Yes. She. Can.

Rebecca Sive

“Contemplating the status of women in the craft world, particularly ceramics, impels one to encourage a strong stand in all areas in which women are striving for equal rights and status with men.”

“In an equipment-intensive field, women run into discrimination based on perceived physical limitations and old ideas about what is ‘feminine.’ This line of thinking determines that gas kilns are not feminine, and that ‘anyone who can’t lift a hundred pound bag of clay will never get this job’ (a verbatim quote to me by the chair of a search committee for a ceramics job for which I had applied—I didn’t land the job, nor did any other female).”

Gail Kendall, Studio Potter, Volume 20, No. 1, 1991

When I was invited to lead this NCECA 2019 conference panel, Yes. She. Can., I renewed my discussions with others—both within the ceramics community and without—about the #MeToo movement and its significance. Since I am an historian of American social and political history and an organizer of political movements myself (as well as an avid ceramics collector), these discussions were framed by my understanding that 2019 is a unique year in American history in the context of female–male relations.

In 2019, gender and power dynamics will play out as they never have before, affecting each of us living in the United States as never before. For, this year, for the first time in US history, it appears likely (as I write this essay in December 2018) that several women will seek the major political party nomination for President of the United States (POTUS), perhaps even of both of those parties. These women will follow in the footsteps of other courageous women who preceded them, including, in 2016, Hillary Clinton, the first woman POTUS candidate nominated by a major political party. In 1972, Shirley Chisholm, the first African-American woman Member of Congress, was also the first African-American to seek a major political party presidential nomination and to have her name placed in nomination (by the Democratic Party). In 1964, the name of Margaret Chase Smith, Republican US senator, was placed in nomination at the Republican convention. And, way back in the day, there was Victoria Woodhull, a “free love advocate,” who, in 1872, ran for the presidency on the ticket of the Equal Rights Party (with Frederick Douglass as her vice-presidential running mate).

Clearly, there is precedent for the women, POTUS-candidate class of 2019, several of whose likely members have a chance not only of securing the nomination, but of winning the presidency. Consequently, this circumstance is not only of importance to political junkies, political science professors, or history buffs. It is, instead, of singular importance to every man, woman, and child in our nation (citizen or not). Consequently, I believe that every person in the ceramics world ought to consider what the duties of POTUS actually are, and then take that eminently-relevant occasion to think about how this job description relates to her or his daily experience of executives in the ceramics world. For, it does, deeply. (Keep reading.)

What does POTUS do? In ordinary times, POTUS:

- embodies US national values for the rest of the world;
- proclaims the beliefs our nation was founded on; and
- typifies personal behavior to emulate.

- At the same time as POTUS undertakes these executive, administrative duties, she:
  - decides how to spend trillions of dollars;
  - appoints thousands of people to positions of influence and decision-making; and
  - makes decisions (unilaterally), through the mechanism of executive orders.

Does the fact that the current POTUS is seemingly unable or unwilling to personify the values expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, or to prudently undertake the duties of POTUS as defined in the Constitution, make the reality of this centuries-long institutionalized sex discrimination, i.e., no woman has ever been POTUS, particularly invidious? Yes. Consider his victory—that of a supremely unqualified, undisciplined man over a supremely qualified and focused woman.

Is the fact that there has been no woman POTUS a result of the seeming reality that the men who have run the US since its inception have not believed a woman POTUS is desirable? I say “yes.” For, had they thought otherwise, it would not have taken almost 150 years for American women to attain federal suffrage, the cornerstone prerequisite to running for the presidency.

Now, analogize: extrapolate from POTUS’s job description to consider the executive, administrative powers possessed by the predominantly male bosses within the ceramics world. When you do so, consider this: are their duties all that different from those of POTUS, or is this matter of gender-derived executive power a matter of dimension but not of kind?

Think about your university or college art department. Think about your local arts center, or museum, or ceramics residency program. Think about the associations of professionals in ceramics and the arts in which you participate. Who runs most of these institutions? Who possesses the executive responsibilities akin to POTUS’s? What unique administrative, policy-making, political, and financial decision-making powers do these bosses wield? What messages do they choose to articulate and share via their decisions about the art they select to exhibit or sell, and the people they hire? Whose values and goals do they articulate to aspiring ceramists? Whom do they choose to help them govern? What deleterious personal behaviors do (too many of them) feel free to engage in, with impunity?

Think about the number of women ceramics professors, versus male ceramics professors, who have tenure. Think about this cumulatively, over the time you have been teaching in the field. Think about the number of women professors in your department, who could seek to lead it. (That likely can’t include adjuncts or others on short-term contracts.) Think about the proportion of male, versus female, winners of awards, fellowships, and residencies you and your female colleagues have applied for. Think about the women potters you know who have ceased to engage institutionally. Perhaps, they now pursue a solo studio practice. Perhaps, they now live and work out in the country, far removed from the invidious daily sexism of male-run ceramics institutions.

I think that this gender-based, institutionalized sexism has little to do with sexuality and everything to do with the imbalance of power that generally exists in our culture between men and...
PATTI WARASHINA A Pussy in Disguise (27"x16.5"x16.5") low-fire clay, underglaze, glaze, mixed media, 2017
The Blue of the Distance
(20”x12”x6”) ceramics and synthetic hair, 2018

MOLLY ALLEN
women. This is then exacerbated by the continuing prevalence of men in executive positions in places where women labor and are, therefore, beholden to male bosses.

Simultaneously, the ceramics world intertwines many professional and personal experiences. Sadly, and for instance, an experience of sexual harassment or of sexual assault can’t be separated from the institutional setting in which it likely occurred; one which may promulgate sexist personnel policies or fail to seriously discipline sexual harassment. It’s also nigh on impossible to separate the sexist messages, and the underlying values these messages advance — promulgated by some male ceramists in the personal contexts in which they occur; for example, in social media or in the home — from the professional contexts in which these men work. And too few leave their discriminatory or abusive personal behaviors at the job site door.

In an important book, *Against Our Will*, published in 1975, writer Susan Brownmiller defined the possibility of rape as “a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.” Not as a matter of an uncontrollable urge to have sex. Reviewing the book for *The New York Times*, Mary Ellen Gale wrote that *Against Our Will* deserves a place on the shelf next to those rare books about social problems which force us to make connections we have too long evaded, and change the way we feel about what we know.” Notably for today’s women ceramists, the publication of *Against Our Will* fostered beneficial changes in laws about rape, just as today’s activists continue to seek additional changes in laws governing sexual assault.

In 1991, Gail Kendall, now a distinguished ceramist and retired professor but then a young woman beginning her ceramics career, wrote an article for *Studio Potter* in which she summarized the findings of a colleague about the professional circumstances in which women artists, including ceramists, find themselves: “In all categories in which women participate in the art world, from grant applications to visuals artists in art textbooks, listings in art magazines, and exhibition opportunities, they are underrepresented.... When change has occurred it is in response to protests or when pressure is brought to bear on sensitive [institutions]...”

Thus, the antecedents of the #MeToo movement were born.

Like those earlier feminist movements, #MeToo was born of the gendered misuse of power by men. US Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell fathered it: “Sen. [Elizabeth] Warren was giving a lengthy speech. She had appeared to violate the rule. [An obscure US Senate rule rarely enforced.] She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.”

The Twitterverse roared back. “I’m shocked at how @SenWarren last night,’ said no woman ever.” (From @PastorAmyTRC) The memeforward roared back, too: “She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, #ShePersisted,” written below a picture of Rosa Parks at the front of the bus. (From @brianajones) “She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted,” written underneath a picture of Darth Vader towering over Princess Leia pointing a finger at her and lecturing her. (From @MarcSnetiker)

The #MeToo movement has called-out the longstanding abusive behavior of many powerful men, not all famous, but all infamous. Among the famous infamous, Bill Cosby was accused — over a 50 year period — of rape, drug-facilitated sexual assault, sexual battery, child sexual abuse, and sexual misconduct. He is now in jail on a conviction of drugging a woman and committing sexual assault. Harvey Weinstein, another accused of sexual assault by many women, has been indicted on several charges of sexual assault and faces trial.

Add to the list of famous infamous chefs John Besh and Mario Batali; media executives Matt Lauer and Les Moonves; congressmen John Conyers, Democrat of Michigan, and Trent Franks, Republican of Arizona. Add to the list the bad behavior of lauded male ceramists and professors. Fill in the blanks with those names for yourself.

“As a female artist starting out in the 1950’s, it was not always an easy ride for [Betty] Woodman. She fell in love with clay as a teenager and her family supported her decision to become a potter, but the ceramics world was not always so welcoming. ‘At the beginning, people were quick to dismiss me or not take me seriously,’ she says. ‘Back then [in the 1950’s], the world of ceramics was totally male dominated, it was a very macho world. If you weren’t willing to be one of the boys, it was very difficult to be a part of it.’”

Woodman went on to say: “But I’m a little combative, so I guess I also enjoyed it.”

But why should any woman need to be combative (or like combat) to receive equal treatment—anywhere? Sadly, I continue to hear such accounts. Sadly, it was only in 2018 that the first “equality clay day” was declared; advisedly, on the day marking US women’s federal suffrage.

Yes. She. Can. describes the movement from #MeToo declarations to #ShePersisted action. Today, we campaign to end discriminatory, gendered power dynamics in the ceramics world and the sexist behavior of male ceramists. All of it. Today, women ceramists seek executive power. All of it. Today, Equal Clay Day is everyday. All of them.

---


3 Hannah Ello-Petersen “Ceramics was always a macho world,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/feb/03/sculptor-betty-woodman-ceramists-was-always-a-very-macho-world


---

**My Yes. She. Can. And Yes. She Did. Story**

*Angelica Pozo*

Watching the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements unfold, seeing all the stories that many shared for the first time in their lives, and now being invited to be on this panel, has moved me to reflect on my personal experiences as a woman and how my gender has affected my life and career through the years.

Thinking back, I have had to endure my share of misogynistic behavior, but it feels like it was mostly long ago. Actually, I feel pretty good right now in terms of how I am perceived as a woman artist in my local and greater arts community. I do not feel that my career is held back or restricted in any way because of my gender.

So how did I get to this place where I professionally feel successful in my own feminine skin?

Thinking back to my formative years, my parents were very supportive of their only child. They sent me to an all-girls Catholic boarding school for middle and high school to keep me from getting into trouble on the New York City streets as I was coming of age.

Even from that protected and supportive cloister, I was able to see that in the real world outside, women and people of color were not on the same footing as the white patriarchy that dominated society. It was the ’60s & ’70s, the era of Vietnam War protests and revolts against the ‘establishment,’ and that establishment was very white and very male and old.

In my teens, I do very specifically remember thinking that as a female and person of color, I would have to work twice as hard to prove myself and be able to get to where I wanted to be in life. As harsh a reality as that may have been for me as a young teen, I do recall welcoming the challenge. I was proud to be an Afro-Latina and did not let my perceptions of obstacles ahead get me down or deter my resolve to persevere.

Later during college, in the mid ’70s, my female classmates and
I would note how the art classes were filled with predominantly women students, yet professors and department heads were almost exclusively male. We would find similar ratios when considering the rosters of major ceramic gallery exhibitions.

In retrospect, this shouldn’t have come as much of a surprise for that time, as universities were part of that ‘establishment’ I mention above. So, of course, faculty hired and artwork chosen would generally reflect the institutions’ narrow self-image and values. The same can be said of much of the landscape of 20th century contemporary ceramics; it was certainly ‘a man’s man’s world.’

Women and people of color would have been hard pressed to find the few, if any, reflections of themselves within contemporary ceramic institutions of the time. In the early 20th century, a woman’s place in the ceramic world had been primarily as a decorator in the art pottery factories like Rockwood. Women did not normally take part in forming the clay. It was not until later in the century that you start seeing women getting recognized within the arena of contemporary clay.

Ceramics has long had its predominantly male mentors. Looking back through early 20th century American ceramics, we would find a long string of revered men, and conjure up images of humble masters at their craft generously sharing the Zen like wisdom of their years in clay. In the mid-20th century, that male-dominated ceramic world went into macho man overdrive with the emergence of Peter Voulkos.

Creating his massive thrown, stacked, and aggressively altered forms did take a lot of hard work and physical strength, which he loved to flamboyantly show off during his well-attended demos. Voulkos gained rock star status. His influence helped add a layer of machismo to the good ol’ clay boy’s club foundation that dominated much of the contemporary ceramic art institutions of the time.

This was all a frustrating reality, which most likely influenced my decision to not actively pursue a college teaching job upon receiving my MFA from the University of Michigan in 1978. Instead, I stayed in Ann Arbor for a few years and kept my options open.

In 1984, I moved to Cleveland, Ohio to see if I could start my arts career in clay. The three things I cite as my reasons to take a chance on Cleveland were the affordable shared studio space that had opened up for me, similarities I found to my hometown of New York, and the great work of the Ohio Arts Council. It has turned out to be a good gamble for me.

Through trials and errors, feasts and famines and a lot of hard work, I have been able to craft a varied and stimulating career for myself as a self-employed artist here in Cleveland.

That career spans working on big tile public art commissions, to leading participatory community art projects, to at times teaching ceramic workshops. More often, I have worked as an artist/teacher in K-12 schools doing tile mural projects as an artist in residence. Always remaining flexible, I have recently been doing shorter school workshops and a lot of after school art programs. In between all that I try to squeeze out as much time as possible for my own studio work.

The intention is to have all of these different income streams ebb and flow, ideally at the right overlapping times to keep me covered when projects end, or a particular stream dries out. It doesn’t always quite match up, but things have seemed to work out eventually.

This ‘many irons in many fires’ approach to self-employment has been a bit frazzling at times, but I wouldn’t have it any other way, because most of the time I get to do quite satisfying and rewarding work. Generally, I have felt free to control what I choose to work on, whom I choose to work with or for. I am my own boss. That is a very empowering thing.

I owe a big part of that empowerment to a life focused around clay and the arts. This field has offered me the opportunity to mold a fulfilling career and to work with some wonderful people. Through that journey I have encountered many women working in the field of the arts, who have been helpful and supportive. I am honored and humbled to now be offered the opportunity to ‘pay that forward’ and see how my experiences can be of help and inspiration to other women as they enter the field and begin to mold their own careers in clay.

Feminism, Intersectionality, Inclusiveness, And Critical Pedagogy
Ann Lawton

If only I could start off discussing feminism, intersectionality, inclusiveness, and critical pedagogy with some beautifully-packaged, inspiring quote. But those of us experiencing and working...
within these facets of everyday life — personally and professionally — know that the complexities of these realities are not at all presentable in clean, fluid fonts and read with conviction. These topics are aching with frustration, history, shame, and politics. A rally cry cannot be simple or made into a t-shirt. These voices are raw and tired.

I find myself between three different disciplines: the arts, academia and the mental health field. I am an artist, art therapist and art educator. I have been teaching in higher education and practicing art therapy with a variety of populations for eight years, respectively. I have been an artist for far longer, as memories of making and creating are my earliest memories. There is a key theme that transcends the disciplines I work in: empowerment. The individuals, groups, and communities I work with aren’t empowered, rather they have experienced disempowerment, struggle, and often, injustice.

In the arts, voices are transformed through media and materials, catharsis and symbolism, process and product. This is not a new concept, as humans have been trying to understand and communicate with each other since before we have had a verbal language. Whether it’s my students, who find clarity and confidence in their making process through failures, or my clients, who are able to reimagine their hardships and sense of autonomy with art materials, the making process allows someone to take control of their experiences and understand themselves in new ways. If we know that art is empowering, why is access and exposure to the various media and disciplines so very white-washed, wrapped in patriarchy, and out of reach to populations that need it the most?

In my own education — academic, personal, and professional — the experts in the field appeared to be men. The voice of knowledge came from slides featuring chronological collections of male artists and through descriptions of how they contributed to the profound movements across time and space. Female artists, artists of color, and LGBTQIA+ artists were reserved for their own books and own brief special PowerPoints, as an afterthought of, “Oh yes, and here are some artists who are not men who did some art once. Yeah, they exist, supposedly.” Their art was controversial because they were not men and because their subject matter didn’t fit the expectations of the male gaze or ego.

While practicing inclusivity is inherently necessary, we need to engage in a critical examination of how we are taught to move through the world, how we engage with each other, and how we are passing down knowledge to subsequent generations. Within teaching and learning, the practice of critical pedagogy addresses inequality and oppression through the identification of structures of power, which include systematic and internalized oppression. Patriarchal structures have been embedded in the unconsciousness of women, resulting in learned helplessness, low self-esteem, and intergenerational PTSD. These are pervasive realities that women, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ individuals experience yet are ignored in everyday life. If we peel back the layers, we can see it as an inflamed underrepresentation within the field of the arts and makers. The double standards, patronizing remarks, and assumptions made about makers from marginalized populations are being regurgitated with every new generation of young artist.

In order to try and remedy what we know about the arts and who is empowered through them, we have to first understand who we consider to be the experts in our respective fields. The simplest act of fostering an awareness of who you include in your dialogue, areas of influence, and network is a simple yet profound way to practice inclusivity. It takes an honest look at your own personal story, family story, and cultural story to unearth the patriarchal structures that influence our understanding of self, others, the work we do, and how we understand that work.

As makers, educators, and humans engaging with other humans, on the surface it would seem that our greatest intention is to inspire and empower. Through the artistic community, from the broader context to our individualized disciplines, this is easy to do with the richness that art and craft have to offer in means of personal storytelling and cultivating engagement. Yet we are unknowingly caught in the netting of structures, customs, and norms which have been passed down to us, consciously and unconsciously. And when muffled or silenced, individuals or groups become aware of the rotting scaffolding which holds privilege above them, and these people start to raise their voices...well, most of us know how this goes. We are belittled, told to stay in our lane, to appreciate what we have, and that we’ve come so far, and to be grateful for having a seat under the table.

We need to address privilege, advocacy, and how we got to this point. We need to ask the difficult questions that reveal grizzled truths. We cannot have change, progress, growth and empowerment without struggle and confrontation. Who will show up to address privilege, patriarchy, and the arts? Who has access to education, the arts, and access to knowledge? Who gets to be a part of this conversation? Right now, not enough of us.

An inspirational and powerful speaker, **Rebecca Sive** was founding academic and program director of the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy women’s leadership executive education initiative; is among Feminists Who Changed America (2006, University of Illinois Press); and has been widely recognized for her writing, speaking, civic leadership, and advocacy of opportunity for women and girls.

**Ann E. Lawton** is a mixed media artist, registered art therapist, and an art educator. Lawton works with a variety of populations in Western Wisconsin and Eastern Minnesota. Lawton is a faculty member in the art department at the University of Wisconsin — River Falls.

As a full time self employed ceramic artist in Cleveland, Ohio, **Angelica Pozo** divides her time between public art commissions, studio work, writing how to books, teaching ceramic workshops, and artist teaching in K-12 schools, often serving as an artist-in-residence on large participatory tile/mosaic projects in school and community settings.

**Adrienne Spinozzi** is Assistant Research Curator of American Decorative Arts at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. She is currently organizing two ceramic exhibitions: one on mid-nineteenth-century stoneware from Edgefield District, South Carolina (October 2020), and another on the Robert A. Ellison Jr. Collection of modern and contemporary American and European ceramics (May 2021).