

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Harvey Sadow

The following text is an interview summary from a conversation conducted by Tom Spleth on behalf of the curator in May 2007.

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

I work with clay, paint, draw and make digital art for the same basic reasons. I love manipulating visual media to create two and three-dimensional images. I love the

processes and the results. I usually go to work with very clear images in my mind. Then the dialogue between artist and medium often produces sets of divergent paths. Choosing which ones to follow, and then going off down trails blazed by “what ifs”, leads me from the known to the unknown, where real learning takes place. I love to learn.



*Harvey Sadow- Liang's Garden Series #2005-15 and
Liang's Garden Series #2005-16*

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?

My life influences my work. Where I have been, what I have seen, what was revealed, how I felt about it, all have been my influences. I love working with clay, especially on the potter's wheel, and I must be at least part pyromaniac, because I love firing kilns. In my ceramic work, by slowing down the process of making wheel-thrown vessels using rethrowing and hyperexpanding techniques, I often see an evolutionary parade of

historical forms on the way to my finished pieces, but I choose to try to move beyond them to forms whose silhouettes are vaguely familiar but not trite. What I really want to do is describe form that suggests movement, and whose surface sets up well for the surface that I intend to apply. Since my subject matter is personal and experiential, I am not really concerned with the history of the craft. My clay body, my surfaces, my kilns and even my methods of application and post fired surface revision are quite unconventional. In fact, it has been said that I have made a career out of glaze flaws. It makes me laugh, because it is, in some sense, true. While I am certainly working in the continuing tradition of wheel thrown pottery, my work only consciously links to the past when I am trying to reference the past in the subject matter of the work.

How is, or is, utility and function a part of your work?

Utility is really only relevant to my porcelain. Again, a 30 year preoccupation with carbon trap glazes, and atmospheric firing techniques, has made process innovation and exploration a very strong aspect of the work. Porcelain work, which is the least well-known and most underexposed aspect of my ceramic activity, is concerned with function. Function drives that work and is of primary importance, yet I am still extremely concerned with the dynamics of form and surface, and I am very much concerned with the relationship of form and surface to food and drink, as well as to presentation and storage issues.

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

I usually work in isolation, as an independent studio potter. I do a few workshops every year, but most of my work and the thought process behind it are primarily done in private. I always glaze in isolation. That is very precise and contemplative work, and is more successful when I am by myself. I like to have a friend or helper present when I do serial raku firings. My firings are done quickly, and I arrange equipment and materials in preparation for the next piece to come out of the kiln while the last one is cooling. I usually do 10 to 15 individual firings during a three to four hour session. It is more fun when someone else is present.

What does “mastery” mean to you?

Mastery is something I have never really thought about. What it means to me is being in possession of a body of knowledge and a set of skills that allows one to actualize what one visualizes without compromise. It indicates that one has developed a high degree of control and or knowledge, which allows one to manipulate his/her medium with extreme confidence. One thing I have always liked about flash firing (raku) is that I can orchestrate a set of probabilities, but the ultimate surrender of control allows the pot the

opportunity to be better than the potter. That is as close as I can come to understanding the concept of grace. Grace might be just as important to me as mastery.

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

I moved to Florida in 1988, and have been here for almost 20 years. I came here from southern Maryland, near the Virginia border just off the Appalachian Trail. I have lived all over the USA and on several other continents, but I lived in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia as a young boy. I guess that I qualify as an American Nomad.

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?

First of all, I came to the South from Southern Maryland. I chose to live there because of the rolling landscape, the nearby mountains and the proximity to (and distance from) Washington, DC, New York and other urban areas. I also wanted to be close Washington, DC for a number of reasons relating to art, culture and the general education level of the population.

Many of my neighbors considered themselves southerners and their ancestors definitely were. The landscape on both sides of the Potomac is very similar, as are the colors prevalent in nature. The towns, their architecture and their history are also very similar. All these factors affected my work there, from the *Maryland Lights Series* (studies in refracted light relating to sunsets), to the *Chesapeake Veneer Series* (an attempt to capture the reticulation of light and water on broad horizon forms), to the *Ground Zero Series* (work based on the notion of the destruction caused by a nuclear explosion viewed from a celestial perspective, and very much inspired by the daily discussion of Cold War issues and pollution-filled air in the DC basin).

I spent increasing amounts of time in Florida beginning in 1980. Finally, I moved to Jupiter, Florida in 1988, because I was so curious to know how the pure white light (similar to the Mediterranean) would affect my work that I could not stay away. Also, the days are longer in the winter and the weather is not a stumbling block to my working outdoors through the winter. Most of my work since 1988 has directly related to the Florida landscape and seascape or to the international experiences that I have increasingly had since moving to Florida.

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

I don't know how to talk "in general" about the relationship of my work to my sense of place. The relationship is and almost always has been extremely specific. My

grandfather taught me that the land is sacred. I learned this also from several Native Americans. When I decided to work with visual media instead of with words, I carried with me an important lesson from my college creative writing teacher. He impressed upon me the importance of writing about what I know. Beginning with the intense experience of living and working in a one-room cabin in rural Wisconsin for four years from 1973 to 1977, my relationship with nature and with natural landscape intensified tremendously. The spiritual connection intimated by both my grandfather and indigenous people began to sink in and affect my thinking and values profoundly. It has been the foundation for my best work ever since, directing my work, but also directing my life and travels, where I live and where I choose to work.

Usually my work focuses on more rural landscapes. The *Elkhorn Vessels* (Wisconsin, 1974-1978), *Maryland Lights Series* (1979-1981), *Chesapeake Veneer Series* (1980-84), *Gulfstream* and *Ground Zero Series* (1984-88) were primarily broad atmospheric landscapes. Beginning with the *Jupiter Diary Series* (1989-present) in Florida, living in a flat, heavily foliated, visually confining place, my work has been much more micro-focused. I find myself working from the surface of my pond to the lights and darks of jungle-like foliage to cloud studies. When I travel, I often find myself translating immediate impressions and ideas about a place and its culture into object form. The *Sacred Sites: Australia* and *Sacred Sites II* series were direct responses to the Aboriginal concept of original creation, the ancient land and both the natural and human forces that act upon it.

Most recently, my travels in China have affected my work in other ways, relating to urban events, places and socio-politics themes. The *Liang's Garden* series comes from a combination of watching parents teach their young children how to write with brushes, studying about the cultural revolution, seeing evidence of the old China and its rich culture revealed in back alleys and back rooms and in the hearts of the people, while watching armies of mirrored glass condos marching across the countryside, swallowing up temples and Ming dynasty villages. It is the synthesis of a time of silk robes and bamboo flutes to the sooty cement tenement walls and gray civilian garb from the days of Mao to the designer jeans and neon atmosphere of the present. All are alive and in conflict within the people of China.

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 honestly never think about that. There is not much in the way of crafts community here in southeastern Florida, and most of the people working with clay are not from around here. I don't look as much at the works of others, as I do the land and the light and the sky. I read a lot and, yes; there are very obvious features, subjects and use of language that distinguish Southern writing so there probably is also in contemporary craft, but

more in the mid-south than here in what is actually the “deep North.” Actually, as I think of it, contemporary education, where so many of us learned our craft, is so universally cerebral, self-conscious and prejudiced toward “Art with a capital A” that it may have considerably affected regional influences.

Do you see yourself as an innovator?

I used to think of myself as an innovator. I certainly have developed a vocabulary of surface that is quite unique. From fusing non-glass metallic surfaces to clay, to the application of multiple firing to flash-firing (raku being a misnomer), to revisionist techniques such as glaze-chiseling, sandblasting and acid etching of glazes, I have pursued a very personal vision in clay through a series of “what-ifs” that have led to quite a number of innovative technical and aesthetic developments. Possibly this is why there are so many of my pieces in museums now. However, I never bothered to write self-promoting articles for the magazines, and I did not hide any of my techniques when doing workshops, so it has all been appropriated and is now somewhat common. I know that the work is innovative, but it is more important that the work is honest and that it represents properly. I believe that it is and it does.

How is your work evolving?

I am always developing forms and glazing and firing techniques for my work, in direct response to the subject matter that I am trying to interpret. As long as I continue to have new experiences, I expect my work to change. I have been traveling a lot in the French Alps and in Provence. The culture and the landscape are stimulating lots of drawings, photographs and notes. How this will express itself in clay is still unclear.

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

My relationship to community is complex. Wherever I have lived, I have always tried to contribute to the overall excitement, dialog and exposure of the community to craft media work, especially ceramics. In every community in which I have lived, I have curated exhibitions, participated in statewide organizations, taught, helped to create workshops and outreach programs, done projects in the public schools, and collaborated with museums. In some cases I have chosen to teach at art schools or universities. Yet, I still choose to work in relative isolation, living at the end of the proverbial dead-end dirt road and never maintaining a formal retail shop or gallery.

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

I collect work in all media by other artists and craftspeople, but only because I am moved by the work and it is a source of great joy to and my family and me. I have also found ways to give back, creating artist- in-residence programs, building university programs and/or consulting on the design or studios, kilns, etc.

I would like my legacy to be that I was an honest man, a good husband and father, that I lived a full and richly textured life.

How did you learn your craft?

I studied ceramics and art history at Knox College while majoring in creative writing. Then I went to graduate school in ceramics and sculpture at the University of Iowa. I have traveled extensively and continue to learn by experimentation and by asking questions everywhere I go.

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

I teach three or four workshops each year. I have periodically chosen to teach in universities or art schools for extended periods of time. Occasionally I mentor an emerging artist.

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, and John C Campbell Folk School? Other?

I think that a few northern universities have played entirely too large a role in ceramics in the south. I cannot believe how many graduates from a very few northeastern schools are teaching in southern colleges and universities. This tends to produce a kind of homogenous thought process that does not seem to focus on southern culture or place, but rather on a somewhat limited notion of “creativity” and breaking down of traditions.

Penland, Arrowmont, the Campbell Folk School offer wonderful alternatives. They provide faculty from widely varied backgrounds and with widely varied stylistic, subjective and technical concerns. They offer high energy, concentrated learning experiences and environments and bring together professionals, hobbyists and other interested people to share ideas and cultural understanding. They allow individuals to immerse themselves in extraordinary living and learning environments for relatively short periods of time, promoting freedom from the day-to-day cares and concerns that tie us to our habits. This often results in willingness to explore new ideas and values and to great personal breakthroughs.

Because Penland, for example, is in such a beautiful place, isolated yet continually providing outside stimuli, and near enough to several cities and educational centers, the area has become home to a large community of craftspeople. Sometimes I think it would be very interesting to live in such an environment, since most of my living situations have lacked close access to vibrant communities of craftspeople and I enjoy most of those whom I meet.