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Adapting the Ceramics Process with Creative Problem-Solving

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Adapting the Ceramics Process with Creative Problem-Solving

Abstract

Madeline Kaczmarczyk, a ceramics sculptor based in Rockford, MI, provided the cover art for the Fall 2021 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). The piece is a wall vase made from clay, luster glaze, and glass beads. Madeline has been creating decorative ceramics for over four decades. In recent years, Madeline has found creative ways to adapt the ceramics process so she can continue creating beautiful works of art. For Madeline, ceramics is more than a means to make a living. This meaningful activity brings focus to her life.

Keywords

occupation, occupational therapy, art, ceramics, beads, Madeline Kaczmarczyk

Credentials Display

Jennifer Fortuna, PhD, OTR/L

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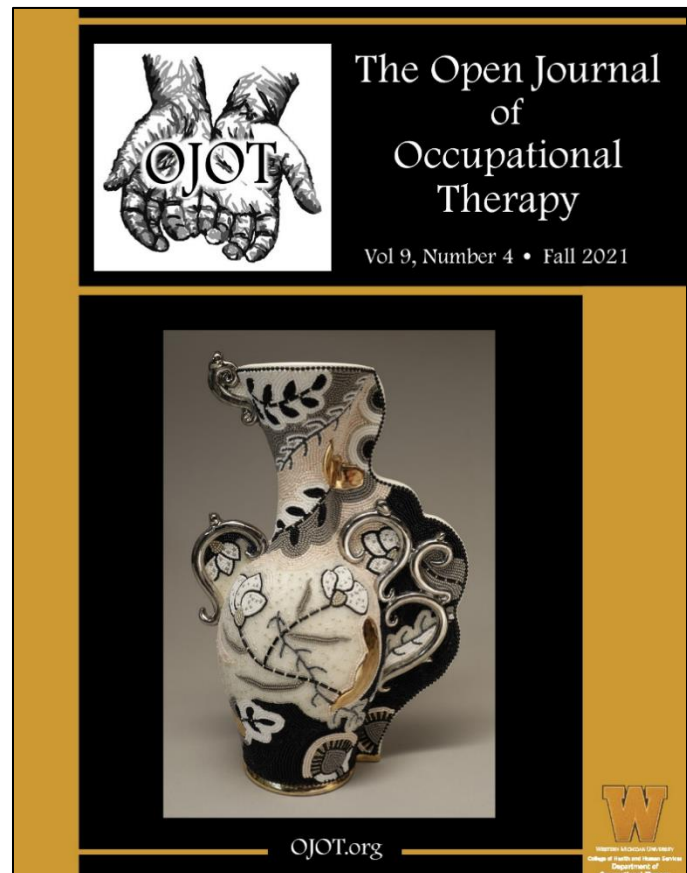
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There is a symbiotic relationship between the human and natural world. Clay has been used to create storage vessels and three-dimensional art for thousands of years. Modern ceramics sculptors use two primary methods to create pottery. A potter's wheel produces symmetrical forms that are easier to replicate. Hand building methods, such as pinch, coil, and slab building, create forms with a handmade look and feel. These methods give the sculptor more control and are easier to learn. There are several slab-building techniques. For example, the slab for a small pot can be formed using the palm of the hand. For larger pots, clay is pressed with a rolling pin, slab roller, or extruder to ensure uniform thickness. Once pressed, the slab can be formed with a mold or cut into smaller pieces that are joined together. After the form is finished, it must be left alone to dry. Depending on the size of the form, the drying process may take several weeks. Most pottery is fired twice. During the bisque firing, clay is permanently transformed into ceramic. Once cooled, glazing offers a protective coating and allows for artistic expression. The second firing fuses the glaze to the body of the clay. Acclaimed ceramics sculptor Paulus Berensohn found the ceramics process therapeutic. "It's not a way of making a living, it's a way of making a life" (Lawrence, 2014). For Madeline Kaczmarczyk, ceramics is a meaningful activity that brings focus to her life.

Madeline, a ceramics sculptor based in Rockford, MI, provided the cover art for the Fall 2021 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). The wall vase is made from clay, luster glaze, and glass beads. Madeline describes the piece as a playful take on shadows and patterns using a deconstructed classic vase form. Madeline has been creating decorative ceramics for over four decades. In recent years, she has found creative ways to adapt the ceramics process so she can continue creating beautiful works of art. For Madeline, ceramics is more than a means to make a living. This meaningful activity brings focus to her life.

Madeline was born and raised in Detroit, MI. Her father was a self-employed candy and tobacco dealer who stored his stock in the garage of the family home. As children, Madeline and her sister Darlene would sneak loose pieces of candy and nobody would know they were gone. "It was sort of amazing," she said. Madeline's mother was a homemaker and self-taught artist who loved to create. She grew up during the Depression and dropped out of school in the fifth grade. "For someone who was not formally educated, mom found several creative outlets." Gardening, cake decorating, and ceramics were a few of her favorites. Madeline grew up observing her mother come up with her own creative methods and techniques. For example, she would dip slip (wet clay) into lace fabric and set it on top of another clay object in the kiln. The lace would burn out, but the pattern was retained in the clay. "Everything mom made had certain steps," said Madeline. "She had high standards and was very precise."

Figure 1. Cover art for OJOT Vol 9, No 3, Fall 2021



When Madeline was a child, her mother gave her free reign of the art materials and encouraged her to create. Madeline believes her mother had a positive influence on her future career path.

After high school, Madeline pursued an art degree at Michigan State University. She completed many of the required classes, but left school before her degree was finished. Madeline traveled to northern Michigan to work as a nanny for three children. The family had a large group of friends who were writers and musicians. “Creativity was encouraged in this household,” said Madeline. She spent her free time at Northwestern Community College. “I could pay \$10 for access to all of their art materials,” she said. Over the summer, Madeline taught herself ceramics. “I was searching for something and did not know what it was,” she said. “Ceramics just hit me and I knew this is where I wanted to focus my time and energy.”

When Madeline’s father passed away, she returned to Detroit to support her mother. Madeline enrolled in ceramics classes at Pewabic Pottery in Detroit, MI. While taking classes, she met her future husband, Jerry Berta. “I like to think of myself as a good pottery thrower,” she said. “Jerry had filled an entire table with the work he had created that day. I thought, he can’t throw so I don’t have to be competitive with him.” Madeline describes Jerry’s work as humorous. “He was interested in 1950s diners and movie theatres,” she said. Three years later, Madeline and Jerry were married and making plans to open their own pottery business.

In 1975, Madeline and Jerry moved to Grand Rapids. They selected the location based on proximity to larger cities where they could sell their work. They found a ceramics studio for rent in Rockford, MI. “It’s amazing how everything fell into place,” said Madeline. The studio had a large garage door. In the summer, people loved coming to the studio to watch Madeline throw pots. “That was a lot of fun,” she said. Madeline and Jerry’s children, Zack and Amy, grew up in the studio. “They are both scientists, but they credit their art background for building skills in problem-solving,” said Madeline. “Knowing there is always more than one solution to any given problem has been very helpful to them.”

Problem-solving is also one of Madeline’s strengths. After giving birth to her daughter, Madeline started experiencing pain all over her body. She saw a doctor who confirmed the cause was rheumatoid arthritis. Madeline has been able to control her flare-ups through a combination of diet, natural products, and medications. “The new biologics have extended my work time by decades,” she said. Over the years, Madeline’s physical limitations have led her to adapt the way she works. “I used to be able to throw big, beautiful pots,” she said. “This took a lot of hand strength that I no longer have.”

A few years ago, Madeline developed a unique process for decorative ceramics during a jewelry class. “It happened as an accident,” she said. The assignment was to make a bezel to hold the stone in a ring. Madeline did not enjoy the jewelry making process which required sanding and sawing. She crafted a bezel and pendant out of clay. Madeline used a slowed drying process that made it possible to insert glass beads and pieces of clay. “I was able to make a form I liked and apply beads to it,” she said. “It was a great marriage of the two.” Today, Madeline applies her process to ceramics. After the clay is glazed and fired, Madeline creates a sketch of her design or improvises in the moment. She applies glue to the glaze before placing several rows of seed beads that are still attached to a string. “The glaze allows the glue to stick to the surface of the clay,” said Madeline. “If the clay is unglazed (e.g., bisque surface) the beads will pop off.” Once the beads are in place, she removes the string and the beads remain in place. The process allows bead application to happen quickly. Madeline has been working on a large flower vase decorated with gold luster and glass beads (see Figure 2). The vase rests on a pillow that provides support and prevents the piece from chipping. Madeline can only work 1 hr a day. “It’s an intense process,” she said. “Making the form goes so much quicker than applying the beads.” Madeline regularly posts

photographs of her progress on Instagram. Social media allows her to showcase her process and receive feedback.

Madeline strives to attain a soft feeling of fabric in her work. The inspiration behind her style is directly correlated with past experiences and objects from her childhood. “Mother had bone china tea cups and saucers with ornate detail and lattice work displayed on a shelf,” said Madeline. “We never used these objects, they were always on display like a piece of art.” To Madeline, the tea cups represented something beautiful, based on a functional object, and never to be used. Madeline’s religious upbringing is another source of inspiration. She says her Catholic faith and the ornate detail found in cathedrals are directly reflected in her creations. Today, Madeline is known for her decorative cups and teapots. “Deconstructed Cup,” (see Figure 3) is a ceramic tea cup made from clay, luster glaze, and glass beads.

Madeline says ceramics provide her focus in her life. When she is working on a project, everything else fades away. “I start with nothing in front of me,” she said. “Through the process of making, firing and glazing, having something in front of me is so rewarding.” Madeline admits some days are tough, but overall, creating ceramics has been interesting and fun. “There is always something new to explore in ceramics,” she said. “When I finish working on something, or get bored with it, somehow it comes to me.” Through the process of creating ceramics, Madeline finds something new to try, or another road to pursue, and her work becomes interesting again. Recently, Madeline and Jerry began creating 3D printed molds that resemble beaded decorations. Madeline uses the molds to stamp the design into soft clay. “Color Tea” (see Figure 4) is a ceramic teapot made from clay, luster glaze, and glass beads.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Madeline spent a lot of time in her studio. “When I went into the studio, I had to decide what to do,” she said. Madeline wanted to make big pots, but knew her hands were not strong enough. “I created a new technique that allowed me to continue making large pots,” she said. For comparison, Madeline used to throw pots on the wheel. “I used to be able to do 15 pounds of

Figure 2. “Flower Vase” (2021) by Madeline Kaczmarczyk



Figure 3. “Deconstructed Cup” (2020) by Madeline Kaczmarczyk



clay at one time,” she said. “The wheel would start spinning and a pot would magically form.” Madeline still uses a potter’s wheel for her adapted technique; however, the process starts much slower. She uses an extruder to create long coils of clay. As the wheel spins, Madeline smooths the edges of the coils and gradually pulls the clay up. The form only grows one or two inches taller before another coil is added. “This method does not require a lot of strength, and I can make any shape I want,” she said. “Black, Red and White Vase” (see Figure 5) is made from clay, luster glaze, and glass beads. Developing this method was especially gratifying during COVID. “Making something large gave me some control when everything was out of control.”

In addition to her studio career, Madeline has been teaching art classes at colleges and art centers for over 20 years. From 1999 to 2021, Madeline was an adjunct associate professor of art at Aquinas College. From 2006 to 2015, she served as the studio manager at the Cook Art Center, an art school located in Grand Rapids, MI. Madeline has been invited to conduct workshops by several colleges and potters’ guilds. Her talent has been recognized in the local community with awards from the Grand Rapids Festival regional art show and the Muskegon Art Museum. Madeline has been hired for several solo art exhibits and commissions, including the Hyatt Regency World Headquarters in Chicago.

When Madeline turned 60, she could no longer mass produce ceramics. Over time, the inflammation caused by rheumatoid had damaged the joints and surrounding connective tissues in her hands. Madeline recently had tendon transfer surgery on her dominant right hand. Dr. Jeanine Beasley, EdD, OTRL, CHT, FAOTA, is a close friend of Madeline’s. According to Dr. Beasley, the tendon of the extensor digiti minimi in Madeline’s fifth digit had ruptured at the wrist. The tendon of the extensor indices (index finger) was moved over to take the place of the damaged tendon. Madeline credits Dr. Beasley for the longevity of her ceramics career. “We met when our boys were in preschool together,” she said. “If it were not for

Figure 4. “Color Tea” (2020) by Madeline Kaczmarczyk



Figure 5. “Black, Red and White Vase” (2020) by Madeline Kaczmarczyk



Jeanine, and her connecting me to an excellent rheumatologist, I would have never had the career I did.” Madeline is unable to work with clay while she recovers from surgery. In the meantime, she is using her left hand to sketch design ideas for future projects. “I don’t know where I will be two months from now, except that I look forward to being back in the studio,” she said.

Madeline has been creating decorative ceramics for over four decades. The inspiration behind her unique style is correlated with her past experiences. Adapting the ceramics process has allowed Madeline to continue creating beautiful works of art. Although she no longer runs a storefront, Madeline continues to run her business. She plans to create one of a kind ceramic pieces as long as her hands allow. For Madeline, ceramics is more than a means to make a living. This meaningful activity brings focus to her life.

View more of Madeline’s work in the [OJOT Gallery!](#)

Visit Madeline’s Website:

www.madclaypots.com

Follow Madeline’s progress on Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/madelineclaymade/>

Reference

Lawrence, N. (Producer). (2014). *To spring from the hand: The life and work of Paulus Berensohn* [Documentary]. Available from <http://www.springfromthehandfilm.com>