

## Exploring Form, Keeping Function

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an interview with Ellen Shankin

Since completing formal education in ceramics (Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, and the New York State School of Ceramics at Alfred University, New York) in 1977, Ellen Shankin has worked in her rural Floyd, Virginia studio as a potter. Her thrown and altered forms are intended for use. "I am rooted to pots and to life as a potter. No matter what the fads are, pots will hold me...the pot has to want to be used. While I admire people who make pots about pots, for me, the pot I make must have a function"(Studio Potter 1985 vol. 13). The work seems to have a fluid depth of surface, a result of layers of sprayed oxides and washes over glaze. Her studio practice has grown over these almost twenty years to include exhibiting throughout the States, conducting workshops and participating at conferences, the most recent being one of 15 presenters for Utilitarian Clay II: Celebrating the Object at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. This spring Ellen Shankin will be a guest artist (along the British Columbia ceramist Wayne Ngan) at the Fusion Conference in London, Ontario. Shirley Clifford interviewed Ellen Shankin for Contact.-Ed.

SC Could you describe what you consider a good pot?



ES I think at various times in my life there may have been different definitions. But now, that answer would have to be about clarity. A "good pot" speaks clearly and soundly in a total way about itself. And other than that, it is taste or personal opinion. Whether it is classical, whimsical, fragile, haughty or humble, it should sing of it's nature in rim, foot, body, surface treatment...in every aspect we can expand our awareness to discern over our lifetime.

SC You once said you wished your pots could evolve more naturally, so that you had time to daydream and wander. Could you talk about your early influences? And then what are influences for you now- what thoughts or images or questions inspire you and cause you to "daydream and wander"?

ES In the beginning, I loved the material. At thirteen, what child wouldn't? When I was older and began to study pottery in college, I fell in love with a potter's life: to make things of clay...dried by the wind...engulfed by the fire...in cycles through the seasons. Gwyn Hanson Pigott, an Australian potter, lived alone, dug her own clay and fired a wood kiln four times a year. I met her in Vermont and was hooked. It was a long time before I began to look at pots in the world, contemporary or historical. I was striving simply for competency then. But once I went back to school to study for my B.F.A. I began to see—became ready to see—pots. Shigaraki, Iga, Tamba, Jomon pots...big volumetric earthy pots of presence.

They moved me then as they do now, though their influence on my work may be hard for some to see. I spend a lot of time posing questions about form: how the lip, where the handle, when the belly of the curve—like every other potter from the beginning of time who had a moment to catch a breath. I am keenly interested in where I can take a form while still keeping its function. And the wheel is the only tool I am comfortable with. My mind definitely wanders these days ..down the path of altered pots.

**SC** You have had several years of formal ceramic art education and training. What concepts or techniques have stayed with you to act as a foundation for your professional career?

**ES** Of course I learned how to throw, fire kilns, to formulate glazes, but I could have learned that anywhere, on my own even. What I do value most from my two years at Alfred was being helped to see pottery from great teachers who offered such a broad perspective and vision. There are some words, ideas, that act as porcupine quills. They enter the body, barely skin deep. Then slowly, over time, they inch their way deeper and deeper into the tissue, till they sometimes reach the heart. If you are an art student, these quills, these insights reach your heart sometime later and illuminate you. “Whatever you do either contributes to, or takes away from the pot. Nothing is unimportant” It seems so simple. That quill is bone deep now.

**SC** What advice or guidance do you wish someone had given you when you were starting your career and what advice would you give to students today graduating from Art Colleges in Canada and the USA?

**ES** In some ways I am glad that I never talked much to anyone about making pots for a living. Naivete and optimism allowed me to pursue something that wise counsel might have ruled out. What I might say to graduating art students interested in pursuing a life as a studio potter is pretty simple. Be prepared to work hard. Make the pots you love. Don't let the marketplace be your critique. And expose yourself to people (like Gwyn) doing what you hope for in your own life, so you know, viscerally, that it is possible.

**SC** Could you describe your studio? When you organized and set up your studio, what were the most important features to consider for you and your work?

**ES** My husband, Brad, a woodworker, and I built our house and studios in 1980 in the mountains of Southwest Virginia. The pottery is a 24-foot-square space, facing south, with seven floor-to-ceiling windows that look out on a fifteen-acre meadow bordered by a pond and hills. It is very rural, this life we chose. As far as equipment goes, I have a Soldner electric wheel, Venco pug mill, spray booth, compressor, five ware racks, and one large table. The attached kiln shed holds an electric kiln for bisquing and a 45-cubic-foot, gas fired car kiln which opens into the studio where the pots are stacked in a warm, well-lighted area. I wanted to work in a lot of daylight and have plenty of room to move around. While I am pleased with my studio, I have often wished I had a separate glaze room and a small area to display work.

**SC** Could you outline your work schedule and firing schedule—whether for day-to-day work or in preparation for a show and sale?

**ES** I have two .. sons, and now my work schedule relates to their schooling. I am in the studio daily by 8 or 9 and work until 4:30 with a short break for lunch. Two or three nights a week there are things that need attending to in the studio after the children go to bed. I fire a kiln each month. If I am in a bind, I can complete a cycle in three weeks, but I do not like to. I set up a throwing list for myself at the beginning of each cycle. If it is wholesale, it reflects orders from galleries. If there are open orders I construct them at this time. If it is a show I am preparing for, I make the decisions about what pots I would like to exhibit before I get started. I like a day of throwing one form. And then a day of trimming handling and altering. I don't like to throw and trim in the same day and I don't like to make a hodgepodge of forms. It comes down to fifteen to eighteen days of making pots, six hundred pounds of clay, four days of glazing, four days of the firing process and readying the studio to begin a gain.

**SC** Could you elaborate a bit more about the compromises you have had to make in the way you work and the way it has been affected by the marketplace? Also, how do you go about marketing your work? How did this business practice evolve from the time your training ended to your current method of business practice?



**ES** When I first got out of school there were many difficult years. Brad was involved in a studio career. We experienced the whims of fairs, the instability of no regular salaries, no security. We worked hard, put our efforts into cardboard boxes and sought out galleries to buy our work. It was demoralizing and filled with rejection. We went to small craft fairs and came home with enough money to buy more clay, and not much else. It was hard to come back with boxes full of casseroles and begin to make more. When our children were born we decided to try to do it differently. The first wholesale show came about. It started off slowly, but each year the Baltimore Winter Market became a . larger and larger factor in my plans and within three of four years it provided an entire years worth of orders. For ten years I made my entire living doing wholesale, staying home, making pots and shipping them out to galleries all over the country. But a lot has changed since 1985. I no longer rely so heavily on the Baltimore A.C.E. show. I used to present new forms and glazes each February in order to take orders for the year and allow for progress and change. There was such a narrow window to work with then. A commitment to forms for a year and very little time to explore new ones. Eleven years later much has changed. I still go to Baltimore, but I have not needed to seek out new galleries for many years and those that I do sell to, seem to be interested, for the most part, in having whatever work I am excited about making. So new pieces can evolve more naturally and are accepted generally with pleasure by the galleries I have been selling my work to for so many years. I have begun to try to do one good retail show each year. For the past two years that has been the Smithsonian Craft Fair in Washington D.C. We also have been having a studio sale at our place each year on Thanksgiving weekend. That has grown and developed into something of value over time.

**SC** As for the future, do you have any short-term or long-term goals to explore for yourself and your work?

**ES** I don't find myself thinking that way. Oh sure, there are glaze surfaces that I can imagine in my mind that I have not been able to work out on real pots yet. And I would love to travel to Japan, New Zealand, Australia- a dream more than a goal really. But mostly, I just work. Forms change slowly at their own pace. I don't hope to be somewhere I am not, at some time yet to come. It just unfolds. Some people revere change, plan for it. For them it would be a terrible admission that I have made the same teapot-using the same elements- for 20 years. For me, it only makes sense. I love that form. It is still difficult for me to make. I hold my breath when I throw the body. I still feel a sense of pride and pleasure when it comes out of the kiln. I will make that teapot until I no longer feel that way. A dozen other teapots forms have come

and gone. As soon as they diminished in interest I stopped making them. I let my feeling about form dictate change, not any outside notion. If and when boredom or dissatisfaction assert itself, I move on.  
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