

ceramic arts *yearbook* and annual buyers guide



Cohorts.Art
Ceramic Artist/
Project of the Year

supplement to **ceramics** | PotteryMaking
MONTHLY Illustrated



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Cohorts.Art

Ceramic Artist/Project of the Year

Editors: What inspired you to establish Cohorts.Art (formerly Clay Cohorts) as a mentorship program?

Simon Levin: Like so many good things, Cohorts.Art sprung from discontent, empathy, and opportunity. Educational opportunities in the art field have been inaccessible for many people. In the midst of the pandemic, as online ceramic education became a viable alternative, I began to envision a program that would merge the most effective elements from my own learning experiences: intrinsically motivated peers; a knowledgeable, passionate, invested mentor; lots of iteration and discussion; honest constructive critique; and a supportive community. As I reflect on my educational journey, some of my best teachers have been full-time studio artists. Their teaching methods were relational—my mentors clearly wanted me to find my voice and were invested in my success. They opened my eyes to things I did not see and challenged me to clarify and develop my ideas. Forging this strong connection allows for the trust that is central to honest critiques, and a relationship that is committed to artistic growth.

I began to wonder, what if you took an intense two-week craft-school workshop and exploded that intimate experience into a year's time? How many more iterations of making, firing, and feedback could there be? How much more trust and continuity could evolve? Would 24 individual classes spread out over time not just inspire change, but cement the process of idea development in a student's studio life?

Much of the Cohorts.Art program is what I wanted and needed when I was trying to figure out my own voice, inspiration, and a sustainable artistic direction. I needed a mentor, a peer group, an in-person workshop, and honest feedback from people I trusted.

Eds: Describe how Cohorts.Art works for those in teaching roles as well as for the Cohort students. What are the themes that recur in each year's group in terms of goals, struggles, growth, etc.?

SL: Since Cohorts is based on relational learning and the group sizes are kept small, we are able to work with people on their own goals, and meet them at their level of experience. The students'



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goals often include making better work, growing their business, building kilns, getting gallery representation, writing an artist statement, and connecting with a peer group that is committed to artistic growth.

I had originally thought that Cohorts would be primarily a platform for critique. The value I have gained over the years through honest feedback from people I trust has been immeasurable. However, my narrow view of the potential for such a program was quickly stripped away by actually working with the first ten students. I realized how powerful the community aspects of the Cohorts program are; the struggles we face in our artistic development are eased by the shared experience and the ways that we can lift each other up.

I was smart enough to hire an amazing manager, Ann Marie Cooper, whose organizational skills are only surpassed by her warm, community-minded spirit. Ann Marie has done so much to forge strong and lasting connections within the ever-growing Cohorts community. Lisa Orr and Liz Lurie joined me as mentors in the program's second year, bringing a great investment in the program by adding a lecture series, historical context, and many more teaching resources. We have continued to grow, adding two more mentors this year and a total of eight for 2024.

I have come to think of Cohorts more as enveloping students in a culture of connection and engagement: connection to their work, connections to ideas, connections to a mentor. The continuity, community, and contextual foundation all inform the culture of artistic growth that Cohorts is creating.



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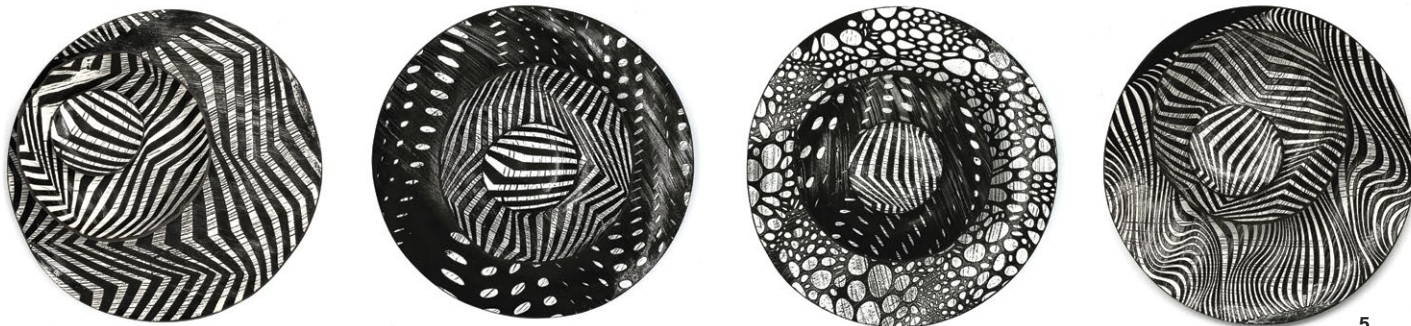


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1 Tina Opp, Mike Olsen, Simon Levin, and Suzanne Weil tend the train kiln at Mill Creek Pottery during their 2022 workshop. 2 Tina Opp's *Procession*, 14 in. (36 cm) in length, wood-fired stoneware, charred cypress wood, 2022. 3 The team behind Cohorts.Art: Manager, Ann Marie Cooper, and Founder/Director, Simon Levin. 4 Liz Lurie demonstrates to her students, Amy Dimenna, Liz Myers, Tara Rosenboom, and Lisa Eppolito, during their 2023 workshop. Photo: Will Abraham.

Students who apply choose the mentors they want to work with, and from those applications the mentors build their cohorts of five students. It seems important that the groups are curated by the mentors, as it allows for agency and personal investment, as well as uniting the groups together around the mentor's skill sets. I have

heard wonderful things from the mentors about their experiences: rewarding investment, community connection, and developing friendships. I have also had conversations where the mentors struggle to figure out how to connect and best serve their individual students. I find this heartening as it is an inherent part of relational learning.



5 Yael Braha's plates. 6 Simon Levin's students Amanda Jorgensen, Shannon Brownlee, Joe Carter, and Any Guelmann with their work fresh from the train kiln during their 2022 workshop. 7 Liz Lurie's *Flowerbowl*, handbuilt and wood-fired ceramic. 8 Stephen Corner, Simon Levin, Rekha Srinivasan, Kate Marotz, Signe Klove Kjaer, Shirley Stephens enjoying their monthly group Zoom meeting. 9 Tara Rosenboom's work in progress. 10 Liz Lurie's 2023 in-person workshop (left to right): Liz Myers, Lisa Eppolito, Liz Lurie, Tara Rosenboom, Will Abraham, Amy Dimenna.



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Eds: How has Cohorts.Art changed since its start in response to positive feedback or to overcome issues—be they technological, programmatic, or something else—to continue to serve students?

SL: We are early on in our growth and our model allows us to be pretty nimble and personalized. We do source feedback from students, mentors, and the larger clay community. Equity, accessibility, and additional resources have been big topics as we consider our growth and goals. We have begun to address these by creating a BIPOC Artist Scholarship Fund. Through a generous grant for a lecture series, we are building a video library for our Cohorts students. We are intentionally growing our group of mentors, adding artists who have skill sets in gallery ownership, soda firing, and sculptural work. Having more mentors with diverse skills and backgrounds allows us to cross-pollinate those resources, as other mentors are available to assist in areas outside another mentor's range.

Our growing alumni numbers have been amazing to watch, and they continue to connect and lift each other up after leaving the program, hosting weekly shared studio sessions on Zoom, and traveling to fire kilns together. In response to students not wanting to leave Cohorts, this past year we added a new program for alumni called Continuum, which has more of a focus on small groups of students receiving monthly presentations and critiques from a variety of artists. Continuum has been a work in progress as it finds its legs, but it essentially continues to build community, offers support, and provide excellent quality feedback from a range of perspectives.

Liz Lurie: Mentor

Editors: How do you approach mentoring ceramic artists with various goals, skills, and work styles?

Liz Lurie: One of the many wonderful components of this program is that each cohort is small (5 students), making it easy to tailor the education to the individual. Being able to recognize and teach to different learning styles and agendas is very rewarding and, I believe, makes for an enjoyable and absorbable learning experience for the student.

I try to encourage and foster relationships between the cohorts, especially at our once-a-month group meetings where they learn skills of critiquing. This develops community and the language, tools, and trust needed to help each other move forward and think critically about the work well beyond the scope of the program. Many of the students are alone in their studios and it is important to help in creating a supportive culture of sharing and creativity.

Eds: What advice would you offer artists considering a mentoring relationship or program—both mentors and mentees?

LL: I think the people who apply for this program are serious about figuring out why they are making the work they're making. They're eager to take a more reflective, critical look. It takes courage, vulnerability, and openness to dig deeper and share that experience with a teacher. It's the mentor's responsibility to be respectful of that vulnerability while also pushing the student to be accountable for research and goals.

At the 6-month mark, individually we reassess goals, check in with expectations, and step back to look at the progress that has been made (knowing that progress doesn't always look like progress!). It's essential to remain open and flexible, as goals sometimes change quickly, and a redirection is needed.

I strive to help students discover and make the work they want to make by exploring their understanding of their sources and questions. Through critical feedback, demos, lectures, and various exercises, I hope to help students learn to see in a different way. This paves the way for the cohorts to become more confident and have deeper understanding of who they are as makers!



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Eds: What is the connection for you between establishing and working with Cohorts.Art and your own clay practice?

SL: When things are happening in my studio work, it feels like a good conversation you don't want to end or like a good book that you don't want to put down. Much of my time with my students is finding ways to curate a similar engagement for them in their studios. There is a compelling energy and flow, struggle and resolution in this space, and the inviting conversations with students who are finding their place in artistic expression informs my own practice and clarifies my ideas.

Eds: How do you balance the demands of making work, teaching workshops, mentoring studio assistants and cohort participants, and actively working to inspire and support more creative interactions between ceramic artists?

SL: This is an interesting question. There is definitely a sweet spot where making, reflecting, questioning, teaching, and learning are all happening in balance. There is a momentum from watching a student discover a rich vein of ideas, and there is an energizing momentum from the self-care of mining your own ideas and artistic values.



11 Simon Levin's yunomis, to 5 in. (13 cm) in height, wood-fired porcelain with underglaze, 2023. **12** The inaugural Cohorts.Art students. Left to right: Amy Song, Polina Miller, Jess Lease, Simon Levin, Miles Asher McCreary, and Stephen Mullins, with their work fresh from the train kiln at Mill Creek Pottery in 2021. **13** Paul Heckler's bottle, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, soda-fired earthenware, 2023. **14** Paul Heckler and Denise Shoukas at the Sugar Maple Center for Creative Arts. Photo: Bruce Dehnert.



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Sometimes I balance responsibilities and demands on myself well, and sometimes things get out of whack. I still overextend myself and have a persistent belief that I can get more done in a day than I can. Mostly though, I feel gratitude, which centers me. Gratitude takes the edge off comparisons and feelings of inadequacy. I am thankful for clay, for the generosity and ideas of other artists, for my students' trust in me, for my teachers who invested in me, and for my family who supports me.

Eds: What is the most important thing that has happened in your career so far and why?

SL: I found mentors who helped me think clearly and start the path to finding a voice. Without that foundation, I can't imagine where I would be. All accolades and adventures rest on that.

Paul Heckler: Student

Editors: How has your work or practice changed since participating in Cohorts.Art?

Paul Heckler: When I started Cohorts, I had just come back to the studio following a 13-year hiatus from making work and was feeling somewhat adrift. The program's sustained focus and regular feedback helped me reground myself in my artistic practice and pushed me toward a new clarity about the role I want ceramics to play in my life. As a result, and with support from Liz Lurie, I decided to pursue an master of fine arts degree and am excited to start my studies at East Tennessee State University in fall 2023.

Eds: What element of the Cohorts program was most effective in driving growth in your ceramics practice?

PH: Cohorts offered more sustained one-on-one mentorship than I had ever previously experienced in my artistic training. The program's structure made it possible to gain feedback across cycles of iteration and helped me set studio goals and build accountability for following through. The result was a much deeper understanding of my own work, and thoughtful guidance on how to situate my work in a larger context. It was also so wonderful to have time together as a cohort in person—I cherish my memories of learning with Liz and of visiting the Everson Museum together as a group.

Eds: What advice would you offer artists considering a mentoring relationship or program?

PH: Particularly in ceramics, it can be helpful to build mentoring relationships with people who focus on different modes of work from your own. Ceramic artists sometimes focus so much on the technical that we lose sight of the bigger picture. Getting feedback from someone who uses different processes is a great way to focus more on motivation and meaning than on technique. It's also been so important for me to build relationships with my fellow cohort members. I just fired a soda kiln with Denise Shoukas, who was with me in Liz's cohort—it was fantastic to have that time together and to be building our practices together.



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Yael Braha: Student

Editors: How has your work or practice changed since participating in Cohorts.Art?

Yael Braha: Since completing the Cohorts.Art mentorship, I have gradually experienced a great deal of growth, both in terms of my practice and exposure. During the program, the activities and scheduling kept me really busy and engaged: I felt like a sponge, learning as much as possible, casting a wide net by experimenting, trying new ideas, and failing a lot—which was very helpful! After the mentorship, I sat down and objectively looked at all the work produced within the year, and decided to focus my efforts in the direction that felt promising and closer to defining my unique style. Even though we're no longer actively meeting as a group, I'm grateful to have formed a long-lasting bond with both the Cohort's members and Simon, my mentor. The Cohort's critiques and teachings still accompany me as I continue to develop new forms and create new bodies of work.

Eds: What element of the Cohorts program was most effective in driving growth in your ceramics practice?

YB: I particularly enjoyed the recurring group meetings with the cohort. I have learned as much by listening and participating in feedback offered to other members, as I have from the feedback that was offered to me. The discussions were lively and dynamic, and they shifted focus and depth depending on the individual and group needs. I really appreciated the professional knowledge shared by Simon, the program's breadth, its adaptability, and personalization.

Eds: What advice would you offer artists considering a mentoring relationship or program?

YB: My humble advice is to carve out enough time to test, try new ideas, and put into practice for additional learning and discovery. I was grateful that during the Cohorts.Art mentorship I had access to a studio 24/7, kilns, and plenty of time to work. It would've been a bit more challenging for me to reap the benefits of the mentorship if all of these elements weren't available to me at that time.



Eds: Can you discuss the ways that social connectivity and engagement have become a larger part of the ceramics field? How has this affected your career path and how has this impacted your studio work?

SL: Social connectivity has been really good for Cohorts.Art. We use it to build up community and bring attention to each other's work, as well as access a wider audience. Our manager, Ann Marie, has started an Instagram hosting series on the ClayCohorts page, and it's joyous to watch individual members share their studios, work, and ideas. As Cohorts has grown to over 40 students this year, this platform gives me a chance to see the development of students and the connections among students and mentors. I also know of several lively group chats between current Cohorts classes and alumni. I feel as though we are using these platforms in some of the best ways to cross physical distance and support growth.

Eds: Do you feel that your identity as an artist has changed over time? If so, how?

SL: Oh my, yes! Most recently I have been collaborating with Virgil Ortiz in exhibitions at Grounds For Sculpture, The History of Colorado Center, and the New Mexico Museum of Art. Simply put, saying yes to the collaboration has moved me to think about work in sculptural and futuristic ways. Functional pottery is a deep and powerful discipline. It is my root and entry into artistic expression. Its possibilities are endless, but it also has defining edges. I am currently in a place of comfortable confidence in the unknown, I feel as though I can source the knowledge and bring into being any idea I am passionate about. It's quite a liberating space.

Eds: Are there any other collaborative projects or expansions of the Cohorts that you would like to share and talk about?

SL: I am really pleased to announce that Cohorts.Art is working with The Color Network in a concerted effort to support equity and access to high-quality ceramic education. We are offering two full-tuition scholarships for BIPOC artists in 2024, with the option for additional funds for travel and housing.



15 Workshop at Mill Creek Pottery, 2021. Left to right: Yael Braha, David Roswell, Simon Levin, Mike Tavares, Ian Dunton. **16** Yael Braha's bottles. **17** David Roswell loading the train kiln at Mill Creek Pottery during his 2021 workshop as a student of Simon Levin. **18** Lisa Orr's students Sara Farish, Hypatia Griffith, and Angela Tilley study teapots in her collection during their 2023 workshop.

Eds: Do you have any advice for artists who would like to make a positive impact in the ceramic arts beyond making work? How would you advise individual artists on executing big ideas?

SL: Tie your idea's success to other people's self-interest. I have come to believe in and curate experiences where every individual feels they got more than they put in. I want the Cohorts.Art students to feel like they are getting a great deal, the mentors and Ann Marie to feel well paid, and for myself to feel lucky to be connected to and working with people I admire. In this way, Cohorts.Art is

promoted more by the students and teachers than I could manage alone and my gratitude sustains me.

Simon Levin is a potter living and working in central Illinois. He has traveled extensively building kilns and teaching workshops. He loves clay and likes most people.

For information about Cohorts.Art, visit cohorts.art or find more on Instagram [@claycohorts](https://www.instagram.com/claycohorts).