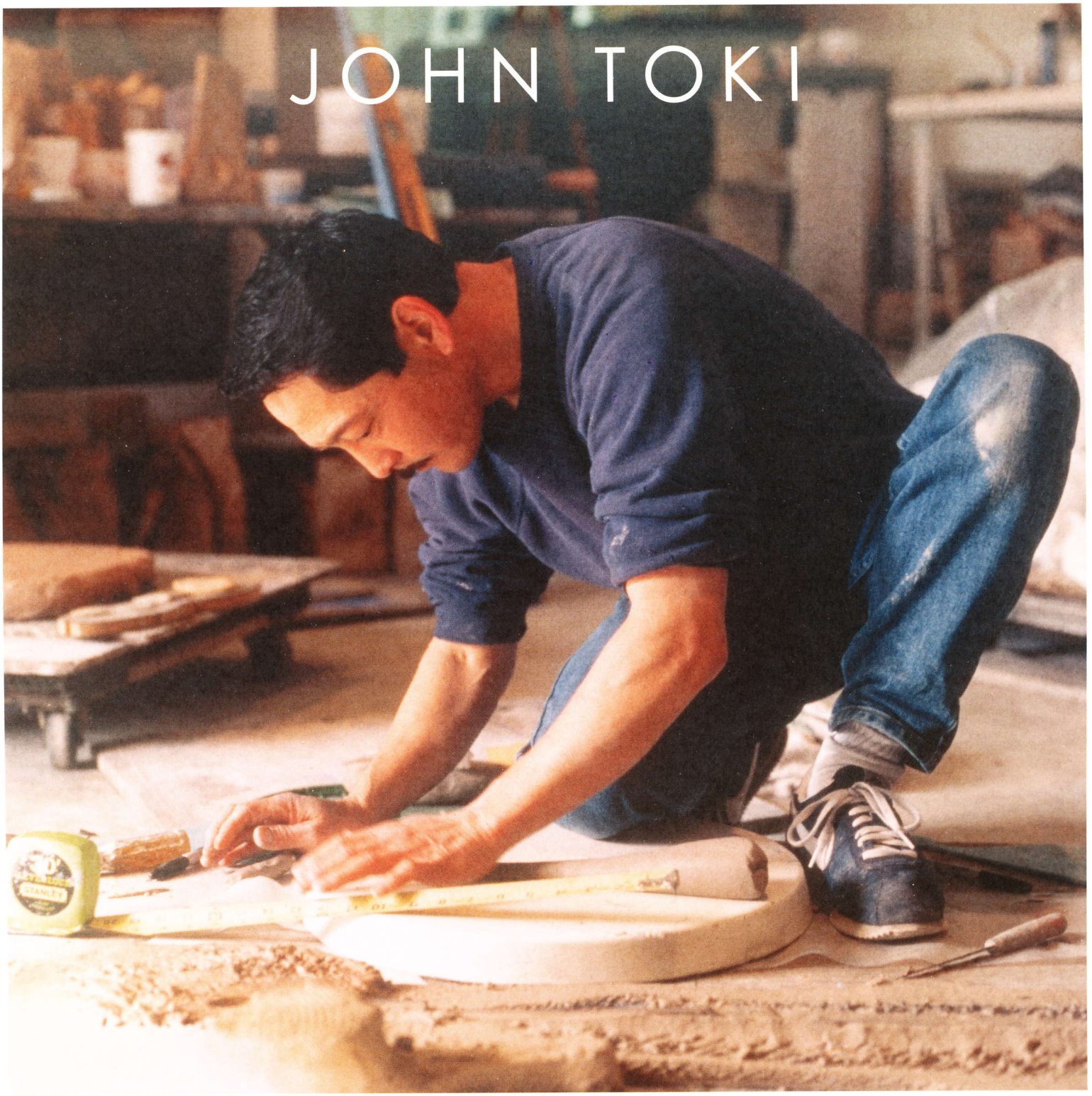
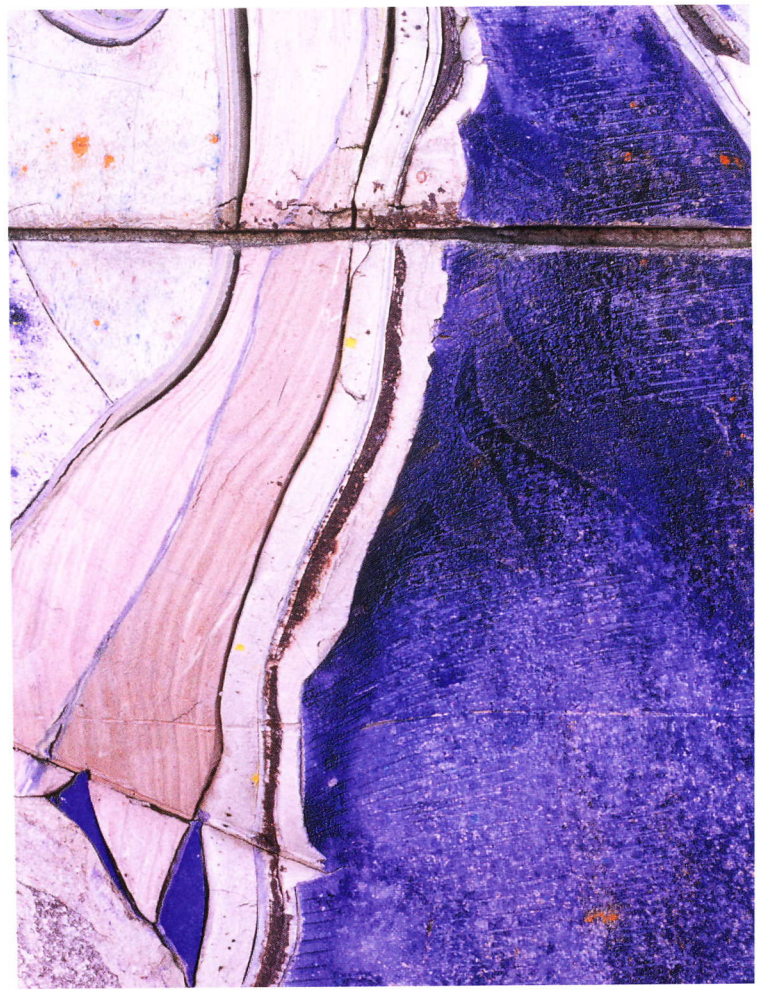

JOHN TOKI

JOHN TOKI



A LIFE THAT'S MORE THAN CLAY

JOHN TOKI
A LIFE THAT'S MORE THAN CLAY

COMMUNITY OF CLAY

John Toki is a life-long ceramic artist. His years of productivity have shaped the technical and artistic ceramic culture of the greater San Francisco Bay Area for five decades. His sphere of influence includes artists at all levels: Students from elementary age to college, cultural organizations, museums and art centers, as well as international venues that benefit from his accessibility and ceramics know how. Broader audiences know him as an author of two recognized books on the history and process of ceramics. John Toki also actively supports ceramic annuals, exhibitions and public projects that advocate an appreciation of traditional, innovative and unconventional ceramic forms. Concurrent with these efforts, Toki also pursues his own large-scale ceramic sculpture. It is not uncommon to find him in his large Richmond, California studio, quietly working alone on a new piece that will ultimately be at least three times his size.

Toki's expansive life-view evolves in part from his parents, Rayer and Akiko Leslie Toki, who founded Leslie Ceramic Supply Company, Inc., in San Pablo, California in 1946 with a move to Berkeley in 1957. Both were artists, especially Leslie, who studied fine art and ceramics and excelled as a musician. Today, John Toki operates Leslie Ceramics at the same Berkeley location,

Left: Detail of 2012 sculpture in John Toki's sculpture courtyard, 2013. Photo by Nancy M. Servis.
Opposite: Toki sculpture in his studio courtyard, 2013. Photo by Nancy M. Servis.
Title page: Detail of one of John Toki's sculptures, 1998. Photo by Dugan Aguilar.

Upper left: Robert Arneson and Rayer Toki at Leslie Ceramics, 1977.
Above: Clayton Bailey with John Toki in Clayton's Port Costa Studic ca. 2000. Photo by Nancy M. Servis
Left: John Toki, Jim Melchert and Rayer Toki at the Tokis' El Cerrito home, 1997. Photo by Nancy M. Servis.

continuing the tradition of on-site art classes, now expanded to include workshops, clay festivals and a display gallery. Begun as a small manufacturer of ceramic containers for the floral industry, it quickly evolved into the best Bay Area resource for artists needing ceramic materials or technical guidance. Clayton Bailey recently voiced what many ceramicists believe, "Leslie Ceramic Supply is common ground for nearly every ceramic artist living in, or visiting the San Francisco Bay Area." Leslie Ceramics also began making clay bodies and glazes to meet the needs of its customers. In a discussion of the business and the formation of the family collection, Jim Melchert fondly recalled how Rayer Toki would set aside unusual molds for Robert Arneson, who frequented the shop from nearby Benicia.[1] Toki himself remembers how Peter Voulkos often borrowed their orange truck to haul his large, heavy sculptures to exhibiting venues. An artistically supportive environment became the norm for the small ceramics business that at times seemed more like a community center for artists. The entire Toki family, which also includes sister Ellengale and John's twin brother, Walter, became known as experts in the field of clay.

Art at the Tokis' with Vernon Coykendahl, Charles Fiske, Viola Frey, Rayer Toki, Ellengale Toki and the McDonalds.

While the local business was one arena where ceramic arts flourished, the Toki home celebrated creative openness during their frequent parties. For these gatherings, their hillside El Cerrito home was sectioned off in areas for painting, drawing, ceramics, poetry and live music. John specifically recalls Voulkos sumi brush painting in the Toki's garage studio with Leslie. Rayer Toki was also an accomplished brush painter so they all enjoyed painting together. Jim Melchert and Ron Nagle often improvised music at the piano with Leslie Toki as well.[2] Many currently recognized California artists working in a variety of media were personal friends of the family, and impressed the young John Toki with their artistry and camaraderie. These joyful memories motivate Toki's ongoing support of ceramic learners, since he, as a young man, was a direct beneficiary.

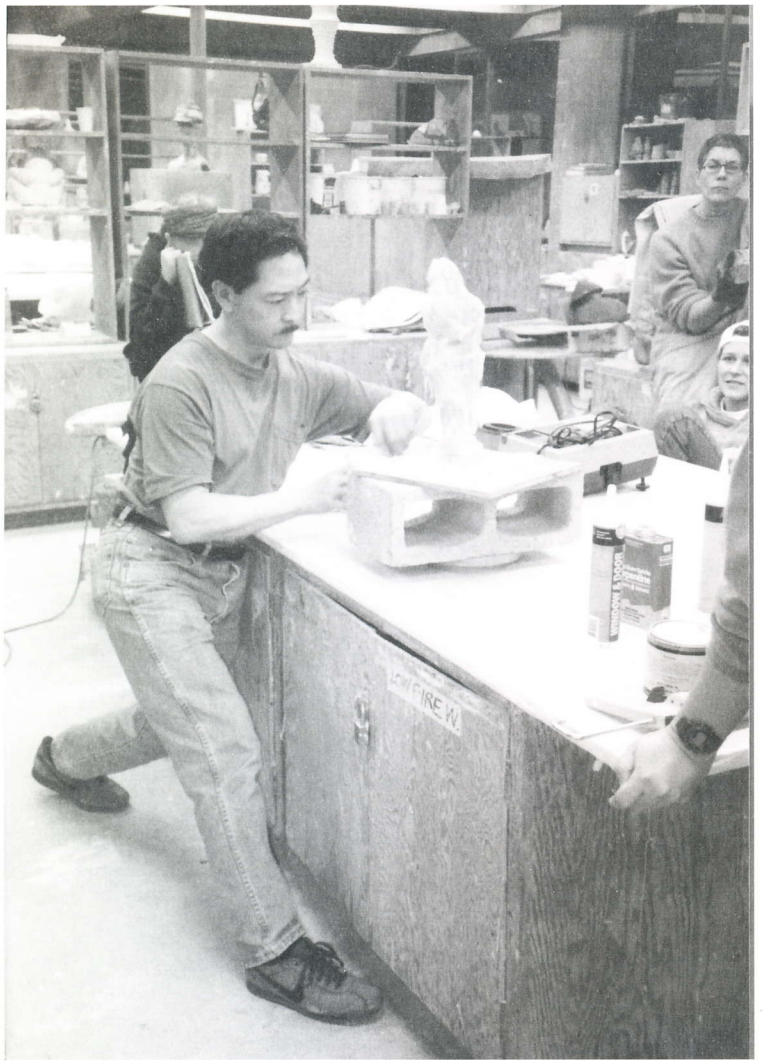
LASTING IMPRESSIONS

The inclusiveness of his parents was enhanced through the influence of other artists. As a student in the early 1970s, John Toki studied with Clayton Bailey at California State University, Hayward, expanding his horizons in the use of clay. He recalls that it was during this fervent time when his "notion about art and particularly how to express ideas through the ceramic medium completely changed."[3] Toki's preferred oversized scale is often linked to the influence of Stephen De Staebler, but it originated with Clayton Bailey, who is known for his clever, esoteric and humorous social commentary. Those early days, and shared interests like cross-country running, forged a lifelong friendship between the two artists.

Above: Herb Greene and John Toki Architectural Installation: Building with Artists, 1991 – The Continuous Present of ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE. The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH. Photo by Ron Forth.
Opposite (clockwise from top): Stephen De Staebler and John Toki, 2010. Photo by Danae Mattes; "John's Graduation Tea," with Clayton Bailey, 1974; John Toki working with Stephen De Staebler, c. 1985.

For twelve years, from 1977 to 1989, John Toki assisted Stephen De Staebler in both his Albany and Berkeley studios. During that extended period the two artists shared the highs and lows of working with large amounts clay, addressing its challenges of building, firing, moving and exhibiting massive ceramic pieces. This rewarding time shaped John Toki's competency with the material, especially engineering clay megaliths, and inspired his growing ceramic artistry. Many stories, some quite amusing, describe how the two artists solved ceramic predicaments, whether they involved installation, kiln repair or moving artwork. As an emerging artist, John Toki's aesthetic perspective was ingrained with De Staebler's acute sensitivity to space and undaunted physicality with clay. How volume, form and flow impacted an area was subtext to their work, further expanding the young sculptor's sensitivities to expansive three-dimensionality. While Stephen De Staebler appeared to be a quiet and unassuming artist, their shared conversations included having a good laugh as well as discussions of philosophical ideas. Today, John Toki still fires the large kiln Stephen De Staebler gave him. With its regular use, Toki is reminded of their enduring closeness.

Toki's spatial intuition coupled with his geologic sensibilities led to a collaboration with the Berkeley architect Herb Greene for the exhibition *The Continuous Present of ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE*, 1991, at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio. Their contribution featured a 50' x 16' installation with two overhead curving beams, styrofoam sections modified to look like layered rock formations and strips of white canvas bridging the beams. This landscape-influenced structure was an ecological illustration of the architect's intention to create a healing relationship between a building with people, rather than emphasizing architectural focus alone. This meaningful collaboration further loosened Toki's artistic approach to scale. Soon thereafter, his sculptures attained unprecedented size and stature.



THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

While John Toki was pursuing his sculpture practice he also taught in the Ceramics Department of the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) from 1995 to 2007, while Viola Frey was still an active member of the faculty. Along with artists like Arthur González, Hedi Ernst and Lisa Clague, who was the ceramics technician at the time, he fostered a skilled environment that took learning beyond the studio. Each semester, John also organized and ran symposia for students as well as community members, with lectures and demonstrations featuring regional and visiting ceramic artists. Many of his students appreciated Toki's dedicated approach. One former student, Derek Weisberg explained, "John was probably one of the busiest teachers at CCAC and was also one of the most generous. . .He put his students' needs and education before everything else. He fully believed in his students, treating us not really as students but as actual artists."

John Toki's support for education extends to public schools, community organizations, and regional art centers, especially the Richmond Art Center where Toki himself took pottery classes as a young boy, studying with the inspiring teacher Ernie Kim.[4]

Top: John Toki demonstrating mold making at California College of Arts and Crafts, 1997.
Bottom: John Toki and Charlotte F. Speight, 1997. Photo by Scott McCue.
Opposite (clockwise from upper left): John Toki doing a sculpture demonstration at Mission Clay, Niles, CA, 1987. Photo by Charlotte F. Speight; John and Rayer Toki with Charles Fiske and Viola Frey, 1976; John with Emilio Stamas– a young intern from Piedmont High School, c. 2009; John Toki with Leslie Toki doing a wheel throwing demonstration for The San Francisco Chapter of Ikebana International Club, c. 1970. Photo by S. Onodera; John Toki giving a clay demonstration to the Chinese Ceramics Association, Taiwan, 2000. The audience never saw so much clay used at one time! Toki made a 5'7" piece in 1 ½ hours.

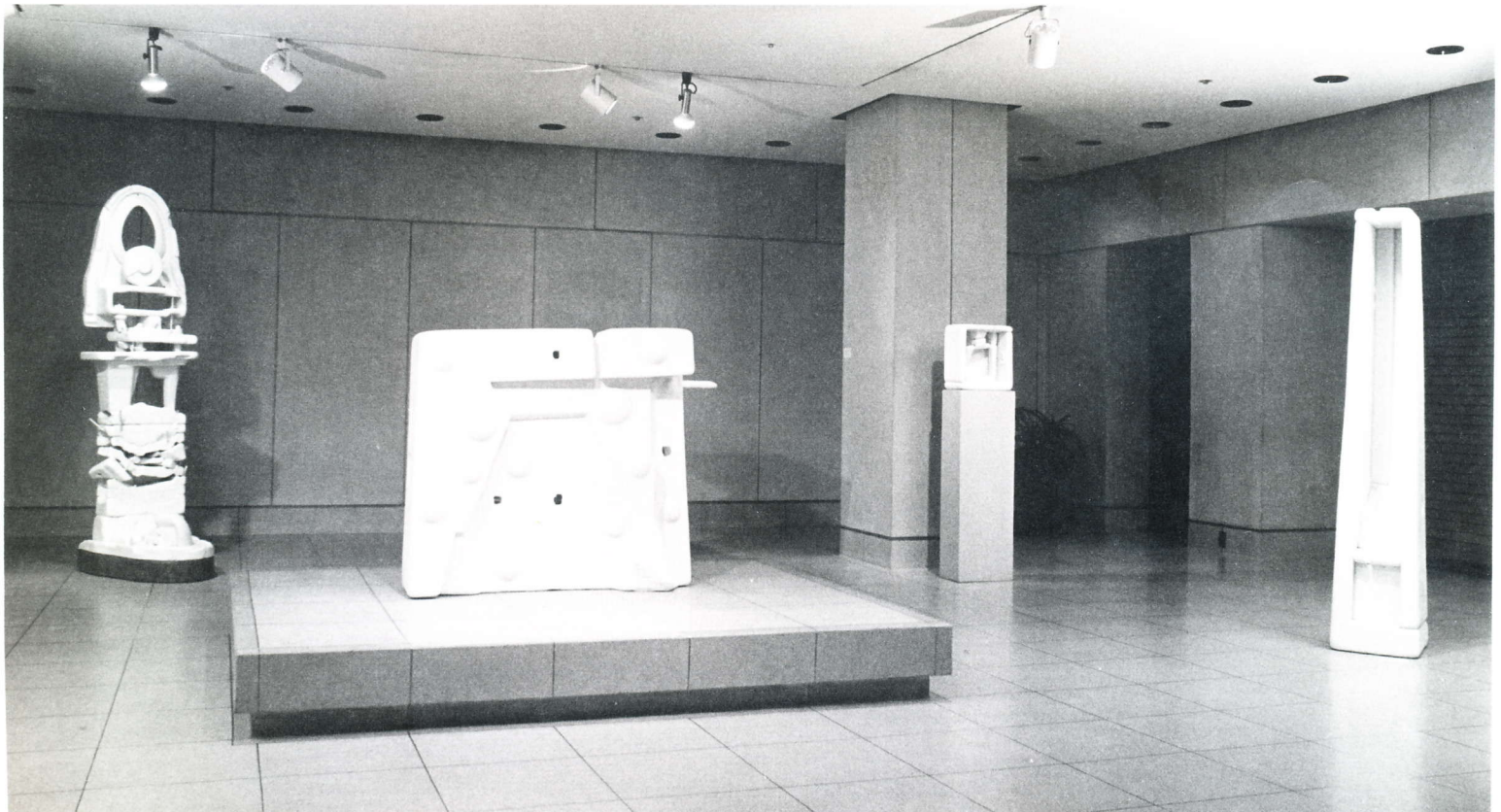
Toki's generosity takes many forms – providing art supplies for underserved communities, giving tours of his large studio to high school students, and conducting on-site art demonstrations and lectures. With each effort, his intention is to advance people's engagement with clay, fostering their artistic self-confidence and personal growth.

John Toki regularly participates in large venues like the annual California Conference for the Advancement in Ceramic Art, Davis, and The Mission Clay Art and Industry Program. A professional turning point was his 1992 residency at the European Ceramic Work Center in The Netherlands as well as his residency at the John Michael Kohler Arts Industry Program, in 1982. Today John Toki co-produces the Ceramics Annual of America in San Francisco, now in its fourth year. Considered one of the largest exhibition venues for ceramic sculpture in the West, this three-day venue promotes artists from across the United States and increasingly includes artists from around the world. Through his years of hands-on clay experience, Toki has also become curator of outdoor ceramic sculpture exhibitions integrated throughout the Bay Area and in Arizona. Along with actively pursuing ceramic projects, Toki co-authored two noteworthy books with ceramic historian Charlotte F. Speight: *Hands In Clay,* now in its 5th edition, and *Make It In Clay – A Beginner's Guide to Ceramics,* 2nd edition. These two valuable texts provide firm guidelines for the technical development of ceramics within an art historical context.

MORE THAN CLAY

John Toki's mindset is to support the work of artists at any stage of their development and broaden the public's engagement with ceramics. This dedication guided the unique development of the Toki Collection of Ceramics, which evolved over six decades. Many of the 450 objects in the collection were gifts

Below: John Toki Exhibition Installation at Concourse Gallery, Bank of America World Headquarters, San Francisco, CA 1980.
Opposite: John Toki working in his Richmond studio, 1998. Photo Dugan Aguilar.



to the Toki family, given by the artists who benefited from their patronage, support or friendship. Some pieces were also acquired through trade or purchase. Each piece in the collection was especially admired for the authenticity of the artist's intent.

> *"The collection,"* John Toki wrote, *"was an important part of the lives of the Tokis. Over the years they developed a genuine bond with many of the artists and reveled in their successes. The Tokis especially wanted to support the young and emerging artist who needed the most help, and they personally knew nearly every artist. This made collecting a rich experience. . .The Tokis displayed as many pieces as would fit into their store and felt it was important to share the collection with customers so they would be inspired to create."*[5]

What developed over the years was a tangible timeline documenting an intimate view into late 20th century Northern California ceramic history. The eclectic scope of work includes vessels, tiles, tile murals and sculpture by practicing ceramicists like Anne Adair (Voulkos), Robert Arneson, Clayton Bailey, David Best, Donna Billick, Robert Brady with Sandy Simon, Lisa Clague, Stephen De Staebler, Viola Frey, James Lovera, James Melchert, Ron Nagle, Annabeth Rosen, Richard Shaw, Peter Voulkos and many more. It also has unique ceramic pieces by artists who usually work in other media, like tromp l'oeil painter John Wehrle, who was asked to experiment with a new line of glazes that Toki was developing. In 2008, 170 pieces from the unconventional Toki Collection of Ceramics were given to the Oakland Museum of California. One unique sculpture, a collaboration between Nathan Oliveira and Peter Voulkos, is among those that now belong to the museum.[6] The collection thus provides one of the more engaging views into the varied regional perspective of the medium of clay. Since California has a unique role in the unfolding story of American ceramic history, the Toki Collection of Ceramics offers insight into this pluralistic era of ceramic makership.

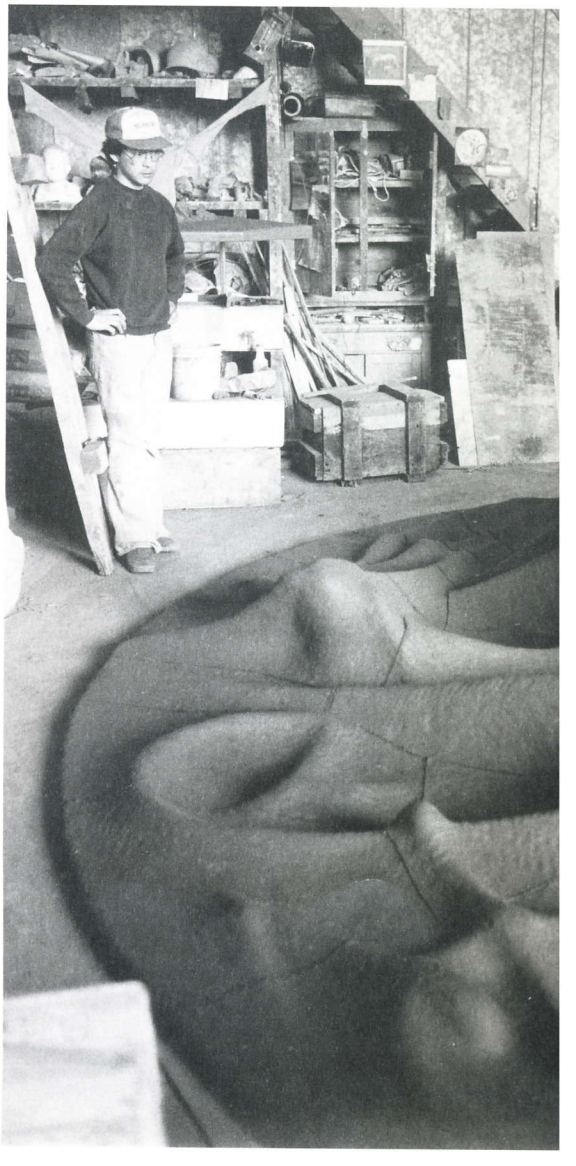
Toki's entrepreneurial drive has also led to additional innovations like the Toki kiln, as well as flame ware clay used to make ceramic cookware presently being marketed in the Bay Area. Toki and Bryan Vansell, of Mission Clay Products, have developed large ceramic wine fermentation casks presently used by select Northern California wineries.

SCULPTURAL PASSAGES

Amidst all these efforts, John Toki maintains an active art practice in the same studio he built in 1974. Over the years, Toki's studio has developed into an industrial-looking workyard, with towering cranes, hoists, very large kilns, and sculptures staged throughout an enclosed courtyard. Inside the one-story, barn-sized building are drawings, a collection of implements and tools, works in various stages of completion, buckets of ceramic stains and an extensive amount of wet clay. A recent addition was the conversion of a side area into a gourmet kitchen.

It is characteristic for John Toki to use tons of clay to build a piece, though as much clay is discarded as is retained by the time the work is complete. His sculptural surfaces, which he builds in layers face-down on the floor, are punctuated with colored porcelain trails amidst rich earth-tone striations. This stylistic hallmark illustrates why Toki describes himself as a landscape sculptor, echoing the surrounding Bay Area region as a point of departure for his towering clay forms. With geological tonal gradations, color passages and linear features, his commanding sculptures effectively translate the dramatic California landscape into an abstract realm. This sculptural approach partially developed from an integration of Western

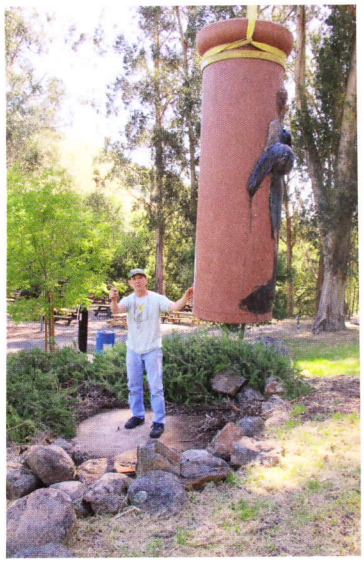
Opposite left: Toki in his sculpture courtyard, 2002. Photo by David Kong.
Opposite right: John Toki working in Stephen De Staebler's studio, 1982. Photo by Scott McCue.



and Eastern ceramic traditions, originating with his family who savored their rich Japanese heritage, especially through the art of calligraphy and the study of Japanese ceramics. Toki initially trained as a traditional potter, contemplating the irregularity of the Japanese tea bowl. Some of the aesthetic concepts first pondered there, like the preoccupation with the edge, find large-scale realization in his sculpture.

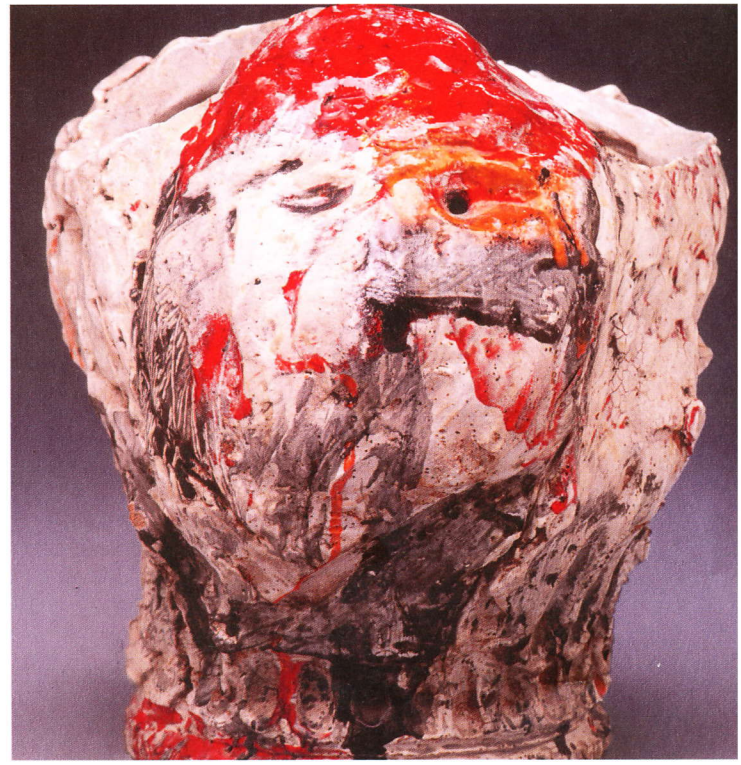
John Toki has left a large imprint on the world of ceramics especially in Northern California. He entered this realm through his generous family, who fostered success for many whom they came to know through their ceramic business and broader community. The creative views he absorbed from artists he knew during his formative years further defined this conscientious artist into a mindful leader who forged his own boundary-breaking work while guiding many others along the way. When asked recently how he managed this scope of involvement, John Toki simply said, "I just stay present to what I am doing, and do it the best I can. And when I'm finished I turn my attention to the next thing."[7] Along with his wife, Pam, a clay monoprint artist in her own right, his trajectory is still unfolding.

Nancy M. Servis
Davis, California
February 2013



Left: John Toki doing a sculpture demonstration at Mission Clay Products, Niles, CA 1989. Photo by Bryan Vansell.
Right: John Toki installing one of Lisa Reinertson's sculptures for the exhibition, "Works in Nature," on view at the California Shakespeare Theater, Orinda, CA 2012. Photo by Lisa Reinertson.
Opposite left: John Wehrle. Mural detail, 1997. Earthenware tiles with underglazes and glazes. 46 x 24 x 2" Toki Collection of Ceramics.
Opposite right: Nathan Oliveira with Peter Voulkos, Vase with Faces, ca. 1960. Stoneware clay, 14 1/2 x 14 x 12" Toki Collection of Ceramics. Photo by Scott McCue.

[1] "Context of Patronage" by Jim Melchert in *More Than Clay: The Toki Collection of Ceramics,* Exhibition Catalogue, 1998, p. 13
[2] "Interview: John Toki," by Richard Whittaker in *Works & Conversations,* Dec. 23, 2008.
[3] "John Toki" by Nancy M. Servis in *Ceramics Monthly,* October 1998, Volume 46, No 8, p 38.
[4] His first one-person show in 1979 was staged in the center's 6000 sq. ft. Main Gallery.
[5] "Introduction" by John Toki in *More Than Clay,* p. 2
[6] Called *Vase with Faces,* ca. 1960, Peter Voulkos threw the stoneware clay form that was then glazed by Nathan Oliveira. It was made originally at the UC Berkeley Pot Shop, and was given to Leslie and Rayer Toki by Jim Melchert.
[7] "Interview: John Toki," by Richard Whittaker in *Works & Conversations,* Dec. 23, 2008.



JOHN TOKI – SELECT CHRONOLOGY

Education:

1978 California College of Arts and Crafts, MFA
1974 California State University, Hayward, BFA
1972 Contra Costa College, AA

Positions:

2013 Toki Studio, established 1974
Mission Clay Products – Art & Industry Program, Associate Director, Corona, CA
SCULPTCAST, Conversations About Sculpture, Associate Producer
AMOCA, American Museum of Ceramic Art, Pomona, CA, Board Member
McGraw Hill, author since 1985
Leslie Ceramic Supply Co., Inc., owner; founded 1946
Richmond Art Center, CA, Trustee

Past Positions:

2010-2012 CAA, Ceramics Annual of America, Co-Director
1993-2008 California College of the Arts, Senior Adjunct Professor
1992 European Ceramic Work Center, 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands, staff
1980-91 San Francisco State University, Visiting Assistant Professor, Sculpture Dept.
1989 California State University, Hayward, Adjunct Professor
1987-88 Richmond Art Center, CA President, Board of Directors
1985-87 University of California, Berkeley, Lecturer, Ceramics Dept.
1982 John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Workshop Leader, Arts Industry Program, Sheboygan, WI
1977-89 Stephen De Staebler, Artist's assistant

Exhibitions and Public Projects:

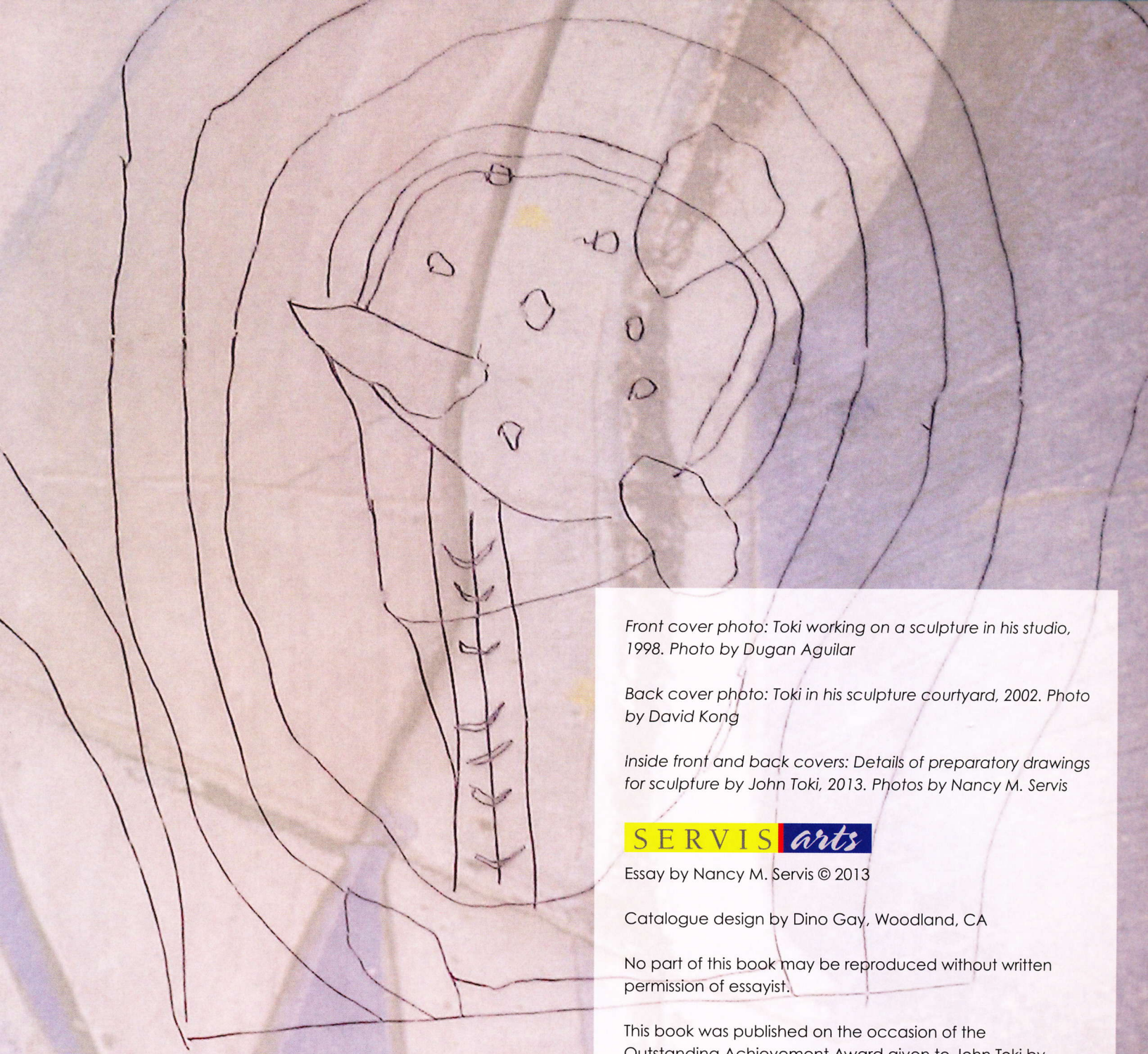
2012 Transmedia Sculpture Walk, Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA installed "Blue Turns"
Village Theater Arts Gallery, Danville, CA
Two person show with Pamela Stefl Toki, Petaluma Art Center, CA
"Berkeley Treasures: Bay Area Ceramics," Berkeley Art Center, CA, group show
2011 Craft & Cultural Arts Gallery, Oakland, CA
75th Anniversary Exhibit, Richmond Art Center
California Shakespeare Theater, Orinda, CA, installed "Spring Majesty," 24'
30 Ceramic Sculptors, Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA
American Museum of Ceramic Art, Pomona, CA, installed 22' painted pipe sculpture
2010 Ceramics Annual of America, San Francisco, installed 22' sculpture
Sky Harbor Airport, Phoenix, CA sculpture installation
Museo de Arte, Mazatlan, Mexico, monoprint exhibition
2009 Sculpturesite Gallery, San Francisco, CA, solo show
Udinotti Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ
Building Products, AZ, Clay Pipe Sculpture Exhibition in conjunction with The National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA)
30 Ceramic Sculptors, Natsoulas Gallery, Davis, CA
2008 Sanchez Art Center, Pacific, CA, solo exhibition
Udinotti Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ
City of Orinda, CA sculpture installation at the Library Plaza
2007 Art Foundry Gallery, Sacramento, CA, solo exhibition, sculpture and monoprints
Sculpturesite Gallery, San Francisco, California College of the Arts One Hundred Year Anniversary Alumni exhibition
Richmond Art Center, "Dirty Dozen," group exhibition
2006 Stephen Oliver Center, Tacoah Bruce Gallery, California College of the Arts, CCA Ceramics, 1950-2005
Sculpturesite Gallery, San Francisco, two-person exhibit with Kristin Gudjonsdottir
2005 Art Foundry Gallery, Sacramento, CA, "From Tiles to Totems," curated by Nancy M. Servis
Osceola Gallery, Emeryville, CA, group exhibition with Pamela Stefl Toki and Larry Stefl
Oakland Museum of California, installed "Blue Back," 20' tall column
California Shakespeare Theater, Orinda, CA, group outdoor sculpture invitational National Institute of Art and Disabilities (NIAD), Richmond, CA, group exhibition with NIAD artists
2004 Paradise Ridge Sculpture Grove, Santa Rosa, CA, outdoor sculpture exhibition
2003 City of Berkeley Art Commission, CA, "'s-Hertogenbosch," 14' column
Baltimore Clay Works, MD, Raven-themed group exhibition
2002 University of San Francisco, outdoor sculpture exhibition curated by Richard Kamler
2001 Davis Art Center, CA, collaboration with Daniela Pulido
2000 Pence Gallery, Davis, CA, "Artists as Authors," group exhibit curated by Nancy M. Servis
1999 Washington Square Gallery, San Francisco, CA, two person exhibit with Larry Stefl
1998 Mendocino Art Center, CA
1997 Oceanside Museum of Art, CA, Invitational, "West Coast Painting and Sculpture"
Bedford Gallery, Walnut Creek, CA, installed "Spring Majesty," 24' column
Udinotti Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ
1996 California State University, Hayward
Oliver Gallery, California College of Arts and Crafts
Udinotti Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ
1995 Carnegie Museum, Oxnard, CA
Oakland City Hall, CA , Installed Cultural Arts Division commission, "Blue Currents," 15' mural
Pence Gallery, Davis, CA, solo exhibit
1994 City of Mountain View, CA, Plaza Art, 1994, outdoor public art exhibition
Oakland Museum of California, invitational sculpture, "O" 8' loaned 1994-2000
1991 Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati, OH, "The Continuous Present of ORGANIC ARCHITECTURE" 50 x 16' architectural installation with Herb Greene, architect. NEA funded
1989 Gallery De Keerder Kunstkamer, Cadier En Keer, Netherlands, group exhibition
1987 Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California, Berkeley
1985 Eden Issel Terrence, Hayward, CA, installed "Tetsudau," 12' mural
1983 Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission, CA, "Black Tide," 14' dia.
1982 California College of Arts and Crafts 75th Anniversary Exhibit at the Richmond Art Center
1979 Richmond Art Center, CA, First major solo exhibit
John Michael Kohler Arts Center, WI, "Pieces of Eight," group ceramic exhibition

Publications: co-author

2002 "Hands in Clay," 5th edition, McGraw-Hill
2001 "Fired by Ideals, Arequipa Pottery," Oakland Museum & Pomegranate Press
2000 "Make It In Clay," 2nd edition, McGraw-Hill

Awards, Residencies, Grants:

2013 NCECA, National Council on the Education of Ceramic Art Recipient of the 2013, Outstanding Achievement Award
City of Berkeley, CA, Recipient of John Toki – Leslie Ceramic's Day
2010 Contra Costa Junior College, Distinguished Alumnus Award
2004 Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts, awarded residency.
1990 San Francisco State University, Public Art Program, awarded site for sculpture installation.
1989 European Ceramic Work Center, Netherlands, awarded residency.
1987 City of Hayward, CA, presented key to the City for contribution to the arts.
1982/79 John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Arts Industry Program, awarded residency.
California College of the Arts, awarded two teaching grants.
Orchids Award, Oakland, CA, honorable mention with Herb Greene, for Franklin Plaza Design.
Ruth Chenven, New York, awarded sculpture grant.



Front cover photo: Toki working on a sculpture in his studio, 1998. Photo by Dugan Aguilar

Back cover photo: Toki in his sculpture courtyard, 2002. Photo by David Kong

Inside front and back covers: Details of preparatory drawings for sculpture by John Toki, 2013. Photos by Nancy M. Servis

SERVIS arts

Essay by Nancy M. Servis © 2013

Catalogue design by Dino Gay, Woodland, CA

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