes from patterns I find captivating. This can include anything from dimensional folded paper or carved stone details in gothic architecture to the vibration of patterns in Islamic tile work.

To create complex designs with accuracy, such as the designs seen in my *Pierced Lattice Platter*, I draw my design to scale on paper using a grid first. Next, I draw a matching grid on

process I work from photos whenever possible and employ the mark-up editing feature on my phone to “look” at the piece and make decisions without having to unwrap it from the protective layers of plastic. On pieces I plan to both carve and pierce, I always carve first, since piercing exposes more surface area and rapidly increases how quickly the clay dries.

When it comes time to dry porcelain work, slow and even is key. I begin by uncovering finished pieces for one to two hours at a



3 Carving and piercing progress on *Pierced Lattice Platter*, 2021 4 **KATIE BOSLEY SABIN** *Pierced Lattice Platter*, 2021 Porcelain 10" x 10" x 2" Photo credit: Katie Bosley Sabin

the platter and use paper stencils to trace repeated shapes in their designated spaces. All lines are drawn with a blunt metal tool before running a loop tool or blade through the clay. To repeat components accurately, I also take advantage of muscle memory whenever possible. I always carve one repeated element throughout the piece, then the next, and begin piercing on my final pass. This method has the bonus of extending the leather-hard stage as I move around the piece, uncovering only the section I am actively working on.

I often have to keep my porcelain work leather-hard for days or weeks at a time. While working, I keep my spray bottle close and, between studio sessions, work is wrapped in a continuous sheet of plastic placed both under and over the object. This secures the piece in a humid bubble, keeping the clay not just wet, but *evenly* wet. For design decisions that have to be made mid-

time, slowly increasing the length of time over the span of a week or so until the piece is consistently bone-dry. To promote even drying I place work in a space protected from drafts, rotate and flip the piece regularly, and selectively cover edges if necessary. Pieces are placed on drywall boards which are regularly changed out to encourage a slow pull of moisture from the base as well. If a protruding portion is at an especially high risk of drying quicker, I may even apply wax resist to selectively slow the drying.

**Katie Bosley Sabin** is an artist and educator originally from Florida and currently living in Boston, Massachusetts. She earned her MFA from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and BFA from the University of Florida. Katie has completed residencies at the Archie Bray, Mudflat Studios, and Northern Clay Center.

# PANEL: THE BLACK CLAY BODY

Alecia Dawn Young, William Henry Jackson III, Marcè Nixon-Washington, Deavron Dailey, Janet Watkins

## Introduction by Alecia Dawn Young

Art is an archive of humanity and an expression of our lived experiences. Ceramics, with forms fired into permanent artifacts to be discovered lifetimes from now, creates an extended narrative of those lived experiences and, by extension, our communal values. The ceramic objects we interact with every day, like sculptural public art forms dedicated to feelings of hope, or functional coffee mugs that support morning routines, reflect the value we place on ceramic art in our daily lives. In this vein, what does it look like for our personal narratives to be celebrated in these routine objects? How does it feel for our cultural identities to be reflected in, or go unseen within, our experiences with everyday artifacts like ceramics?

## A narrative of Black artists

In the US, the history of ceramic art and the narratives of Black artists reflect the tension and struggle analogous to the travail of Black communities since America's inception. Black ceramic artists have always existed. Though, the recognition of Black ceramicists and the opportunities for Black artists to thrive have been, at times, in direct opposition to the dominant normative culture of white artistry. Examples can be seen in Afro-Colonoware, a genre of under-documented colonial functional vessels created by enslaved Africans (Chodoronek). These works, which have garnered appreciation from the ceramics field only recently, are examples of mainstream audiences benefiting from the labor of Black artisans while muting their contributions to the craft. Another illustration includes the present day family heirlooms of ceramic mammy jars, reflecting a perspective that devalues Black women as obedient submissive caricatures (Brown). With this historical record in mind, accurate representation of Black artists and their lived experiences must be intentional and, I emphasize, is only accurate from a first-person narrative.



MARCÈ NIXON-WASHINGTON, *BLACK 3*, 2021, Coil built, room temperature glaze, graphite, 17" x 10" x 10"

## The importance of racialized affinity spaces.

One response to this narrative is the creation of Black affinity spaces for artists to gather and build community. The Union Projects BIPOC Collaborative studio does just that, making space for artists of color to unpack and build their future narratives in clay. BIPOC affinity spaces may:

- **Decrease isolation and increase a sense of belonging**

Shared affinity spaces can create a sense of community. Fine ceramic art from Black artists can be seen as exotic or exceptional, a microaggression and product of existing in white spaces. The invitation to access a ceramic studio, and a private space to work, suggests a feeling of belonging. It creates space for Black artists to gather, to build a sense of community, and to experience each other's art as normative. There is a potential to connect about individual experiences as Black artists and to combat racial battle fatigue (Mosley) that may occur among white critics, galleries, leaders, and students.

- **Increase retention in the ceramic field**

Access to this collaborative space also increases the likelihood that artists will stay and work in the ceramics field. Creatives are often multidisciplinary and work in many mediums even if their CV says otherwise. When a person doesn't have access to their specific craft, like during the COVID-19 shut down, you will find artists pivoting to different mediums that can sustain their creative energy. The sense of community and access to quality materials and equipment may increase the likelihood that artists will stay to contribute to the ceramic field. Their contributions will support diversity in the field, create mirrors (Bishop) for other artists to be inspired, and enhance an understanding of the broader life experiences that are present in clay.

- **Increase collaboration between artists**

As artists work and commune in close proximity to one another there are more organic opportunities to collaborate. This may occur in general creative spaces where artists work closely together. Within a racialized affinity group, though, collaboration may provide space for creative problem solving as both artists navigate their identities through their art. Consequently, an adverse effect of racialized affinity spaces:

- **May inadvertently create tokenism within the organization**

Although there are many benefits to racialized affinity spaces, tokenism, the invitation to support marginalized groups to primarily symbolize equity, can be an unintentional byproduct of this group's formation. Each artist clearly benefits from access to the space. However, if participation isn't reflected in the composition of an organization's leadership, board, or strategic plan, social change is only surface level.

## Black affinity spaces

The broader discussion, *Black Clay Bodies: Cultivating Black Creatives*, is a conversation between five Black ceramic artists from the Union Project of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Four of these artists, Janet Watkins, Deavron Dailey, Marcè Nixon-Washington, and William Henry Jackson III, are members of the Union Project's BIPOC Collaborative Studio. This initiative provides access to studio space and equipment at a subsidized rate to its BIPOC participants. This offering of lived experiences highlights the value in controlling the narrative beyond normative culture and the white gaze. It exists apart from the deficit view of Black artists as tokenized charitable endeavors and



# PANEL: THE BLACK CLAY BODY

affirms equitable community and institutional practices that have supported their ascension in the field.

## Artist Reflections

### Deavron Dailey

#### Navigating the field as a clay professional

Public art adds beauty and distinction to communities. To-date I have created nearly 10 medium/large-scale public artworks and installations. Each finished piece stimulates dialogue, creates new relationships, and contributes to social consciousness. Ceramics adds a new level of interest when used in the creation of public art, and has been my preferred choice of artistic media when it is a feasible option related to a project. The largest piece I have created thus far is titled "The Arms of East Liberty." It is an 8' x 16' hand-made ceramic tile painting that is made of 226 slabs of clay in a stainless steel grid. Creating work at this scale requires creative relationships with ceramic art production spaces that are able to facilitate the large volume of artwork I create. As the scale of my artwork has grown I have been fortunate to be connected with ceramic studios that have been excited to share their ceramic resources so that I may continue to bring ceramic art to the public realm. These types of projects can enlighten someone to the many possibilities and applications that ceramics can have.

I appreciate my relationships with key professionals and spaces in the ceramic arts. These relationships are supportive as we, as Black people, add beauty to our communities and provide resources in the ceramic arts for other Black artists. Many Black people may feel ceramics is an artform of the privileged and would not provide a viable living as they express themselves through the artform. I intend to change that by continuing to show examples of a sustainable career through ceramic artwork commissions, ceramic public art, and the mass production of ceramic products. By connecting with

the resources accumulated through my affiliation with ceramic art production spaces I am able to identify and leverage the inclusion of more Black voices in the ceramic arts.

### Janet Watkins

#### Creating art that looks like you

I've always been drawn to art and interior design, even as a young child. As a child, I often wondered why none of the beautiful oil paintings of children in beautiful, floral gardens and beautiful clothes ever looked like me or anyone I knew. They were often images of Asian or white people. As I got older I began to purchase African art. I still did not feel the art completely represented me or my family. This all changed for me once I discovered and began to experiment with clay. I enjoy creating sculptural pieces with full, beautiful lips and textured hair, working with iron oxide to get the perfect shades and skin tones. Today I have an eclectic mix of art in my home which includes abstract oil and acrylic canvases, watercolors, and a few special pieces which I have created for my home. I've grown to surround myself with art that looks like me.

### Marcè Nixon-Washington

#### Making space for Black ceramicists

Advocacy and mentorship have been some of the most important support systems for my growth as a Black artist. My experiences at community arts spaces such as the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild and Art Excursions Unlimited have given me the opportunity to develop my craft as a professional artist. As a Black woman entering ceramic spaces there's an assumption that I lack experience. It has taken my relationships with community leaders and the development of social proof for my presence to be taken seriously. It's important for Black artists to lead and for others to follow the lead of Black organizations.





Supporting arts organizations built by Black people like The Oya Studio and Kaabo Clay Collective by Osa Atoe is one way to rebuild, reclaim, and reform the narrative of Black artists in clay.

### William Henry Jackson III Creating work that cultivates joys

My work is like an instrumental track I heard from DJ Chicken George. He is a Black DJ who creatively utilized multiple layers in the track. He composed the track with Japanese stringed instruments, a hip-hop beat, and a nostalgic voice-over from the past. It was a creative multicultural symphony. This is how I express the joy in my art. My art draws from graffiti that emerged from the Black community. My work also draws on Chinese and Japanese art and culture. This variety in theme expresses the content of my work. It is important for the viewer to observe that the roots of my work flow from a Black mind, but are intended to draw in a larger conversation with other cultures. The conversation, at large, shares an appreciation for the richness and diversity we have.

### A future narrative

New and emerging Black clay students, and marginalized groups in general, should be able to see mirrors of themselves in the ceramics field as an invitation of belonging. Likewise, non-Black creatives should be able to appreciate the variety of life experiences that are present in the craft and reject a limiting culture that centers a singular view (Bishop). This notion occurs beyond the expectation that Black art might look a particular way, but only that it is made from a particular life experience that is unique to Black people. Social justice in ceramics envisions a world where multiple lineages and experiences are acceptable. It dismisses Black art in white spaces as exotic, but a norm.

Unless art leaders are deliberately anti-racist through practices that prioritize Black clay artists, this resource-driven field will continue to reflect the group with the most resources. To support this vision towards equity, Black artists will continue to narrate their own stories with each account etched, carved, coiled, thrown, and molded through clay.

### About the Union Project

Union Project is your community arts center—strengthening the stability of Pittsburgh's neighborhoods and residents. The historic building provides an affordable, safe, and welcoming home to community builders, creative entrepreneurs, artists, nonprofits, and small businesses.

Together with the support of community members, Union Project has made space for tens of thousands of diverse people to connect, create, and celebrate.

Authors of this article are members of the Union Project's community ceramic studio. Janet Watkins, Deavron Dailey, Marcè Nixon-Washington and William Henry Jackson III, in particular, are members of the Union Project's BIPOC Collaborative Studio.

Alecia Dawn Young is an artist and educator who believes the creative process is an invitation to heal. She is the founder of YOGAMOTIF, a creative wellness yoga studio based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Young holds a BFA from Alfred University, Master of Arts Management from Carnegie Mellon University, and is a PhD student at the University of Pittsburgh.

Deavron "The Urban Explorer" Dailey is a mixed-media artist from Detroit, Michigan, living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As a recurring theme of his work, he explores the comparisons of these two industrial cities, with special interest given to landscape differences and times of economic hardship.

Janet Watkins is a self-taught artist who began working in ceramics after she retired from a 30-year career at the Federal Reserve Bank. She is a member of Women of Visions Organization, a collective of Black women in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, said to be the longest running group of Black women artists in the country. She creates whimsical hand-built pieces in earthenware, stoneware, porcelain, mosaic, and glass.

Marcè Nixon-Washington is a multidisciplinary artist based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She earned her BFA from West Virginia University with a focus in Africana Studies. Marcè investigates ceramics as an archival material to permanentize personal and cultural history.

William Henry Jackson III is a Pittsburgh based artist. He went to Edinboro University of Pennsylvania to study Graphic Design and Ceramics. He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2008. After his graduation, he became a member of the Union Project's BIPOC Collaborative Studio in the East End area of Pittsburgh.

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1 WILLIAM HENRY JACKSON III, *Large and Small SciFi Teapots*, 2020, Slip cast 710 slip, airbrushed underglazes Cone 6 oxidation, decals, Large: 7.5" x 7.5" x 13", Small: 3.5" x 3.5" x 6.5"  
2 JANET WATKINS, Janet Watkins standing beside her artwork, *Untitled*, Earthenware, slab construction, Cone 05, with mixed media (telephone wire), 36" x 27" x 5"



# LECTURE: REVIVING MUYSCA METALLURGY IN

Mario A Mutis R

## Contextual History: ¡Pare oreja!

As you may already know, the global voice of the Americas has been represented mostly, if not always, by a dominant westernized society. Since the time of the Spanish arrival, the consequence of such an encounter as it was in 1492, left many scars on the land and the people, both physical and psychological. Since then, the indigenous people of the Americas have shown resilience and resistance to disappearing physically, spiritually, and mentally.

Dreadfully, colonialism has a strong hold on the narrative of our lives. The Colombian people see it, hear it, feel it, and without thinking, perpetuate it. Standards of beauty, the practice of religion, the role of art in society, and how we perceive people's actions to classify them as either backward or progressive are all funneled through the lens of the colonial mind. In Colombia, as well as most of the Americas, Western ideologies and practices have been the norm for hundreds of years. This has led to the misconception that indigenous people and their cultures are either stagnant in time or frozen in the mystical mythology of the noble savage.

I contend that history does not follow a straight line, but is a large tapestry of interwoven threads, overlapping designs, complex craftsmanship and, most importantly, a work in progress.

The importance of pursuing this artistic project has directly to do with combating the ill legacies we inherited from the past, such as the result of King Charles III of Spain banning the practice of our native language in the year 1770. Two hundred and twenty-one years later this ban was lifted in the new Colombian Constitution of 1991. The rewriting of the constitution now gave indigenous people autonomous rights to education, religion, and government. Two years after I was born, my native language became legal. Due to this ban lasting more than two centuries, my *Muysca*<sup>1</sup> language had become officially extinct according to scholars, books and, of course, Wikipedia. However, the language remains alive within us, in our names, the territory we live in, and the memory of our elders. *Muyscubun*<sup>2</sup> means the *language of people*, it is not only the language that we are rebuilding and maintaining orally but a worldview, and the record of our presence.

## The Project ¡Manos a la obra!

I view language as transcending the realm of words, and manifesting into materiality, into clay, into wood, into gold. The practice of my *Muysca* visual language becomes essential to my existence. As an artist and educator, I see the theoretical and the practical as important elements of my work. If these elements are considered truthfully, with passion, and dedication, one can create effective change in society. The case being made is my contribution to bringing a metal casting process native to Colombia, back to our territory, for us to use, and reclaim.

My adventure with this casting technique began in 2015, alongside a great friend, Silvestre Reyes Hernandez, a Nahuatl native from Mexico. He and I would meet up on occasions to play music, eat, and engage in conversations about art and history. It was on one of these days that he and I realized that, like many before us, we too had the ability to exit the somber feelings of our historic past and enter a river of joy through experimentation and artistic expression. Hernandez, as a silversmith, had the knowledge of metals, and I, as a ceramicist, had the knowledge of clay. We put our minds and hearts together and began



MARIO A MUTIS R, *Kiln in use, temperature shown at 2000°F*, 2018, Stoneware, underglazes, and clay slips, 13" x 10" x 10"

experimenting based on ill-informed Spanish accounts, pictures, oral histories, and our creativity.

I began by designing and making clay kilns using a stoneware-like clay body. These kilns were small, about 12" tall and 8" wide, and behaved similarly to a traditional downdraft kiln. The process consisted of making a beeswax sculpture using candles and metal tools to shape the material. Attaching wax gates, vents, and a funnel guided the molten metal to the pieces. To make the molds, a mixture of stoneware clay body with charcoal guaranteed a successful firing. After setting up the kiln by placing the mold with the metal inside it, we fired up the kiln by blowing air with our lungs inside a bed of hot charcoal. Once the mold reached 2100°F and the metal flowed down into the mold, we removed it from the kiln to cool down. Lastly, once it was below 300°F, we'd break the mold and reveal the final product.

We experimented with different styles of kilns and clay bodies, each presenting obstacles as well as paths toward success. Mold making now became another reason for us to gather. After he and I made some wax figurines, we'd meet at my home to test various clay recipes to use for the molds. We failed countless times, yet we persisted, and each failure taught us something new. Oddly enough we looked forward to failure. It was until slowly we became more and more aware of the materials, and the process. Sixteen months or so went by and I continued working on this process on my own, daily life made it difficult for us to meet up. After years of experimentation, I decided to focus on a specific type of work related to my culture. The process of reviving this casting technique to me was one element of the bigger picture. I wanted ultimately to have this process create works of art, *Tunjos*<sup>3</sup>, and present them with their proper context, as was always intended.

In the winter of 2021, while home in Colombia, I met La Gueba<sup>4</sup> del Jhon Rojas. Rojas and I became friends through shared



Blowing air into the kiln to reach the proper temperature. Photo credit: Jhon "La Gueba del Jhon" Rojas

## Without clay, this project wouldn't have happened. Without clay, our stories aren't told. Without clay, gold can't flow.

histories, interests, and the fact that we both wanted to contribute to our Muysca communities. Rojas is the Leader of Education at the Indigenous Muysca Community of Sesquilé, a town in the department of Cundinamarca, Colombia, mostly known for the legend of "El Dorado." I proposed to Rojas that I wanted to bring this casting process back to the territory for all of us to use. I wanted the process to come home after centuries of wandering through the stories of some and the minds of many. I wanted to bring back something we all lost and, more importantly, I wanted to share this knowledge with those who felt connected to it. We have no memory of when we lost this technique, however, we do know that immediately upon Spanish arrival in the region, the production of traditional Muysca metal works drastically stopped. We have evidence of this in the museums that today hold much of our cultural heritage. Ironically, it is at one of these museums where a large part of my understanding of this casting process evolved, not because of what was written on the labels, but because of what the objects revealed.

With the Indigenous Muysca Community of Sesquilé on board, we decided that a five-day workshop from 6:00–10:00 p.m. would be sufficient to learn the casting process and to make some pieces ourselves. The effort that everyone made was incredible. Most of the community came to the workshops to learn about our history. Most made the sacrifice of coming after a long day of work to a cold, dimly-lit room in 40° weather. This willingness to give up their resting time so they could learn this process spoke to the desire to regain this lost knowledge. We shared stories, gathered as a community in ceremonies, ate the warmest food we could get our hands on, and each night left the workshop with beeswax and clay under our fingernails.

On July 28th, 2022, for the first time in almost 500 years, we, the Indigenous *Muyscas* of Colombia, created *Tunjos* using a traditional metal casting technique. We engaged in a practice that hadn't been seen, felt, or heard of in centuries. Words fail to communicate the pride, joy, and sense of empowerment we all felt.

To us, this specific technique of casting has changed how we create artworks and how we engage with the world of art. Because now, our material culture can continue to grow in our own language and tell our stories. Reviving *Muysca* metallurgy empowered us by helping us to regain a visual language we lost, and to create works that transcend the context of museums and exhibitions to function in the realm of our traditional relationships with people and the world around us. Our ancestors invented this process, it was taken from them due to ethnocide, but today, we make them proud.

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### Endnotes:

1. Muysca: Known as Muisca or Mhuysqa, are indigenous people of Colombia. Muysca translates to *people*.
2. Muyscubun: The language of the Muysca. Translates to the tongue of people.
3. Tunjo: Gold, gold alloy, copper or silver figures made with the intention of becoming offerings.
4. La Gueba: In Spanish this words refers to someone dumb, or less intelligent. It is a word often used as an insult that was recontextualized from its original meaning. In Muyscubun, Gueba means a student. Like many things about our culture the Spanish changed the context of our language to make us feel more ashamed of using it.