

Making Pots from the Heart

(Studio potter, Volume 13)

by Ellen Shankin

I have been steadfastly making pots for thirteen years, feeling connected through time to all potters in effort and intent, focus and activity. There was a time when pots were essential, when potters filled the basic needs of local communities for storage jars, bread bowls, every dish and container.....a time before plastic (B.P.). I remember reading of Moravian potters in Old Salem N.C., whose kiln openings were attended by miles of horse-drawn carriages filled with families lined up and waiting to secure the pots they needed to cook in and store their food.



Those days are gone. Beautiful salt jugs are no longer stolen from kiln sheds for moonshine. Now moonshine is sold in mason jars and plastic milk jug. Pots are a luxury, an extravagance for people who appreciate the richness of clay, who value the presence of heart and hand in objects around them. There is a market in those people, and I feel it will always be there.

I am surviving as a functional potter. I work hard, I don't make a lot of money, but it is enough. I can take care of my family, I live where I want, and I love what I do. The more my pots are out in the world, the easier it is to make a living.

For eight years I participated in the A.C.E. Baltimore Fair. For the past three years it has provided a schedule of full kilns for the entire year. It has become an easy, concentrated way to pull together the whole business aspect of pottery for me. I worry about my dependence on it. Could I make a living if I didn't get in one year? At this point, however, many of the orders are from long standing accounts that would most likely contact me whether I was there or not.

There are compromises that have had to be made over the years, not in the pots so much, as in the way I work. Change is orchestrated and manipulated by the marketplace. I commit myself for a year to the forms and glazes I exhibit in February. January has become a fertile time, finally following through on ideas bubbling up, knowing that next years work will only involve work that is seen at the show.

I wish the pots could evolve more naturally, that I had time to daydream and wander. I wish I could fire a salt kiln next week and not have to deal with the wrath of galleries expecting reduction glazes. There are pressures, but they can be managed as long as they don't interfere with the pots themselves. One should always make pots from the heart, and an income will come along eventually.

I wonder though, where are the new potters, the eighteen- year- olds making similar choices to mine? I don't see many young faces at the fair; mostly just a graying group of craftsmen. Will we be making pots at sixty and seventy? Yes, I am sure I will. Going to Craft Fairs? God, I hope not. Maybe we old timers will be well-known enough by then to have requests for our work pour in on a regular basis. Wouldn't that be nice !