

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Brian Nettles

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?

Since I was a small child growing up on the banks of waterways on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, I have been making objects from clay and fire. I have continued that

passion and believe it comes from deep in ones soul. I do not know if there is a way to explain why I do what I do. I think it is easier to say that I love what I do and that is the labor-intensive process of making pottery.



*Brian Nettles- Boat and Three Handle Jug
Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007*

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?

My work over the years has drawn from the history of pottery going back to the folk potters of the Asian countries. More specially, the Japanese Mingei philosophy¹ of their pots and way of life. For years I have worked in the Mingei ethic, but since August, 2005 when Hurricane Katrina took everything I owned, I have been rethinking the way I make art and why I make art. Before the storm I was making pots for everyday use with an Asian influence, but since the storm I have been thinking more about the pots that have been made here on the gulf coast for the last thousand years.

¹ The Japanese Mingei movement focused on the beauty of utilitarian objects. It is also known as the Japanese Folk Art movement and its central pillar is the “hand-crafted art of ordinary people.”

How is utility and function a part of you work?

I make a wide variety of work; for years I have worked this way making large amounts of functional ware for meals or cut flowers. I also make “art objects” that really do not have a function for food, but have a function for the pleasure to be observed - “aesthetic function” with a reference to functional pottery.

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

My studio is in the middle of 30 acres with cypress swamps and the Wolf River on one boundary. I work alone in isolation, it gives me time to concentrate and observe nature. I work in cycles from digging clay, processing clay, making pots, glazing pots, firing the ware, chopping and stacking wood, to cleaning, then starting over again. I try and have four cycles a year, spring, summer, fall and winter.

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

I grew up on the Mississippi coast and went to a university in Mississippi and only have lived about a year of my life off the gulf coast (in Atlanta, Georgia) I would say my entire life has been spent living in the south.

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

I grew up around Shearwater Pottery in Ocean Springs, Mississippi and have played in the mud as a child. But it was at The University of Southern Mississippi that I discovered clay could be a profession and went on then earn my Bachelors degree in ceramics and sculpture.

The Mississippi Gulf Coast has a long line of craftsmen dating back hundreds of years. My family comes from many generations of sail makers, but there were also boat builders, blacksmiths, and many potters in the area as well. The Biloxi Indians were pot makers dating back over a thousand years. When the French arrived in 1699 they brought potters over as well. Francis Myers came to Biloxi in the early 1800’s and opened a pottery on Clay Point in Biloxi. His son Joseph Myers was one of the founding potters of Newcomb Pottery in New Orleans, but kept close ties to the Mississippi Coast where he had a house and studio on Deer Island. Joseph Myers is the one who turned George Ohr on to clay and inspired Shearwater Pottery founder Peter Anderson, which was founded in 1928 on Ohr’s potter’s wheel and is still in operation today. In my opinion Biloxi was the true “Birth Place of Art Pottery”. It was Ohr who first started the twisting, smashing and distortion on pottery back in the 1870’s. The community along the Mississippi coast has a long tradition of art pottery and most have grown up with hand made art pots in their homes.

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?

I live in the middle of 30 acres with cypress swamps, bayous, rivers and an abundance of birds, alligators and every type of wild life. I take walks alone everyday to look, watch and observe nature. I find inspiration from the dead winter brown leaves to the fresh spring green leaves on ferns. I watch as the alligators wake from their long winter hibernation, to the migrating birds landing and staying for days at a time. I dig clay on my property and while thinning my pine forest, I use the wood to fire my kiln. I feel by working with mud and fire it is as close to nature as I can become.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

Innovator ... I have never thought of my self as an innovator, just fortunate enough to work at my passion.

How is your work evolving?

Since August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina took everything I ever owned, my work has seen a change. After losing everything one starts to question their life and the meaning of their life, asking “why am I here” and, as a craftsman, asking, “why am I making this?” I have seen the change in my work, from a large percentage of functional Asian inspired pottery, to more of my own local inspired art pottery.

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

The Mississippi Gulf Coast has a long rich history of craftsmen and with a very high interest in pottery. We do have a potter’s guild that has over 65 members that meet once a month and discuss things going on in the ceramic 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?

I would consider myself as a keeper of the culture. The Mississippi coast is rapidly changing and the craftsmen seem to be being pushed away. I had been the studio director of ceramics at The Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art, in Biloxi for seven years before Katrina hit. We were nine months away from opening a \$30 million dollar, Frank Ghery-designed museum that was going to really help spread the word of the ceramic community of the Mississippi coast. We have not given up on it, only a setback! My legacy...maybe that I was a fine craftsmen and

helped spread and share to the world about the ceramic cultural on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

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

I do share my experience with others by teaching classes and workshops around the country and in my own studio. I think it is important to teach the up-and-coming craftsmen and help keep them motivated, for it is getting harder to make a living from your hands.

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 the role of universities needs to focus more on crafts. They tend to be going more in the direction of conceptual art, which is fine and I understand, but I have seen kids graduate that cannot center clay on the potter's wheel or even think about firing a kiln that doesn't have computer hooked up to it. I never went to grad school because an older potter told me that he regretted it, because he learned more in two weeks at a Penland workshop, than in three years of graduate school. That really hit home with me and never received my Masters degree. Although to this day I have not had the privilege of attending a craft school as a student. But, I feel in the world of crafts the craft schools are doing better at teaching young students the proper understanding of crafts.