

Mission Clay: The Industry of Art

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INTRODUCTION

Brightly colored columns stand throughout the industrial site of Mission Clay Building Products on the outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona.¹ Their presence, amidst outdoor horizontal stacks of terra-cotta pipe, signals that artists are at work on eight-foot extruded clay pillars.² These sculptures and the mass-produced industrial pipe come from four different clay caches found in select regions of Arizona. The mineral clays are mixed to create a stiff, muddy substance that is both suitable for industrial uses and adaptable as a sculptural medium.

The large, solitary pipes resemble architectural columns. Its universal form lends itself to artistic expression while referencing free-standing pillars. Not structurally functional in the traditional sense – although they are load bearing – the sculptures serve as artistic records created by experimental and experienced mark-makers. Artists, who work in this challenging pre-fabricated format, summon innovation and persistence. Recently, Tom Franco, of Oakland, California, said this endeavor demands “a commitment that forces you to expand [your ideas] and think bigger as an artist.”³

Tall and hollow, the cylinders provide artists with an opportunity to render encircling narratives or create a non-objective design. They incise, cut, saw, scrape, and hammer the curved surface, often decorating with colored slips. Some work alone for days, weeks, months and sometimes years; others may collaborate with fellow artists on a community project. All, however, must rely on a pre-established industrial protocol to realize their finished artwork. Essential to the forming, moving, firing, and installing of the completed artforms are the managers and workers of Mission Clay, who produce the industrial pipe used by the artists.



Plant manager Jon Humphreys works closely with artists to refine clay bodies to achieve new sculptural results. His technical knowledge of tempering clays that can endure the heat extrusion, sculpting, and firing processes is central to each artist's successful results. While most practitioners don't have a kiln large enough to make oversized work, Mission Clay's massive beehive kilns, initially designed for simultaneous bulk-firing of hundreds of pipes (weighing 350 tons per kiln load), offer unique opportunities to prepare oversized columns, the largest measuring twelve feet high by thirty-six inches wide. Creative partners in this endeavor are plant supervisor Robert Carmona and sculptor Shane Lutzk, whose assistance to many artists helps them navigate the industrial realities of making pipe-based sculpture. These collaborators have developed practices that probe artistic clay use on a large scale.

THE WAY OF CLAY



Surface allure and sculptural experimentation attract artists to work on Mission Clay's cylindrical water pipe. For nearly forty years, a concerted effort by the company has provided terra-cotta blanks for sculptors, painters, and potters, enabling the artists to explore where their inquiries might lead. Similar in concept to the traditional artists' atelier, the Art and Industry Program at Mission Clay advances the ideas of artists, provides a dedicated venue for pursuing their work, and welcomes the technical challenges needed to support expanding artistic vision. The result is a collection of columnar sculptures where a singular predetermined material is the common link to a variety of sculptural results.

The artists-in-residence activity increased, due in part to two conferences held in Phoenix that featured Mission Clay's unique program. Mission Clay Building Products was an integral exhibition and tour site at the 2009 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) annual meeting, *Ceramic Interface: From*

Dawn to Digital, and, in 2015, the International Sculpture Conference, New Frontiers in Sculpture, showcased the sculptural potential of the extruded pipe. Although the region's scorching summer temperatures close the residency from June to September, the industrial site is active for the remaining months of the year and supports artists, whose intensity in executing creative work is fed by an endless supply of extruded clay.

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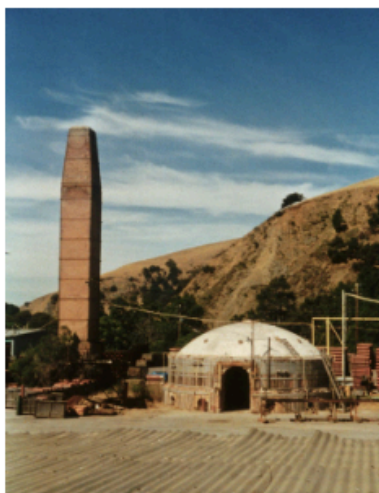
Lauren Mabry, from Wisconsin, is an artist whose established method of work matches Mission Clay's intent. Active as a ceramic sculptor and dedicated to a minimalist cylindrical format, she successfully adapts her approach to the extruded clay forms. Using colorful glazes, she creates lively circular paintings on the curved clay columns. Her process-based ceramic sculptures are, in essence, bright, three-dimensional paintings. "I consider each work as a painting that has form," explains Mabry. "I limit the complexity of the underlying structural forms in order for them to serve as a dimensional, pared-down canvas. The linear edges and basic, stable forms contrast the vibrant activity and complex depth of the surfaces."⁴ When viewed from a short distance, the pipes visually flatten into a rectangular, painterly plane. Her ability to address these pre-made, extruded canvases results in a body of original work that breaks free of the piece's industrial origins.

Tom Franco, along with his brother James who occasionally works in the pipe mural format, renders narratives on the columns where he depicts the extraordinary found in the everyday. Stylistically, Tom Franco illustrates a fantasy culture through folk-art depictions. The narratives of nature, athletes or passersby emerge from his deeply cut surfaces. Central to Franco's broader art practice is his commitment to collaboration. He insists on aligning his large-scale work with aspiring young artists seeking new artistic levels. Four artists from Franco's Firehouse Art Collective in Oakland, California – Heather Fairweather, Colin Hurley, Rayoliver Bacoy, and Iris Torres – worked extensively on the pipe mural project. Their collaborations were featured in the exhibition *Pipe Brothers*, on view at the Ceramic Research Center of Arizona State University in 2017.



MUD MATTERS IN CONTEXT

Mission Clay's Phoenix-based Art and Industry Program began in Southern California in 1979. The company's Corona plant served as the first site for what became known as the Pipe Sculpture Workshops. Sculptor Jerry Caplan from Pennsylvania brought this concept to the West Coast after developing it while working at a pipe manufacturing plant near Pittsburgh. The first California workshop relocated a year later to the Niles Canyon in Northern California, an idyllic location near the city of Fremont, situated in the southeast part of the San Francisco Bay region. The program's unconventional reputation excited artists, who vied for one of the limited spots available.



Working artistically with industrial clay pipe took hold in Niles Canyon, adding to the region's already strong reputation for the pluralistic use of the material. An abundance of clay, dedicated working space, kiln services, and camaraderie fostered a productive milieu for artists. Also, its proximity to the San Francisco art community made it an ideal site for weekend workshops, symposia, and artists-in-residence. Nancy Selvin, who attended the 1981 workshop, recalled the atmosphere there. "The magnitude of the work going on around us, as we struggled with our single, individually selected pipe, was astounding," she said. "There were tons of clay. The whirr of extruders [producing pipe] in multiple diameters, along with loading kilns, stacking fired ware in the yard, was happening day and night..."⁵ Richard Shaw, for example, utilized various sizes of pipe ranging from four to eighteen inches in diameter when building his life-sized seated figure, *Pipe Man*, during a 1992 Mission

Clay symposium. Originally developed for brick manufacture, the California clay body from Niles was malleable and less gritty than the clay formula in Arizona.

For nearly forty years, artists have worked at one of the company's five locations free to sculpturally explore the artistic use of industrial clay. Each Mission Clay site offered unique clays with distinct physical properties that influenced how artists addressed their work. The extensive familial support of artists began during the early history of the company. Since the 1960s, the Garrett family, as owners of Southern California family-run Mission Clay, have had a toehold in the ceramic arts. Katherine Garrett was married to the founder of Mission Clay, Ben Bryan Garrett. She was friends with renowned potter and educator Susan Peterson during the 1950s and attended Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. During the 1950s and 1960s, Katherine's sphere of associates included artists such as Otto and Vivika Heino, Shoji Hamada, Peter Voulkos, Maria Martinez, and Ralph Bacerra. Business interests in ceramic products led by the next-generation family member Charlotte Garrett foreshadowed the ambitious art and industry program that exists today.

Now, grandson Bryan Vansell has reinforced and broadened his family's earlier efforts. He organized many of the pipe workshops and the clay symposia that took place in Niles Canyon. Smaller Mission Clay operations, such as that in San Antonio, Texas, where Pancho Jiménez developed sculptural work from rectangular flue inserts, offered an alternative creative opportunity. Vansell's efforts in the family business guided the expansion of the Art and Industry Program that now has far-reaching effect. While business oversight drives most of his efforts, Bryan is also an artist who graduated in 1988 from San Francisco State University, and in 1992 from Claremont Graduate School with a Master of Fine Arts.

MATERIALLY DRIVEN

Although the Pipe Sculpture Workshops continued for twelve years, concluding in 1992, another program emerged in the mid-1980s that furthered experimentation. The Pipe Sculpture Symposia featured artists, demonstrations, and entertainment, illustrating this new format's dynamic appeal. In 1985, three recognized practitioners in sculptural ceramics, Don Reitz, Tony Hepburn, and Al Johnsen, were the first featured participants. Their sculpture demonstrations, collaborations, and slide lectures created an exciting atmosphere that was anchored in ceramic history while accelerating experimentation in large-scale building. Historically, Mission Clay's Niles location was the site of the California Pressed Brick Company, established in 1907, whose products were used in the rebuilding of San Francisco after the devastating 1906 earthquake and its ensuing fire. The site was purchased by the Oakland-based California Pottery Company in 1915 and was active for decades. In 1945, artist James Lovera, who made elegantly refined vessels, worked there testing clay bodies intended for a Bay Area dinnerware line. Another recognized Northern California potter, Marguerite Wildenhain, designed and implemented its production.⁶



For the attendees, these symposia provided an exciting opportunity to work along with artists who transformed the artistic field of clay. The challenge of scale, coupled with the endless amounts of clay, freed artists to take creative risks and thus advance their work. Stephen De Staebler welcomed this challenge: “There is something exciting about industrial scale. It dwarfs the individual. And that is the first impression I had of Mission Clay, with its gigantic beehive kilns and hydraulic extruder. . . . When the workshop got underway, and the leather-hard sewer pipes were dished up, human scale returned. The challenge was to transform these pipes so that their resemblance to the industrial world would purely be coincidental.”⁷

Working before an audience, symposium artists made pieces that were part performance and part sculptural endeavor. They included: Judy Moonelis and Stephen De Staebler, 1987; John Toki and Deborah Horrell, 1989; Ron Nagle and Christine Federighi, 1990; John and Suzanne Stephenson, 1991; and Richard Shaw and John Roloff, 1992, who walked the eighty-acre site to detail the land’s geology, its clay and history, which was consistent with the environmental performance pieces he was doing at the time.



When pipe production ended at Niles Canyon an opportunity for artists to work uninterrupted was created. Internationally recognized artist Jun Kaneko, whose home base is in Omaha, Nebraska, undertook a long-term residency in 1992–1994. Kaneko, with a small team of assistants, occupied the Niles Canyon location. During that time, they made a series of six eleven-foot tall sculptures and eighteen sculptures measuring eight feet in height – well suited for firing in the large beehive kilns. This successful endeavor led to a second residency in 2005 at a different Mission Clay location in Pittsburg, Kansas. Not long after Kaneko’s project ended, the Niles site closed permanently.

LAND SHIFTS

Other Mission Clay venues, such as Pittsburg, Kansas, emerged as residency locales. Susannah Israel, from Oakland, California, completed one of the few residencies there in 2004. While the sculptural process with pipe seems experimental, focused preparation takes place before the residency occurs. Israel’s twelve days in residence was based on months of slip testing and calibrations, enabling her to work economically while sculpting. “The clay texture changes from sand-in-butter to a dry concrete texture in only eight hours, if left uncovered,” she recalls. “It is essential to move rapidly around the pipe, marking the designs, carving the images, and painting areas of color with slips.”⁹ Consequently, a balance must exist between liberating experimentation and disciplined preparation to attain successful results. Jun Kaneko’s four eight-foot, six-inch heads were created inside the cavernous beehive kilns. These works appeared as public sculpture in the highly visible, landscaped center medians of Park Avenue in New York City in 2008. He and his team also produced thirty six nine-foot, six-inch dangos, and four thirteen-foot dangos, the largest of which were built in place inside the forty-foot diameter kilns with nineteen-foot high ceilings and twelve-foot high doors.¹⁰ The urge to develop an artists-in-residence program in Phoenix was due to the successful residencies at the Kansas plant. Since 2007, artists from throughout the country have worked at the Arizona site in a dedicated space alongside the factory workers, who make the pipe to create the large-scale sculpture.

SOLID PRACTITIONERS

Experienced and emerging sculptors create vibrant works in Phoenix. Many are legendary as teachers or are artists of merit exploring new ideas. Jeff Downing, Robert Harrison, Joe Hawley, David Kuraoka, Lisa Reinertson, Don Reitz, Cybele Rowe, Patrick Siler, Yoshio Taylor, John Toki, Agnese Udinotti, Rimas VisGirda, and Gonzalo Duran, co-creator/maker with his partner, Cheri Pann, of the Mosaic Tile House in Southern California, are among those artists who have completed work. VisGirda, who sculpts on a much smaller scale, recalibrated his process of figurative drawings onto the large, textured pipe. Its graininess is similar to the uniquely textured surfaces he developed for his forms. Others were invited to explore and create pieces that were either a departure from their body of work or an expansion of ideas. An example of this integrated experience was the residency of painter Russell Ferguson in 2014 and 2015.



SEASONED CLAYERS

Many artists at the top of their field have spent time developing new work at Mission Clay. Two such sculptors are Don Reitz and Patrick Siler. Ample amounts of clay enabled expansion of their mature ideas, based on a lifetime of experience. Reitz, who died in 2015, was recognized as an energetic practitioner for nearly fifty years. Described by Peter Held as a modern-day folk hero born at the height of the 1929 financial crash, Reitz developed a fearlessness regarding his work, often formed by those forced to live resilient and ingenious lives. Trained at New York's Alfred University, which fostered an expert utilitarian genre in his work, he was boldly original. Like his friend Peter Voukos, Reitz had a "penchant for disregarding prevailing orthodoxy in teaching and technique."¹² His autobiographical series, created in Phoenix in 2009, relied on his skill as painter and vigorous sculptor. He punctured the clay surface with drills and saws, while also using glaze to gesturally mark dreamlike imagery. These works referenced a personal experience for the artist, who explained the source of his imagery for the piece *Iron Man* (2009):



"Iron Man refers to a time period when I had broken my leg in a car wreck, and I was not supposed to walk again, but I decided that I was going to walk despite everything I was told. The image refers to me as physically broken but mentally strong as iron, and still having a great big heart to share with the world. I was angry with myself with my truck with the world with everybody, and that was too much negative energy to put out in the universe for anyone. So I decided to put myself back together and figured out that the heart is the strongest muscle in the body. I feel very proud that I proved the doctors wrong and with the help of my friends and family, I was able to go back and work again."¹³ Reitz likened the grand tubular form to telephone poles which he covered with graffiti-like expression.

For decades Patrick Siler created large-scale ceramic works. He made tile murals such as *Pillars of Enterprise* (1987), that measures 84 x 160 x 7 inches. His energized Pop-Expressionist approach, similar in feel to his paintings and woodcuts, finds new purpose on the Mission

Clay terra-cotta pipes. He regularly visits Mission Clay from his home in Washington State and conquers several pipes during each visit. Common-man narratives circle around each column. Tongue-in-cheek details of times gone by avoid sentimentality through Siler's vibrant use of glaze, roughly hewn, and cartoon-like renderings. "Comic strips use an economical shorthand, concise, blunt, and unromantic," said the artist. "It's not the actual jokes that grab me but an intrinsic humor in the drawings themselves."¹⁴ Due to Siler's history of executing work in monumental scale, his Mission Clay pieces possess a fluidity and ease that defy his rigorous creative process. The intimidation of the towering clay pipe melts away as Siler approaches his work with the same intensity and vigor found in his large-scale murals.

CONCLUSION

Many artists have dedicated extended time and focused effort in developing new work at Mission Clay. Some individuals are at the threshold of their artistic careers, while others have invested a lifetime in the practice of art, much of it using the material of clay. All have ventured into the industrial landscape to address the challenging call of coaxing unique sculptures from the extruded columnar pipe. The artistic consequence of their participation in the Art and Industry Program at Mission Clay is the stretching of contemporary sculptural language. These forms, often larger than those who work on them, confront the artists with the demand to engage with determination. Many have addressed the clay pipe in the manner of other materially based techniques. Some carve, as if into wood, others paint with glaze as if addressing a blank canvas. Many find a method that births a new vernacular in clay.

Endnotes

1 Mission Clay Products supplies vitrified clay sewer pipe, fittings, couplings, and related products to the below-ground construction industry, using locally sourced raw materials throughout the western U.S.

2 For example, an unfired pipe/column that measures fifteen inches in diameter – a common size used by artists – is approximately ten feet high and weighs 1000 lbs.

3 Author's phone interview with Tom Franco, March 9, 2017.

4 <http://laurenmabry.com/about/>.

5 Nancy Selvin's email to the author, April 5, 2017.

6 Daniels, Diana, *Playing with Fire*, in *Craters From Fire: Ceramics by James Lovera*, 2006. Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California, exhibition catalogue, pg. 10.

7 See the exhibition catalogue, *Artists of Mission Clay*, 1993. Richmond Art Center, Richmond, California, exhibition catalogue, unpaginated. Also, John Toki recently calibrated the volumetric interior of the beehive kilns to be 30,000 cubic feet.

8 Mission Clay provided many of its firebricks to resourceful artists who built their own kilns. A noborigama-style kiln called Mama Gama, owned by Rodney Mott, is now located in the Sierra Nevada foothills, more than 100 miles from Niles Canyon. <<http://www.rodneymottart.com/clay-talks>>.

9 Israel, Susannah. *Working Big: Sculpting Industrial Clay Pipe*, http://www.ceramicstoday.com/articles/clay_pipe.htm.

10 Jun Kaneko: Special Project, 2004–2008, pg. 2.

11 The artists who exhibited were Emily Carroll, Peter Durst, Susanne French, Tamara Huggins, Tracy Lee, Ron Nagle, Virginia Rigney, Richard Shaw, John Stephenson, and Susanne Stephenson

12 Held, Peter. "The Fearless Nature of Being: The Legacy of Don Reitz," 2011. SOFA Chicago: Sculptural Objects Functional Art and Design <<http://www.sofaexpo.com/chicago/essays/2011/the-fearless-nature-of-being>>.

13 Ephemera, Private Collection.

14 Watkinson, Patricia Grieve. "Patrick Siler," 2011, pg. 6.

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