

MOLDING A LIFE IN CLAY: Sumi von Dassow

by Laine Godsey, arts programming curator

For more than 20 years, artist Sumi von Dassow has shared her contagious passion for and immense knowledge of the art of ceramics with students at Washington Heights Arts Center. After studying ceramics at the University of Washington and San Francisco State University, she found her home on the Front Range, where she teaches and produces a variety of work ranging from functional pottery to unglazed burnished work. She has written multiple books including "Low-firing and Burnishing," and "In the Potter's Kitchen: Handmade Pots for Home-cooked Recipes." I had the opportunity to talk with Sumi about her life as a ceramicist and a teacher.

Laine Godsey: How did you find your way into a life of making artwork using clay?

Sumi von Dassow: I started working in clay in high school and never figured out anything else I wanted to do. In college I was taking pottery classes and I registered as an art major so I could get a locker, figuring that once I decided on a serious major I'd switch. Guess what? I never did think of anything "serious" to major in.

LG: What about ceramics as a medium has held your passion and interest?

SvD: Pottery is a full-spectrum discipline. You want to exercise your math skills? You always have to account for the shrinkage rate of clay to make your pots the right size. And try calculating the volume of a finished pot after shrinkage! Mixing and formulating glazes involves both math and chemistry. Love gardening and growing your own food? You can make custom pots for your plants and for cooking your favorite meals in. Want a full body workout? Clay comes in 50-pound boxes and glaze materials come in 50-pound bags. If you need a meditative discipline that forces you to focus and forget the rest of the world, you can do detailed decorative work on the surface of your pots. And on a basic level, we have to control fire, which is endlessly fascinating and

challenging. Oh, and of course, you can make beautiful things and things that feel wonderful to the touch.

LG: How has teaching transformed your practice?

SvD: I develop new projects in order to keep my students challenged. Sometimes I might be too lazy — or too focused on making things that I know will sell — to switch gears and work on something completely different, but I need to do so for my students. They bring ideas to class, point me to pots on Pinterest or YouTube videos, and challenge me to figure out how something is done. Teaching means I have to keep learning.

LG: What is one key lesson you'd like to impart on students who are beginning their ceramics journey?

SvD: Relax and have fun. This isn't brain surgery. It's only clay, if you mess it up, nobody dies! Focus, forget your workday, and play with the clay.

LG: What has been the most rewarding aspect of your work at Washington Heights Arts Center?

SvD: I have learned a tremendous amount about so many aspects of pottery. I've improved my clay-handling skills in 20 years of teaching, but I've also learned a lot about firing pots, the physics and chemistry of kilns, glaze chemistry, something about how to repair kilns. And I've met so many interesting, incredible people. If I need to know about any subject, I have a student who is an expert who can answer my questions. And it's great to work for an institution that genuinely supports what I do and helps us improve the learning experience for our students.



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