

embodied clay

by Cristina Córdova

The Center for the Study of Figurative Ceramics in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina is a thriving space for figurative sculptors to find creative growth and community.

We are wired to recognize ourselves. A face, a posture, the curve of a hand—these things pull us in, make us pause. We see a figure, and, almost instinctively, we search for a story, a connection, something familiar.

Clay has always been a vessel for this recognition. Long before museums, before galleries, before art as we name it now, people shaped figures from earth. In the Neolithic settlements of Eurasia and Africa, in the Pre-Columbian communities of the Caribbean and the Americas, clay was pressed, coiled, and fired into forms that carried the weight of human longing. These figures held fear and devotion, memory and myth. They were reflections—fragments of a shared past, speaking across time.

The Center for the Study of Figurative Ceramics was born from this simple but essential need to sculpt the figure—a place where artists can come together to learn from one another, to refine skills, to push the limits of clay and ideas alike. Here, figuration is a conversation—a way of exploring, questioning, and understanding the human form in all its depth, alongside the many other possibilities of representational work in clay.

With experience as a Puerto Rican ceramic sculptor, an Alfred University graduate, and recipient of the 2024 Herbert Adams Memorial Award in Sculpture from the National Sculpture Society, I founded the Center in 2022 and offer a range of learning opportunities. These include virtual courses of varying lengths, in-person masterclasses, and residencies. These programs are designed for artists at every stage of their ceramic journey, providing multiple pathways into the world of figurative ceramics, fostering growth within a supportive and engaged community.

A Live Virtual Gathering

One of the keystone offerings is a one-month virtual curriculum. It is not passive learning. There are no anonymous logins, no detached lectures playing in the background. Instead, there are live sessions twice weekly where artists meet face to face, where techniques are demonstrated and dissected, where ideas unfold in real time. The work continues beyond the screen through our shared forum: maquettes evolve into forms, experiments lead to breakthroughs, questions arise and incite discussions long after class has ended.



1 A wintertime view of the Center, nestled in the mountains of Western North Carolina. 2 James Xavier Barbour leading an anatomy class at the Center.



Our teaching cohorts are thoughtfully curated to offer expert instruction from a diverse range of perspectives, covering a broad spectrum of contemporary representational approaches in clay. Master sculptors from around the world generously share their expertise and engage with students, answering questions and offering insight into their practices. Some instructors focus on the intricacies of construction, while others specialize in surface techniques or explore more specialized areas within the field. Recent collaborators include Shae Bishop, Melissa Cadell, Claire Curneen, Thaddeus Eardhal, Judy Fox, Sharon Griffin, Sergei Isupov, Crystal Morey, Claire Partington, and Kathy Venter, each bringing their own unique approach and perspective to the material.

Here, learning is cumulative. One artist's challenge becomes another's insight. The walls of the digital space blur as shared victories and frustrations become the foundation of a community. Participants leave not just with refined skills but with a network, an expanded language of making.

Beyond hands-on demonstrations and lectures, every cycle includes insight from professionals in the gallery and business side of ceramics. Contributors such as Kathryn Gremley, director of the Penland School of Craft Gallery, and Leslie Ferrin of the renowned Ferrin Contemporary provide guidance on building a career, navigating the market, and positioning work in the broader art world.

Each season also offers sessions with a creative coach who provides invaluable tools for overcoming creative blocks, gaining clarity, and finding sustainable ways to support studio practice. Together, these perspectives ensure that artists leave not just with refined technical skills, but with a deeper understanding of their path forward.

Students can choose to participate in the class informally or apply for a certification of completion. The Center's certification follows the Carnegie Credit Unit system, requiring 52.5 hours of study, including lectures and independent work. These month-long virtual sessions grant credit in two essential areas: Building and Firing Strategies for Ceramic Sculpture and Surface Development for Ceramic Sculpture. These are the backbone of a figurative practice—how a piece is structured, how it survives the fire, how the surface speaks.



3 Judy Fox offering a hands-on demonstration for the class. *Photo: New York Academy of Art.* **4** Cristina Córdova demonstrating the construction of a full figure. **5** Resident artist Daniel Gloyd's dynamic installation space.

Mastering the Form: In-Person Masterclasses

The Center's in-person masterclasses provide an intimate environment for exploration. With classes limited to ten students, these workshops foster deep engagement with both the material and fellow participants. Here, artists can immerse themselves in the process, guided by experienced instructors who offer personalized attention.

Past workshops have drawn from disciplines beyond ceramics. In conjunction with myself, anatomist James Xavier brought the rigor of scientific study to the sculpting of the human form, breaking down musculature and structure with the precision of one who has studied the body from the inside out. Patricia Esperanza, a keeper of ancestral knowledge, led artists through the rich, elemental process of pit firing—earth, fire, air, and time shaping each piece in ways no electric kiln ever could.



6 Patricia Esperanza loading a pit fire during her workshop. **7** Claire Partington sharing her building technique via a live Zoom session from her studio in London. **8** Cristina Córdova sharing a close-up hand-sculpting demo.
Photo: LOAM.

The masterclasses do not end when the pieces are completed. Conversations extend beyond the studio through our chats and forums, creating bonds between artists who might never have met otherwise. These shared experiences—watching the flames rise during a firing, discussing a stubborn crack in the clay—become the foundation of a community that lasts long after the workshop ends.

The Residency: Space to Breathe, Time to Push

There are moments in an artist's life when nothing matters more than space and time—time to think, to push, to let the work take shape without interruption. The Center's residency program nestled in the mountains of western North Carolina, was created for those moments. Here, artists step away from daily demands and into a space designed for immersion, where the goal is not just to create but to experiment—to stretch a process to its limits, to follow an idea to its furthest point.

Residents have full access to a well-equipped studio, including kilns for large-scale pieces, a pit-fire area, a sandblaster, a glaze laboratory, and a spray booth. Just steps away, a fully furnished apartment with a kitchen offers a quiet, comfortable place to rest and reflect.

But this is not solitary work. While each artist arrives with their own focus, the residency is built on exchange, hosting two artists at a time for 2–4 weeks. Conversations unfold over coffee, critiques happen in real time, discoveries are shared and sharpened through dialog. In addition, residents have continued interactions with myself and my team to consult on building strategies, get feedback and receive gentle mentorship, and support throughout their stay.

Artists leave changed. Not just with new work, but with new ways of thinking, new questions to pursue. The residency is a recalibration, a deepening.

Looking Ahead

The Center for the Study of Figurative Ceramics is growing. New courses, new workshops, and new opportunities are always on the horizon. But at its core, the mission remains the same: to foster a space where artists can develop their voices, where learning is dynamic, where tradition meets innovation.

We are expanding our curriculum to offer structured learning tracks—courses that build on one another, providing both a strong technical foundation and the depth needed to refine creative practice. Our goal is to support artists at every stage, offering a clear path for growth while leaving room for exploration.

Accessibility is also a priority. We are working to establish scholarships that will open doors for a broader and more diverse group of artists, ensuring that financial barriers do not stand in the way of participation.

This is more than just a place to study ceramics—it's a space where making becomes a dialogue, where skill and concept are equally valued. Whether joining us virtually or in person, artists find not only expert instruction, but also a supportive community. The invitation is open. Come join us. The work is waiting.

For more information, visit: figurativeceramics.org.

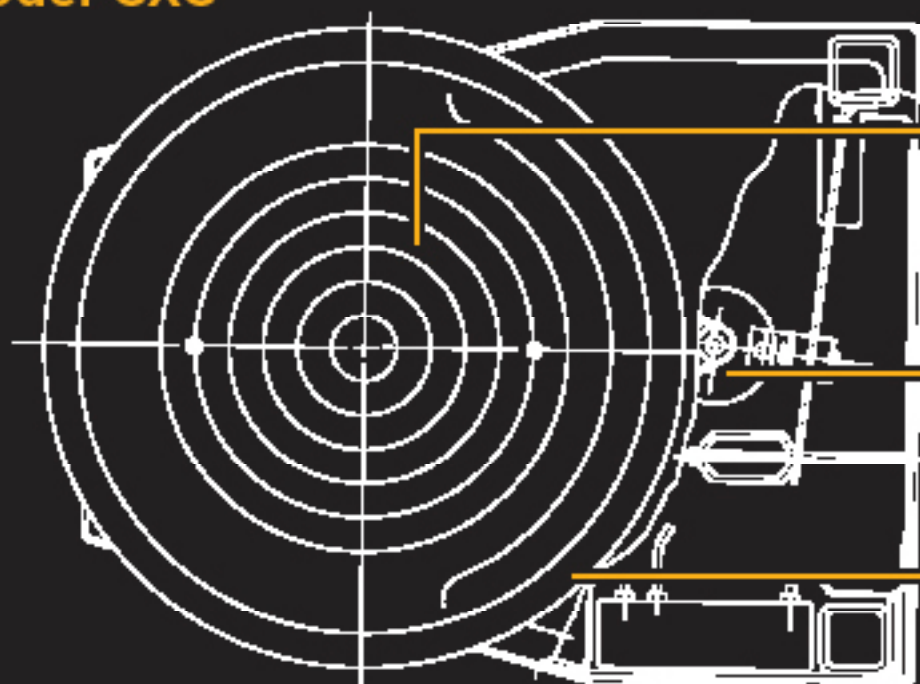
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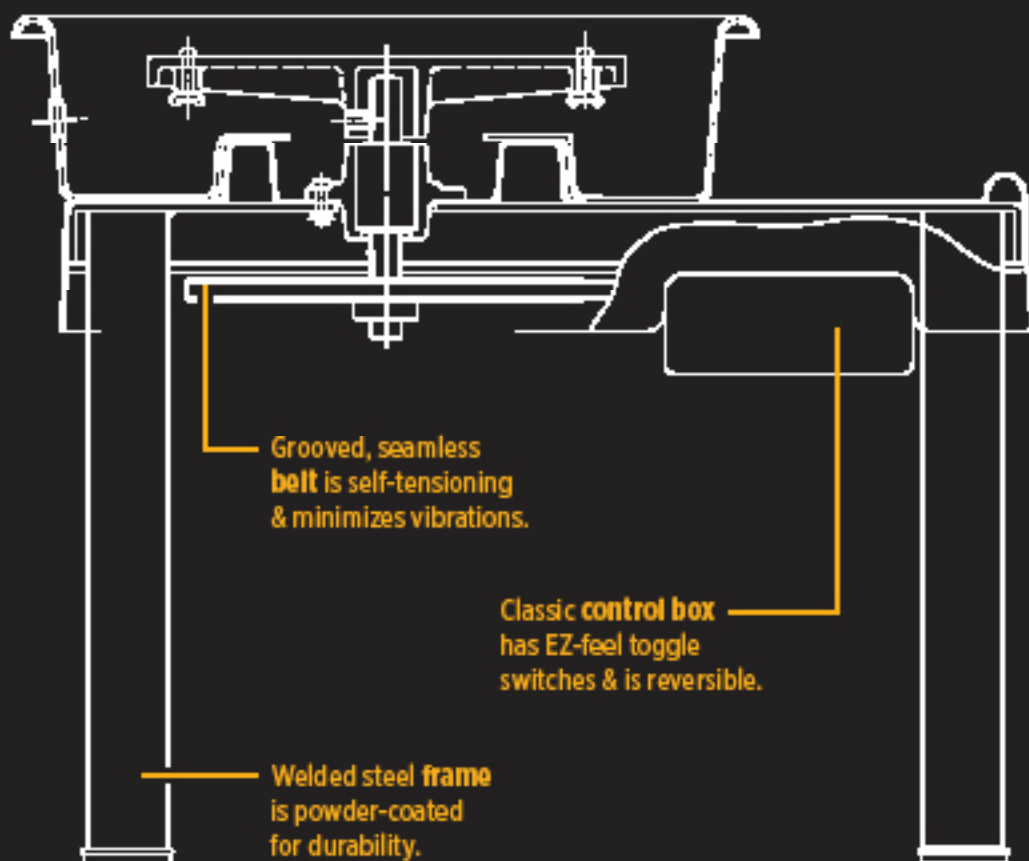
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