



“Scholar” is not a term often associated with ceramic artists, not even with those who have spent a lifetime expressing through clay. We tend to think of artists as doers, not thinkers, or perhaps as people who do their thinking with their hands. For Dr. Judith Schwartz, of New York University, humankind’s most elemental making material inspires a complexity of thought that spans the gamut of intellectual disciplines. From anthropology to architecture, from art history to politics, Schwartz looks to clay to inform these human pursuits.



Judith Schwartz at home with some of her pieces

As a board member and program chairperson at Clay Art Center in Westchester County, Schwartz helped guide **In Our Backyard**, a yearlong series of programs that explore the impact of ceramics in the New York area. Schwartz calls clay “the newest oldest material on the face of the earth,” noting its ubiquitous nature in both history and present times. She points to a recent article in the New York Times that tells of an archeological find in Israel. A ceramic shard marked with writing was clearly used as a note pad for a shopping list, directing the ancient servant to buy wine, flour and oil, and not to be late! (See <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/12/world/middleeast/new-evidence-onwhen-bible-was-written-ancient-shopping-lists.html>.) This early evidence of the practical use of formed and fired earth confirms Schwartz’ enthusiasm for and love of clay. The various exhibitions, lectures and symposia touch on the history of clay in human culture, reviewing clay’s role in building the New York area, and highlighting the work of local ceramic artists who live, work and build their careers with clay.



Clay at the Core Panelists Susan Tunick, Glenn Adamson, David Reid, Jim Klein and Toby Buonagurio, with Moderator Judith Scwhartz

A native New Yorker, Schwartz earned an undergraduate degree in Studio Art at Queens College and sought out a studio space at Clay Art Center in Port Chester. She recalls, “This was a time when we didn’t have artist residencies. There was no Archie Bray or Watershed nurturing young artists. I took the subway from Queens into Manhattan and then a train up to Westchester, just to have a place to

do my work.” She continued her studies, earning both an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Art and Art Education, at NYU beginning her teaching career as a graduate student. Schwartz continues to teach at NYU, with courses ranging from undergraduate introductions to M.F.A. workshops. “The first thing I do with my students is to ask them to name things made with clay. Today, plastic permeates our lives, but just several decades ago, everything was clay. Every trade relied on clay – roof tiles, sewer pipes, kitchen and bath tiles, ornamental terra cotta and bricks, not to mention table ware and planters. But even today, we depend on clay. Artificial hips, teeth, knives, even NASA turned to clay for the heat-proof tiles on the space shuttle because nothing else could withstand the heat of reentry.” The consideration of this industrial use of clay expands her students’ understanding of the material and its properties. This past April, Clay Art Center’s symposium, **Clay at the Core: NY Art, Architecture & Design**, explored how clay has permeated New York life, from basic infrastructure to artistic expression.

From the industrial aspect of clay, Schwartz moves on to the making of objects with clay. She says, “I don’t accept the concept of clay being just craft. Clay is a ‘living ware,’ that responds to the maker. Yes, it involves skills and knowledge, but there must be an idea there. That is what makes it meaningful and memorable.” She speaks of how we intimately live with objects made of clay. “I probably have a hundred cups, made by different artists, each with its own expressive content and craftsmanship. When I reach for one for my morning coffee, I open myself to which cup –artist – speaks to me at that moment.” In this way, functional pottery pushes the boundary into art.



NY, NY: Clay Exhibition at the Clay Art Center

Schwartz says that she sees resurgence in the use of clay by all kinds of artists. She especially sees this in the New York area. She says, “The culture of New York is a fertile breeding ground for artists. There is an intellectual aspect to New York artists – an appreciation of ‘the idea.’ Ceramic artists here cannot help but be influenced by the nexus of all the arts. And, I see more crossover, in terms of materials and ideas – new ways of thinking about materials.” This was evident in the exhibit that just closed at Clay Art Center – **NY, NY: Clay**. A group of sculpture artists demonstrated the concept of putting forth ideas through art, challenging the viewer to interact in a dynamic way through the material, into the idea. Schwartz has explored this concept throughout her career, especially in her book, *Confrontational Ceramics*, published in 2008. Here, she documents the use of clay as a tool not just for artistic expression, but for social and political commentary, presenting a survey of international artists who have used clay to explore personal issues and concerns. She says of the NY, NY: Clay exhibit, “This was a small sampling of a diversity of expression, with a range of ages, from emerging to well-established artists who have an unburdened approach to the material. All were of very high quality and each was represented by noted fine-art galleries.”



Gallery viewers looking art Kenjiro Katade’s work at NY, NY: Clay

With almost fifty years of exploring the many aspects of clay, Schwartz has accumulated an impressive list of accomplishments and honors. She has curated numerous exhibitions, written articles, presented lectures, and chaired conferences, truly earning the title, Scholar. She is an honorary member of NCECA and is currently the Vice President of the prestigious International Academy of Ceramics in Geneva, Switzerland and is looking forward to the organization’s upcoming meeting in Barcelona this September. Her traveling exhibition, **InCiteful Clay**, has been touring through Exhibits USA for over three years and is currently at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater.



General and Emperor, Porcelain piece by Akio Takamori, part of the Inciteful Clay exhibit, curated by Schwartz

Although Schwartz plans to retire from her position at NYU as the Head of Sculpture in Craft Media next year, it is unlikely that she will disappear from the art world. While the area includes Glass, and Metalsmithing, she has recently expanded the program to sewing soft sculpture including digital embroidery. Her interest in fiber arts led to earning certification in millinery craft at the Fashion Institute of Technology. She

says, “I have already made over 200 hats! I have a great fondness for the vessel. What is a hat,

but a vessel?” The final exhibition at Clay Art Center – **Hot Pots** – will return to the basic vessel. This show, which was co-curated by Schwartz and Adam Chau, the CAC gallery director, opens September 24 and will look at new ideas within the functional art context and at themes outside utility.

On the wall in Schwartz’ office is a bumper sticker that she saved from the 1960s. It proclaims, “Ceramics – the World’s Most Fascinating Hobby.” Schwartz insists that clay is “the most interesting material being used today.” She sees a human necessity to return to something so elemental in light of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s digital revolution. “People need to touch something that responds so tactilely to their fingers,” she says. “There is a human need for authentic material.” For Schwartz, this authentic material, this clay, has nourished a lifetime of creativity and thought.

For more information about Dr. Judith Schwartz, visit <http://www.judyschwartz.com>.

For more information about the yearlong, In Our Backyard at the Clay Art Center, visit [http://www.clayartcenter.org/category\\_s/617.htm](http://www.clayartcenter.org/category_s/617.htm).