

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Alice R. Ballard

The following text is a written questionnaire completed by the artist on behalf of the curator.

In general, why do you do what you do? What underlies the commitment you bring to your work?

At the center of my life is my love and respect for our natural environment. My art grows from my affinity for natural forms. These forms materialize during my walks, while I work in my garden, even on visits to the produce section of the grocery store. Sometimes they appear as gifts from friends who share my fascination with the beauty inherent in nature's abundant variety.



Alice Ballard- Pod Trio
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007

I am especially drawn to the metamorphosis of nature's forms as they change from season to season as a metaphor for the human capacity for spiritual renewal and rebirth. What astounds me both as an artist and as a human being is man's and nature's ability to withstand horrific abuse and to regenerate new life, to put forth a magnificent new budding.

It is the visual force of rebirth as represented in nature that I endeavor to capture in clay. The elegance and grace of the buds sprouting from a damaged trunk or new roots are captured in my *Tree Totems*. The *Wall Pods* are unique; varying in color and shape yet each is intricately detailed and expresses our hope, our future.

In my work I am also endlessly drawn to the universal world in which differing life forms share similar qualities. For example, tulip bulbs and the human form can be seen to share many of the same sensual qualities. When I am teaching,

using nature both for its images and its symbolic power is an important part of what I offer my students.

In my studio I can spend countless hours contemplating a particular form in order to feel its energy. It becomes a Zen-like connection with nature not unlike meditation. Next I will begin to draw the form, trying to capture the essence of what I have felt and observed. Then I begin to bring the form to life in clay.

When I am at home, my garden is a place where I restore my soul. In my life nature has become “the thread that binds.” As an artist, I hope that those who connect with my work can share some of the harmony and tranquility I realize through the creative process. Perhaps, at the very least the viewer will give those small, often unnoticed forms in nature a second glance....

I think in some ways I am simply driven to make things. I love to use my mind, heart and hands to make things.... Specifically I need to create things that help connect me with our natural environment, regardless of the medium. I do this through photography, drawing, painting, printmaking and clay. Ultimately, my desire is to share my own vision and perspective of our natural environment through my work and teaching in order to help others make a personal connection with nature. I have come to believe completely in the interconnectedness of all things in our natural world. When we honor, love and respect our natural environment, we are protecting ourselves and the future generations who will inhabit the earth.

What influences your work? Is the history of craft, or the media you use, important to your work and if so how? Does your work draw references from or have any link to the past and if so how?

Clay is a medium that has such a long and rich history. I find it fascinating that clay has been used in art and craft in a multitude of cultures across the entire world, making it something that creates a special global connection for mankind. A Fulbright scholarship to study art in India, a summer at the International Ceramic Colony in Resen, Macedonia and a summer traveling in China while studying ceramics certainly have all had an influence on my life and my work. Specifically it was the rich and colorful religious history of India along with things like the amazing ancient sacred trees of India, the charming clay toys of the Indus River Valley culture and the enormous ceramic horses and elephants of southern India that were so large, they were fired in place, that have affected my work. The experience of working with artists from other parts of the world in Resen, Macedonia inspired me to return to my personal work in ceramics in 1998. While traveling in China, the Yixing¹ teapots fascinated me as did the Tang Dynasty horses and camels and then of course there was the terra cotta army of Xian. Traveling to other parts of the world with cultures vastly different from my

¹ Yixing refers to a historic, pottery-producing district of China where small, finely crafted, unglazed and highly polished teapots are still produced.

own has broadened my knowledge and experience and made me feel more connected with our world community. It makes the world feel like a much smaller place. Individual artists also inspire me. Noguchi, Brancusi, O'Keeffe, De Staebler, Rothko, Paulus B., and Ruth Duckworth are only a few.

How is utility and function a part of your work?

Utility and function in the traditional sense have never been a particular interest for me in my own work. Most of my work is sculptural and even my most recent small teapots, influenced by my trip to China and the Yixing teapots, are really decorative. My pinch pots hint at function because of the form being somewhat bowl-like yet I see them as a visual form resulting from a meditative experience. Their function is more a spiritual one.

**Do you work in isolation, independently, in collaboration, in community?
Can you describe your studio practice?**

My life is a balance of teaching and making art. The creation of art is always the top priority but teaching comes close behind in importance. Being an artist who is also a teacher is important to me. When I am teaching I try to be a role model for my students by actively doing what I teach whether they ultimately become patrons of the arts, art appreciators or become artists and/or art teachers.

When I am not teaching I love being alone in my studio to work. As an introvert, this quiet time reenergizes me and I covet this time...In fact I have to have this alone time to keep the balance in my life. Often, I work in my garden at the same time I am working in my studio. I find the process of gardening and working clay to be quite similar. They both are nurturing and require nurturing... In a sense success in both depends on close observation and timing. My studio is a part of our home, so I am able to utilize small amounts of time in my studio even on those days not devoted to full time work in my studio. Generally I teach Monday through Thursday and I am in my studio Friday through Sunday, holidays, and summers, not to mention any small amounts of time in between that I can fit in. It is a discipline that depends on staying focused and present in each moment. I try to be this way with each role in my life whether it is as artist, teacher, wife, mother or friend. This is a challenge of course but thus far the effort and focus have been most rewarding.

I should mention that for the five years that Roger and I lived in Alaska, prior to our move to Greenville, we did six large public art projects together. It was a rich and rewarding experience working in collaboration with my husband Roger Dalrymple. It coupled his experience as an architect and artist with my own experiences. I learned about working with site, new ideas and materials and about working on a larger scale. This was valuable experience that has certainly had an influence on my current work.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

For me this means knowing your medium so well that you have a working relationship with it. In a sense you become “at one” with your medium. In other words, you allow the medium to have a life of its own. As the artist, you direct and guide the work process but all the time you are listening and learning from the experience and process. This is especially true when working with clay I think. Clay, after all, is in a sense a living medium, so much so that clay has inspired many world creation myths. Clay is also a medium that is transformed through the firing process, another aspect of ceramics that cannot always be totally controlled.

**Are you a native of your current home community or did you move there?
How long have you lived in the South?**

Currently I am living in Greenville, South Carolina where I have lived, worked and taught for eleven years. I was actually born in Florence, South Carolina but left at the age of six months to live the life of an Air Force “brat” all the way through high school. That life included elementary school years in Montgomery, Alabama followed by three years in Paris, France and high school years spent in Virginia. Then I was off to the University of Michigan through my Masters degree in painting. From Ann Arbor, I returned to South Carolina for a time to work at the Gibbes Art Gallery in Charleston as their first curator of education. This was followed by marriage to Charlie Munn and moves to Tennessee, Kentucky and then on to Charlotte, North Carolina for thirteen years. This was followed by five years in Alaska before moving to Greenville, South Carolina. I accepted a job teaching middle school art at Christ Church Episcopal School in 1996 and eventually accepted a second part-time job teaching ceramics at the Governor’s School for the Arts and Humanities. So you can see this is a complex question to answer... but I must say, through it all, I felt that my roots remained in South Carolina. In spite of having said that, I still am amazed that after all these years I have returned to the state of my birth. It confirms my belief that life is like a spiral and we are constantly returning to people, places and events in our lives but in a different place with an altered perspective.

If born in the South, how do you think you’ve been influenced by it?

A huge influence on my art and my life comes from the geography of place, the place being South Carolina. By that I mean, the beaches, inland waterways, the drama of the horizon line that separates the sky from the ocean, shells picked up on beaches, the constant drama of changing colors, temperatures and seasons and time spent gardening with my grandparents in Florence. Even the red clay soil and the long needled pine trees indigenous to the low county have imprinted my heart and soul and my work. I will have to add that the slower way of life, the unique personalities and color of Southern people and their varied cultures, have also impacted my life in a deep and special way. Even the salt air of the coast, the

summer heat and vegetation of the South, the heavy scent of the magnolias in July, live on in my conscious memory and in my dreams. Though I consider myself to be somewhat of a world traveler, I always feel that I am coming home when I return to South Carolina.

If you moved to your current home from outside the South, what brought you to the South? Is your work influenced by the South in any way?

In 1995 my husband Roger Dalrymple and I decided the high cost of living in Alaska and the cold temperatures, not to mention the lack of daylight, would not suit us in the long run. Property in Asheville, North Carolina, family in the Carolinas and a job offer at Christ Church Episcopal School in Greenville, South Carolina brought us back to the Carolinas in 1996. What was planned to be a two-year stay in Greenville before moving to Asheville has turned into a permanent move. Two fantastic and supportive part-time jobs plus a vibrant arts community coupled with a reasonable cost of living lead us to the decision to stay here in Greenville and make it our permanent home.

Now my work is influenced by my Greenville, South Carolina neighborhood environment as much as anything. The grand magnolia trees are just one example of a neighborhood subject I use often in my work. I collect all parts of this magnificent tree from the leaves to the flowers, petals, pods, the branches, the protective petals around the flower buds, etc. My own garden also offers constant inspiration for my work. Fabulous forms reveal themselves every season. The first hostas begin to push through dark soil as an early reminder of spring. This is followed by a full array of buds, flowers, leaves, branches and pods. My neighborhood and garden never disappoint me when it comes to the inspiration they constantly offer.

Talk in general about the relationship of your work to place. Do you have a particular relationship to the land or landscape? If you do, can you talk about it?

Nature to me is a constant reminder of the interconnectedness of all things. My own observation of nature draws attention to forms that become symbolic to me for rebirth, hope and renewal. This idea and the process of creating the forms that follow have been consoling and comforting to me on my life's journey. My friends often tease me about being "the eternal optimist" but my observation of nature has brought me to this point of view and is a constant reminder of this perspective. A class in Taoism and the subsequent study that followed only strengthened this point of view.

I view my choice of forms and subjects from which they come as reflecting my point of view as it relates to nature and to life. The forms I choose often seem to sprout, unfold, move and bulge with inner life and potential. At other times they

seem to be reaching toward the sky or light. I like to think that many forms look pregnant with potential or represent some aspect of metamorphosis. I am particularly attracted to forms from nature that show both male and female characteristics within the same form. These forms feel the most complete or the most “individuated” to me. I would also like to think that when people see my work they begin to look more closely at the beauty of our landscape and the beauty of the smaller and often tiny forms within the landscape... I hope that the connections formed from these observations will remind the viewer that we are all one and that when we take care of our natural environment we are taking care of ourselves and our world.

In your opinion, are there features, factors, conditions that distinguish contemporary craft being made in the South from work made in other parts of the country?

I think the strong history of craft in the South has encouraged potentially more support for the craft movement, thinking about Asheville, the Biltmore house, Penland School of Crafts, Jug town, etc. Although I see a few artists directly inspired by the images and traditions that are part of a strong heritage of clay in the South, generally I don't see a great separation between what is happening in contemporary ceramics here in the South and what is happening in the rest of the country.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

I do think my style and forms are at least somewhat unusual...they are certainly very personal. Having a formal background in painting from the University of Michigan coupled with an informal background in ceramics has been a nice combination for me. I had no ceramics class all the way through my Masters degree. In fact I was not at all interested in the high fire, mostly functional ceramics being done during the early years I was in college. I was interested in painting and in sculpture. My interest in ceramics began when I saw Wayne Higby's graduate show at the University of Michigan. He was doing gigantic, colorful, sculptural raku² pieces that were different than anything I had seen in ceramics up to that point. At that time, the Abstract Expressionist movement was beginning to have an impact on the field of ceramics. The spontaneity and immediacy of raku firing had arrived from the East and was becoming popular on the West Coast. This new approach to ceramics began to catch my attention.

After my masters degree I accepted a job at the Gibbes Art Gallery in Charleston, South Carolina where I was the first curator of education. While working at the Gibbes, a friend and colleague, Jo Jeffers returned from attending a fall concentration with Paulus Berensohn (a Penland ceramicist). I was so impressed

² Raku is a traditional Japanese style of pottery characterized by its low firing temperatures, lead glazes, and the removal of the pieces from the kiln while still hot to cool in the open air or water.

by her new work and completely new approach to ceramics that I decided I wanted to learn more about ceramics. A move to Michigan and a class in general ceramics at the Society of Arts and Crafts in Detroit gave me my first foundation in ceramics. Next came a move to Knoxville, Tennessee and my decision to take my first class at Penland with Don Reitz. This was followed by classes at Penland with Wayne Higby, George Kokas, Kyoung Ae Chow and a concentration session with Deborah Groover. I chose each because of the atmosphere of Penland and because I wanted to learn something specific from that artist. I think the formal background of my degree in painting coupled with an informal approach to learning about ceramics has given me a special freedom to explore the medium of clay without the boundaries of the dos and don'ts often taught in ceramics programs. I suppose that although I love the process of working in clay, the medium is always secondary to my ideas.

How is your work evolving?

An installation in the Showcase Gallery of Blue Spiral (Asheville, North Carolina) a few years ago called *Evolution of the Garden* was a step in the direction of thinking about my work in terms of the architectural space around it or the site. It was an installation of all warm white, smaller works displayed on varying sizes of cool white pedestals. All pedestals were low, varying in height from 4" to 12" in height. The intent was to force the viewer to look down at the work. The work for this show was inspired by the many natural forms I discover on my walks. Since most of my walks are in my neighborhood in Greenville, South Carolina, many of the ceramic forms are my interpretations of the parts and pieces of the magnolia trees and oak trees. Rocks I collected on hikes while in Colorado inspired other forms in *Evolution of a Garden*. I even used tiny magnolia seeds shaped like white tears along with clay scrapings from the work process to add texture and another dimension. *Evolution of a Garden* was intended to be displayed in such a way that the viewer would be led on a slow and contemplative walk through the gallery, viewing the work much in the same way that I discover forms mostly on the ground. During this walk, I hoped they would experience the tranquility I feel when I take a walk and the feeling of excitement and wonder when I discover a form that attracts my attention.

A class at Penland with Kyoung Ae Cho called "Conversations with Nature" only added to my perspective of considering the site itself to be the beginning of an idea for a work of art. The ideas I gained from this class also supported my thinking of my work like walks or like bringing the outdoors indoors. As my perspective broadened and focused I began to experiment with several outdoor works. One was a small installation of terra cotta leaves around the base of a small tree with purple ground cover just outside the back of the Penland office. The rolled forms of the rhododendron leaves I collected inspired each leaf. These became gifts for each participant in my class. The gift of a bamboo brush from a fellow student led to another outdoor work. Inspired my memory of the Indian Kolehms (rice flour designs placed on doorways at the dawn of the day only to

disappear in the dust by the end of the day), I used porcelain slip to paint thousands of white fish like shapes swimming in schools up and down the stone steps outside the studio. They also seemed reminiscent of the life cycle of the salmon I observed while living in Alaska as they swim upstream to spawn against all odds.

In 2005 and 2006 my work evolved into a larger installation at the McColl Center in Charlotte, North Carolina called *A Walk Remembered*. This was part of an invitational show called *Contemporary Landscapes... Crossing Boundaries* curated by June Lambla. In this work I continued to add to my collection of white forms inspired by things I collected on subsequent walks and once again created an installation that was designed specifically for the gallery space or site. Low pedestals were especially designed to bring the viewer's eye low to the floor. Groupings were spaced to cause the viewer to meander and weave through the space. In this case we painted the pedestals the soft warm gray of the concrete floor. This further integrated the pedestals with the space creating a topographical landscape of sorts for the work.

Another group of works called my *Tree Totem* series grew out of my need to make a personal statement about September 11th. Interestingly enough this series ultimately helped to give me some closure to my own personal tragedy, the loss of my first husband, Charlie Munn, in a plane accident. He died in 1983 and this series began almost 20 years later. The last of the *Tree Totems* is a highly pruned tree that that could appear to be dead except that it is coming back to life as green leaves push out of unlikely places all along its trunk and what is left of its branches.

Most recently I have been working on a *Wall Pod* series. Pods, inspired by the heart shaped pod of the invasive tree known as the Royal Empress tree, are press molded into a mold. This is done twice and the two halves are joined to become a three dimensional canvas of sorts for all manner of interpretations of things I see and collect from nature. These are grouped into installations. Some installations are comprised of as many as fifteen Pods hung in a triangular format. Others are hung alone, in trios or other groupings.

Looking into the future, I would like to do perhaps one last installation of white pieces that combines my work with music. A few years ago, I heard someone sing Richard Strauss's *Last Four Songs* and was so moved by the words and music it inspired me to do my first installation *Evolution of a Garden*. I would love to somehow bring my work together with someone singing the *Last Four Songs*.

Describe your relationship to community? Are there communities of people with which you affiliate or have a common interest?

I would have to say that aside from my close but small family, my community consists mostly of the teachers who are colleagues and friends and the students I work with. Having two part-time jobs, working actively in my studio, not to mention spending time for husband, family and friends often does not leave enough time for me to connect with the general arts community either here in Greenville or in a broader sense. Visits to Penland as student and teacher or visitor, the America Craft Council Southeast conferences and on occasion, the NCECA (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts) conferences are a few events that help me stay connected with many artist friends I might not otherwise see.

On the other hand, international travel has brought me in touch with our world community. I continue to communicate on a regular basis with friends in Macedonia and China. As a consequence, in 2001 I arranged for a young artist from Macedonia to spend his senior year at Christ Church School and in 2006 I arranged for a Chinese artist to be our artist-in-residence for a month here in Greenville. Through these endeavors, I have formed some special bonds and friendships within our world community.

Do you see yourself as a keeper of the culture? What does this idea mean to you? What would like your legacy to be?

As a teacher of Middle School sixth, seventh and eighth grade students and gifted juniors and seniors at the Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities as well as an occasional teacher of adult classes and workshops, I do consider myself to be a keeper of the culture. By this I mean that I feel that I am passing along skills and knowledge, as well as experience that sometimes lights the fire in others. I also think that being an artist or craftsman and leaving one's art for future generations to see makes one a keeper of the culture. I guess I would like to be known as one who on occasion was able to inspire others to pick up the creative torch and carry it into the future.

Do you share your knowledge with others – the next generation of artists?

Yes! One of the things that I learned from my experience as student and teacher at Penland is about the joy and pleasure of sharing knowledge, techniques and experiences with others. In classes at Penland everyone is both teacher and student regardless of age or experience... I try to act as a good role model for this idea as a teacher and student.

What role do you think colleges and universities have played in the development of contemporary craft in the South? And, alternative places like Penland School of Crafts, Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, John C. Campbell Folk School?

I think all of the above institutions play an important role in the development of contemporary craft in the South. I can personally attest to the knowledge and experience I gained from classes at Penland. On the other hand, I have had other valuable learning experiences that only a university can offer. A formal background that teaches an understanding of how to use the elements and principles of art is extremely valuable. A strong background in drawing is also essential. In addition, classes in poetry, biology, psychology, art history, world religions, etc. potentially add depth to the content of one's work. I believe in the broadest possible educational experience, traditional and non-traditional.