

Joyce Michaud: Meeting the Challenge

STORY BY BECKY BAFFORD • PHOTOS AND ARTWORK BY JOYCE MICHAUD

There is an urgency about Joyce Michaud, as if there couldn't possibly be enough lifetime to learn and share and teach and create. She lives hard, and her life is filled by her passions: her family and her claywork, her driving force for the past 25 years.

Originally a painter and printmaker, now a potter and sculptor, Michaud faced many obstacles in becoming an artist dedicated teacher while singlehandedly raising four children. She is an assistant professor at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland, where she is the director of the ceramics program and curator of the Hodson Gallery. She gives national and international workshops on ceramics techniques and aesthetics, and shows her work in galleries around the country.

For Michaud, ceramic work is not a separate entity. She has successfully integrated the work that she does into her life as artist, mother, and teacher, so that there is a seamless transition among all of her roles, and each role supports the whole.

People discover ceramics for many different reasons. Some commit to clay early on, while others gradually work into the medium as a progression of their art careers. For Michaud, the decision was definitive and specific to a day in 1972 when she learned her grandfather, who nurtured her as a child, had died. In spite of her grieving, friends insisted that she attend the evening clay class she had recently joined. "I came home that evening repaired — intact. It was then that I realized the power that clay holds."

Though her love of clay started later in life, teaching was inherent from the start. As the third oldest of 12 children, Michaud was teacher to her younger siblings from as far back as she can remember. A shy child who felt "lost in the crowd," she found a strong sense of herself in both her connection with the outdoors and with art. During extended visits to her grandparents' farm in Kansas, she experienced nature and its intrinsic cycles firsthand through gardening, witnessing the birthing and later slaughter-

ing of livestock, day-to-day feeding and caring for farm animals, and braving the destructive force of tornados and blizzards. Very early she gained a deep understanding of the universal concept of the life-death-life cycle.

Michaud's creative insights were fueled by her parents' love of travel. Although it was a difficult task with 12 children, they frequented cultural places and national parks that were accessible because of the low cost, but also offered



*Impression. Wood-fired porcelain.
5" x 4½" x 3".*

diverse learning opportunities for everyone. The exposure to a breadth of visual and intellectual stimuli and a diversity of landscape provided a fundamental aesthetic appreciation.

The impact of her environment had a cumulative effect on Michaud's work — the mountains of Colorado, the plains of Kansas, the forests of West Virginia, the deserts of Arizona, and the rocky coast of Maine. Born in Denver, she went to high school in West Virginia, where, although she took no art classes, she was continually drawn to the visual arts. The extent of her educational experiences also influenced her development as an artist.

Starting college at Marshall University in West Virginia and continuing at Indiana State University, she finished her bachelor's degree in art and education at Lycoming College in Williamsport,

Pennsylvania, with a concentration in painting and printmaking. The different viewpoints of many teachers fed her work. The architecture of nature became her primary source of imagery — animal skulls, bones, and natural still life.

As a student at Lycoming College, Michaud enrolled in her first clay class that included a workshop with Jack Troy. She remembers being fascinated by his wedging demonstration — a penny placed on the edge of the clay disappeared during the wedging and ended up at the core. "That excellent demonstration of the movement of the clay made a huge impression on me; I learned to wedge really well." The immediate understanding created by the clear picture of the concept of wedging was the beginning of her commitment to her current method of teaching — instilling a clear visual understanding of the process.

Receiving the gift of a potter's wheel and purchasing a kiln upon graduation cemented Michaud's commitment to clay. Though she continued her painting and printmaking, pottery was the activity that centered her. Claywork and two-dimensional work lived concurrently until caring for her children forced her to focus on one direction. Her two-dimensional images of skulls and nature began to translate into three-dimensional works in clay. She remembers, "Clay allowed me to work in intense, concentrated, bits — pieces of time carved out of the all-consuming job of caring for small children."

In 1983, when Michaud enrolled in the Columbia Visual Arts College in Maryland under the direction of Richard Lafean, she found a clay "language" that held great meaning for her. Lafean's philosophy was conceptual learning that taking a concept in depth in one area correlates to many other areas. In her first course, she sat through three classes of lecture before being allowed to touch the clay. As students began to throw their first bowls, Lafean picked one up and started talking about composition. "As you make a bowl, you need to understand how your eye reads the form." He reinforced the idea that all

skills should grow in a parallel fashion. Developing an eye for composition should occur along with throwing, glazing, and firing skills.

Michaud remembers an immediate positive reaction to Lafean's teaching. "Among artists and teachers, there was an inherent understanding of what makes a good pot — but no one really talked about it; there was no 'language' in clay to express the concepts." Continuing to find a way to express these ideas has been one of the driving forces of her teaching and her own personal research.

After CVAC closed, she continued her studies locally with Catherine White and Rebecca Moy of Greenbridge Pottery, and then founded the Olney Artist Potters, through which she coordinated ceramic workshops. Seeing workshops as an excellent vehicle for furthering her own knowledge, she brought in artists who were skilled in the areas she personally wanted to explore. The first workshop she hosted featured Andrew Brunelle throwing his large porcelain vessels.

When asked about the qualities in clay that keep her passion for it sustained, Michaud answered, "The learning never ends." With painting and prints, she had many great ideas, but she felt compelled to go from the illusion of depth to the reality of three-dimensional space, so

clay was the logical next step. "With clay, each step is part of the creative process — the wedging, the glazing, the firing. It is always a challenge to learn something new. It's easy to get lost in it, but it's also a process that can fit into a family-oriented lifestyle." The skill of throwing requires drive and persistence.

Dealing with the trauma of a divorce and raising four small children, she was determined to finish her M.F.A. degree and enrolled at the George Washington University under the direction of Turker Ozdogan. Some students attend graduate school to experiment, to find a focus, or to find themselves. Michaud already had a strong direction, a definite sense of herself as an artist, and a powerful body of work that included carved platters, pinch pots, and porcelain sculptures that explored light and transparency through a juxtaposition of thick and thin areas, and shadows created by piercing the surface and allowing light to shine through. Confident in her throwing skills, she set clear goals, focusing on expanding her cognitive understanding of creating, glazing, and firing giant pots; working with porcelain; and understanding the correlation among wheel work, hand-throwing, and coil-building.

She approached firing with the same pursuit of concepts and knowledge, striving to understand the science of



Tower Impression. Wood- and salt-fired porcelain. 9" x 3" x 2".

firing and then cementing that knowledge by firing over and over. She was rewarded with unique surface treatments and glaze results.

Michaud concurrently took on museum

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Wood-fired porcelain pinch pots by Joyce Michaud. 4½" - 7½" high.

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studies, partially because of her intense fascination with museums that evolved when she was young, but also because of the access to museums in Washington, DC. She understood a great exhibition and a great piece of pottery or sculpture are both works of art. As all the elements in a three-dimensional piece must work together to create the whole, every piece of an exhibition must relate and “work” in exactly the same way. Museum studies also emphasized the importance of how an artist presents his or her work.

Michaud says, “Your work is an expression of who you are and what you are about. Unless it is well presented, it’s difficult for the viewer to focus on its message. Presentation strengthens the statement of each piece.”

Within the broad range of her creativity, Michaud’s signature work is her pinch pot, with its pristine, delicate form. The thin walls, narrow neck, broad shoulders, and tiny feet all require an extreme balance of skill and understanding of the properties of clay in order to achieve aesthetic and technical success. The pinch pots are all about balance — that fine line between stability and instability, strength and fragility. Early in her career, she learned to pinch from reading Paulus Berensohn’s *Finding One’s Way With Clay*.

Making pinch pots is her “knitting” — her way of keeping her hands busy during quiet times. Michaud feels that her mind works better when her hands are working. Calling them her “little masterpieces,” she says, “By going into depth with the form, you work out all the subtle nuances that make them great.”

Refining the pinched form gave her a sensitivity to the movement of the clay, correlating to the ability to direct the movement of clay on the spinning wheel. In turn, controlling the fluidity of the clay during wheel-throwing taught her how to strengthen and control the clay

during handbuilding. As she builds her larger forms, her goal is to capture the same feeling of clay moving and growing — the quality of life.

Michaud moves easily between thrown and handbuilt work because of her understanding of structural strength concepts that are intrinsically the same in both forms of expression. She responds to the asymmetrical expression in handbuilt forms — the inherent irregularity that occurs when human hands have touched it. Michaud strives to align herself with simplicity of nature. “Simple, elegant forms are not easy.” Her work varies from simple (pinch pots) to complex (carved sculptural forms), back to simplicity again (impressions). Her art and her life are about pushing the limits at both extremes, from small to giant, from simple to complex. Being in the middle is not a comfortable place for her.

Achievement of a solid understanding of the firing process in graduate school allowed Michaud an opportunity to explore. Her love of the clay itself brought her to wood firing and a study of the unique characteristics of each individual kiln. In her work, Michaud sees the importance of the interaction of the clay and the firing as a means of strengthening the subtle beauty of the clay and form. “Firing is where the final throwing occurs — creating the ultimate life of the pot. My work is about line and space, elements inherent in my painting. Simplicity of a good line and the swelling of inner volume defines the form. That’s why the wood kiln is so important. Long anagama firings, with the inherent oxidation/reduction cycles that occur during the stoking of the wood, finish the form in a way that is dictated by the clay and how it is made.”

Her clay “impressions” are all about this interaction — pieces hand-thrown over carefully selected stones by the impact of throwing and slapping to align the particles and strengthen the clay. The final shaping of the pot occurs in the molten stage at the height of the final firing, recording the impact of the velocity of the flame and heat.

On its best day, porcelain is temperamental and tricky. As she works, Michaud achieves a delicate balance. Her confidence and inherent knowledge foster an intimate relationship with the clay, touching and directing its movement as the form emerges. Understanding the firing process well enough to anticipate changes that occur during



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throwing, drying, and firing is critical to the success of her delicate porcelain work.

In teaching, Michaud draws from her personal creative experience. To introduce the properties of clay to her wheel students, she uses pinch pots as experiential preparation.

Students are encouraged to first make a picture in their heads. “Students do come with strong ideas. I encourage them to make what’s in their head, not mine. Teaching is about helping them express who they are and what they’re all about, and stressing the importance of taking their work to the highest level. Everyone has an impetus to create. Given enough skill and knowledge, they can do it.” Michaud does not teach creativity; she teaches skills, tools, and universally respected concepts, and she challenges her students to use them effectively and creatively.

Michaud’s work is evolving toward large sculptural pieces again and to building kilns in which to fire them. Teaching will always be part of her life, but creating is an inherent need. Despite the extraordinary responsibilities in her life, she continues her research and her teaching. Her commitment to family, clay, and artistic expression has endured. The ongoing process of learning is what drew Michaud to clay, and is what continues to draw her today. ■

Rebecca Bafford received her M.F.A. in ceramics from the George Washington University and her B.A. in studio art and English from James Madison University. For the past seven years, she has served as the director of the Columbia Art Center, a community-based art center with a focus on ceramics. As a ceramic sculptor, she works primarily in porcelain, concentrating on collaborative installation and outdoor sculpture work.

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