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ART STUDIO

Natural Expression

Judit Varga interprets the forms of nature in her award-winning ceramic creations

BY TINA COPLAN

Ceramic artist Judit Varga reaches on her studio shelves for two bowls filled with dried artifacts collected on walks and trips with her family. These imprints of nature represent more than casual souvenirs. “I’m drawn to creating things like those I collect,” says Varga, carefully removing each fragile piece and displaying it on her work table, like treasures from a jewel chest: remains of a graceful lotus flower, parchment-thin seed pods clinging to a silvery branch, a delicate cocoon sliced to reveal its intricate web of pockets as if spun from golden wire.

“That’s my inspiration,” says the artist, who admits to sitting for hours studying the forms and wondering, “How can a tiny animal with not much brain make something so beautiful? How does a bird weave a nest into such a strong structure?”

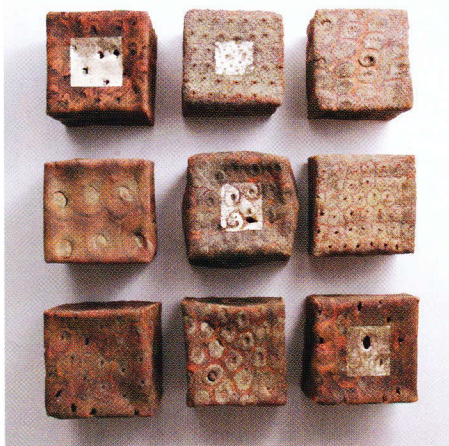
Varga’s answers to these musings appear in an adjoining room. Poised on pedestals, a curved plate is pierced by a checkerboard of irregular openings, echoing the form of a honeycomb stored nearby. A smooth spiral perforated with holes resembles the surface of a reclaimed sea rock, weathered and pocked from wear.

“I’m not trying to copy,” explains Varga. “It’s interesting to learn from structures in nature and translate that into my work.”

Her direction has evolved over time and across nations. Raised in Hungary and educated with a master’s degree in ceramics from the Hungarian Applied Art Academy in Budapest, she graduated in 1992 with an award for Best Graduating Ceramist from the Hungarian Arts Council.

Judit Varga (above left) refines a honeycombed plate in her studio. Working with semi-porcelain and stoneware, she creates abstract pieces inspired by organic forms including (from top left) *Blue Knot*, *Broken Knot* and *Connected Circles*.

ART STUDIO



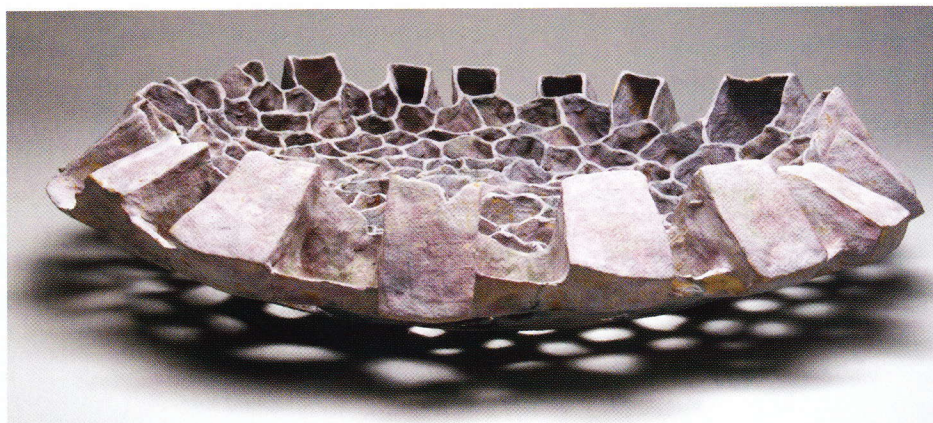
When Varga arrived in the U.S. in 1993, she put her art on hold while her daughters were small. Three years ago, she had a one-person exhibition in Szombathely, the small town where she grew up near the Austrian border. “My teachers and professors came and were impressed. It was the end and start of a new circle,” she relates.

Varga’s work has also been exhibited in “40 Years of Hungarian Ceramics” in Gödöllő, Hungary, and at galleries in the U.S., the U.K. and Germany. Most recently at the Washington Craft Show—Varga’s first participation in a contemporary craft event—she won the AmericanStyle Award of Excellence for an emerging artist.

Petite and personable, with deep-set hazel eyes that light up her face, she bounces around her studio making the process look easy. “You have to find your own way to work with clay,” says Varga. Her hand-building techniques use a minimum of tools, while maximizing the properties of the medium. The artist uses an ordinary pizza roller to flatten the clay into a slab, pointing out that professional tools would hinder her work. “Low tech is satisfying. It’s just me and the clay with a minimum between us.”

Her ceramics students at Montgomery College, where she has taught for two years, joke about her “control mania,” says Varga, referring to her insistence on determining the precise moment to step in and work with the clay. “Timing is the trick,” she argues. “If you force it, it’s going to break.”

She favors fine semi-porcelain because of its plasticity and capacity to be manipulated over time. Starting with red, white or black clay, she sometimes paints the prepared slab’s surface with slips and engobes—



diluted clay with colorants that become an integral matt glaze once pieces are fired.

Her hands stretch, mold, twist and pinch slabs into circles, spheres, knots and boxes, sometimes joined in a single composition. Pairing different colors inside and out or combining elements with silky and gritty surfaces adds further contrast and dimension to her pieces.

Varga views clay as an equal partner in her art. “I try to let the material shine,” she says. Through her interaction with a product of the earth, the artist connects with the universal language of nature in cellular organic forms, created by her own hand. ❖

Varga sets up a 2008 solo exhibition at the Creative Arts Workshop in New Haven, Connecticut (above), where her work won a national competition juried by renowned ceramic artist Paula Winokur. Her pieces range from wall installations such as *Cubes #9* (top left) to table displays, such as *Plate* (top right).

Tina Coplan is a writer in Chevy Chase, Maryland. For more information on Judit Varga, call 301-237-0531 or visit www.juditvarga.net.