

# Of Place and Purpose

## Gay Smith's Artistic Evolution

by Sue Wasserman

If there's one thing Gay Smith is learning, it's that time and transformation go hand in hand. The challenge is being open to possibilities as they are presented, no matter how unexpected.

Unexpected certainly describes Smith's own transformation from Harvard undergrad to professional potter. "At Harvard, pottery was offered as an extra-curricular activity," she recalls. Inexplicably drawn to it, she decided to take a beginner's class at the Radcliffe Ceramics Studio. "Part of what initially intrigued me was the fact that I couldn't just sit down and throw a pot the first time," she recalls. Never one to shy away from a challenge, Smith made a concerted effort to grasp the essentials. "Throwing a pot became something I *had* to do," she adds. "I couldn't let it go, or maybe it couldn't let me go."

"What I love about making pots," Smith discovered, "is that no matter how much time I work, I'll still never know everything there is to know about pottery. There's always an element of the unexpected, the unknown. Sometimes it can be seemingly unacceptable and sometimes a wonderful gift."

That challenge of the unknown would find Smith again after graduation. Like most graduates, she wondered what the future held. During her undergraduate studies, she had heard of a place called the Findhorn Foundation. A non-denominational spiritual community, it was founded in 1962 in Northern Scotland. "I was fascinated by how the founder's faith and spirituality transformed the barren sand dunes in the caravan park in which they were living into flourishing gardens and an international community," she says.

Although not known for its arts programs, Smith knew a pottery studio existed and intuited an experience at Findhorn would be an enriching one. Within the year, Smith happily found herself working full-time in Findhorn's pottery studio. The work wasn't about reaching the creative heights of individual self-expression, but



**"Crossed Jar," 9 in. (23 cm) in height, thrown, faceted and altered porcelain, with slip and glaze, single fired to Cone 10 in a soda kiln, 2006. Smith commented, "I have always been drawn to covered jars, to the way that they can look animated, to the mystery of what is contained inside, to the challenge of making a piece that resolves itself only when two parts come together: the lid and the jar."**



"Fruit Basket," 10 in. (25 cm) in height, thrown, altered into an oval and fluted on the wheel, dipped in flashing slip when leather hard, single fired to Cone 10 in a soda kiln.

learning to share community responsibilities. “The experience was unusual for a twentieth-century potter,” she says. “The work I made belonged to, and intimately connected me with, the community in which I lived. We made pots for the kitchen, garden, whatever the community needed.”

One important lesson she gleaned from Findhorn was that the attitude with which one approaches work is as important as the work itself. “We often spoke about and practiced the idea that work is love in action,” she says.

With that principle in mind, Smith practices noticing what she’s thinking and feeling when she’s making pots. “I learned at Findhorn

She also learned about the school’s artist-in-residence program and was accepted into its well-respected ranks.

In the midst of her residency, however, Smith made the difficult decision to return to Findhorn. “I had a choice between following my artistic intent, and hopefully making a name for myself as an artist, or returning to community life with my Findhorn family, and becoming a more anonymous potter,” she said. “I felt I’d be more useful at Findhorn.”

Useful she was. Not only did she create functional work for the community, she also served as a frequent instructor, working with residents, visitors and children. “I thoroughly enjoy teaching,” she



Canisters, to 11 in. (28 cm) in height, thrown porcelain, fluted, with added pinched handles, dipped in flashing slip when leather hard, single fired to Cone 10 in a soda kiln.

that I had a responsibility for putting positive energy into my work,” she explains. “In theory, every time someone uses my mugs or pots, good energy spreads.”

Change was as much in the air as good energy. In the early ’80s, Smith returned to the United States, specifically Maine, where she made pots professionally, and took classes at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. A position as a studio assistant at Haystack for renowned potter Cynthia Bringle brought her Cynthia’s invitation to serve as studio assistant at the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina.

Smith’s meeting with Bringle was pivotal to the development of her work. “Serving as a studio assistant afforded me a great opportunity to change my work and gain insight into teaching workshops.”

explained. “There’s something wonderful about being able to teach techniques and support students to find their own voice through clay. You can’t learn to throw from a book. It’s an oral tradition that revolves around networking and personal connections. Workshops level the playing field. Everyone in the studio, from CEO to student, is simply ‘a potter.’”

While Smith was helping others find their voices, she was also ready to continue exploring her own as a potter. As much as she loved her life at Findhorn, she knew the time had come to move on. Brief stints at graduate schools were followed by a residency in 1993 at The Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts.

While there, Smith developed ideas and techniques that continue to nourish her current work. She began throwing exclusively with



porcelain. "I love working with porcelain, which is so tactile and soft," she notes. "I am engaged by the challenge of its strong memory; that every movement and touch I make leaves an imprint."

While Smith began raw glazing and single-firing her pottery for lack of a bisque kiln at Findhorn, she did it for the simple joy of it at the Bray, and continues doing it today. "I love the feel of glazing leather hard," she explains. "Although single firing lengthens the firing process, I enjoy the continuous contact with each pot up to the moment it's ready to fire. The Grolleg body with molochite I use reduces the stress of raw glazing, and the stress I place on the work because of how I work."

Smith's passion for soda firing was also ignited at the Bray. The effect of soda firing on clay and glazes struck her. "I was amazed by the colors," she says. "They are simply more brilliant."

Hoping her future could be as bright as her pots, Smith moved in 1994 to a farmhouse in rural Bakersville, North Carolina. "I knew there was a strong arts community surrounding the Penland School; I had friends there," she recalls. "Community is important to me. Not only am I nourished by my friends, but by the natural beauty of the Appalachian Mountains."

Smith built a soda kiln based as much on faith as knowledge. At the time, she knew of few other soda kilns. "Thanks to advice from Jeff Oestreich, the Radcliff Ceramics Studio and Josh DeWeese at the Bray, I built my first kiln out of insulating firebrick recycled from my reduction kiln in Maine."

Smith's pottery flows effortlessly from the wheel. "I believe the way to discover one's own voice in clay is to find what part of the making process you love, and the extra time spent there will eventually uniquely inform the work," she offers. "I love to work on the wheel, so I try to spend as much time there as I can."

"I use mostly flashing slips and glazes with copper for color. I am not," she emphasizes, "a glaze technician. The recipes I use are generally acquired from other potters and modified to suit my kiln and my work."

One reason Smith uses glaze in addition to slip is because the soda ash does not volatilize throughout the kiln, so not all pots receive a direct soda deposit. "Plus, my days as a production potter taught me to get as many pots into the kiln as possible, and so I leave less space around the pots than what is ordinarily left in atmospheric kilns," she explains.

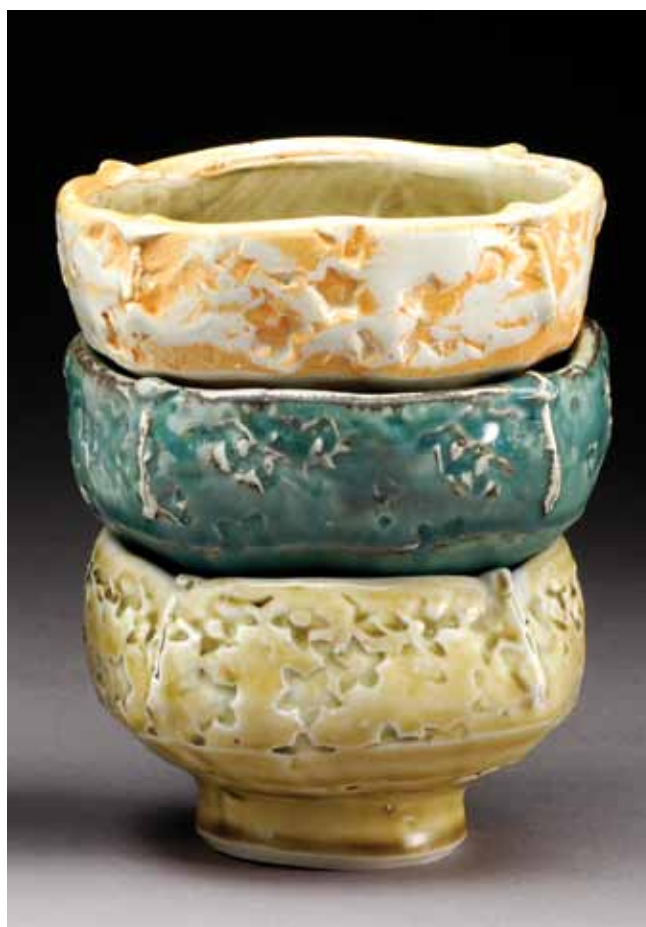
While Smith is often away from her studio, teaching at such places as the Harvard ceramics studio, Penland and Haystack, or traveling to shows, the rustic, somewhat-tattered barn that serves as her home gallery is open seven days a week. There, scattered along the shelves, is an eclectic variety of jars, bowls, teapots, mugs and more.

Smith is grateful for the ongoing journey. "I feel so lucky earning a living doing what I love, making and teaching pottery." Most recently, she was honored to be selected as a recipient of a North Carolina Arts Council Visual Artist Fellowship award for 2006–2007.

"I believe that a hunger for tactile knowledge and experience feeds the contemporary popularity of using and making pottery," she



**"Centerpiece Bowl,"** 8 in. (20 cm) in height, thrown and faceted porcelain, with slip and glaze, single fired to Cone 10 in a soda kiln, 2002. "I imagine that exaggerating certain aspects of the pots is a way to make them more interesting, hence the handles at the end of this piece exaggerated the oval form, and the feet and cut rim enhance this effect too," said Smith.



**"Print Bowls,"** 3 1/2 in. (9 cm) in height, thrown and altered porcelain, stamped while wet on the wheel, with slip and glaze, single-fired to Cone 10 in a soda kiln. "These are new forms for me," Smith explained. "I was excited when a friend brought some blocks that had previously been used to print cloth to the studio, and I am learning to incorporate this impressing on wet clay into my work."



Above: Fluted Teapot, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, thrown porcelain, fluted on the wheel, dipped in flashing slip when leather hard, single fired to Cone 10 in a soda kiln.  
Below: Hourglass Bowl, 7½ in. (19 cm) in height, thrown porcelain, altered and fluted on the wheel, with handbuilt feet and handles, glaze dipped and poured while leather hard, single fired in a soda kiln to Cone 10, by Gay Smith, Bakersville, North Carolina.



# recipes

The Willie Hillix Glaze is also in John Britt's book *High Fire Glazes*. The original recipe calls for kaolin, but Smith substitutes ball clay for kaolin in all of her glaze recipes because she glazes leather-hard pots, and needs the glaze to shrink with the pots. Ball clay shrinks more than kaolin, and so helps with this process. A glaze that has little clay content, such as this one, will need bentonite added to it. Smith adds up to 4.5% Bentonite to such glazes for the same reason that she uses ball clay instead of kaolin: because it helps the glaze stay on the leather-hard pot as it shrinks after it is glazed or slipped.

## WILLIE HILLIX GLAZE

(Cone 10)

|                   |       |   |
|-------------------|-------|---|
| Nepheline Syenite | 42.9  | % |
| Whiting           | 20.4  |   |
| Ball Clay         | 12.2  |   |
| Silica (Flint)    | 24.5  |   |
|                   | 100.0 | % |

|                       |     |   |
|-----------------------|-----|---|
| Add: Copper Carbonate | 5.0 | % |
| Bentonite             | 3.0 | % |

## AMBER CELADON

(Cone 10)

|                 |       |   |
|-----------------|-------|---|
| Alberta Slip    | 35.5  | % |
| Wollastonite    | 14.0  |   |
| Potash Feldspar | 21.5  |   |
| Gerstley Borate | 3.2   |   |
| Whiting         | 7.5   |   |
| Ball Clay       | 3.2   |   |
| Silica (Flint)  | 15.1  |   |
|                 | 100.0 | % |

|                   |     |   |
|-------------------|-----|---|
| Add: Yellow Ochre | 7.0 | % |
| Bentonite         | 3.5 | % |

## HELMAR SLIP

(Cone 10)

|                   |     |   |
|-------------------|-----|---|
| Helmar Kaolin     | 50  |   |
| Ball Clay         | 20  |   |
| Nepheline Syenite | 20  |   |
| Silica (Flint)    | 10  |   |
|                   | 100 | % |

|                |   |   |
|----------------|---|---|
| Add: Bentonite | 2 | % |
|----------------|---|---|

## TILE 6 SLIP

(Cone 10)

|                   |     |   |
|-------------------|-----|---|
| Nepheline Syenite | 17  |   |
| Tile 6 Kaolin     | 75  |   |
| Silica            | 5   |   |
| Borax             | 3   |   |
|                   | 100 | % |

|                |   |   |
|----------------|---|---|
| Add: Bentonite | 3 | % |
|----------------|---|---|



"Dancing Basket," 8 in. (20 cm) in height, thrown, faceted and altered porcelain, with slip and glaze, single fired to Cone 10 in a soda kiln, 2005. "I have admired Oribe baskets, and wanted to try forms with handles over the top," says Smith. "I am more interested in the structural and aesthetic aspects of this piece than in its function. I want one's eyes to find a way to follow a certain rhythm or harmony when idly contemplating this piece. Perhaps the negative space under the handle and inside the cut rim, the curve of the facets, the negative space under the foot, and the relationship between all these parts...engages this process."

says. "The more conscious I become, the better my work and my teaching will get. M.C. Richards says in her book, *Centering*, 'it is not the pots we are transforming but ourselves.' Her quote may not apply to everyone, but I believe it holds true for me."

*Gay Smith will be presenting a workshop with Ruthanne Tudball (see article on page 40) focusing on forms and surfaces for soda firing at Penland School of Crafts May 27–June 8. For details contact Lyman Edwards, Penland School of Crafts; e-mail [clay@penland.org](mailto:clay@penland.org); or tel: (828) 765-2359.*