



ceramic artist of the year

Michael Strand

Michael Strand, who lives and teaches in Fargo, North Dakota, travels far and wide to carry out community-focused projects. He's interested in widening the audience for ceramic work while engaging with and learning from communities at the same time. Strand's work, which involves collaborations with different institutions and creative individuals in different fields, has received some well-deserved attention over the past year. We decided to ask him about his approach as an artist, how he develops his projects, and what he has planned for 2015.

—Holly Goring, Editor, *Pottery Making Illustrated* and Jessica Knapp, Editor, *Ceramics Monthly*.

How did you make the leap from making functional vessels to incorporating social practice into your work?

There was a point in making where simply producing work that would in some manner move into the world through established power systems, i.e. gallery, museum, exhibition, etc., was no longer an inspiring or satisfying outcome. I was making work that looked like good art but it was not extending from my heart. The transition from functional vessels to engagement is not a transition at all; it is what potters have been doing in some manner for many thousands of years. My transition more accurately and in some ways ironically was to move away from art as the golden standard or aspirational goal for my work. Instead, I am interested in forging a more effective and meaningful connection to people and new avenues for work to move. As a field we do a remarkable job at fetishizing the object and I certainly love the object. In fact, I have a failing business model as I collect objects voraciously and then find ways to remove my work from the market! I am a huge fan-boy of many potters!

It is important to talk about the reality of my employment. I have the privilege to work in academia where I am compensated for spending 30 percent of my time creating work, so I do not have to rely on the market or sales of this work for my personal income. Frankly, I see this as a responsibility to do research in the area of craft in the public sphere. I see my role as planting seeds for other makers to harvest and doing experimental work that expands our field's bandwidth by reaching into audiences and systems of moving work beyond the fairly restrictive art or commodity market. Along the way, I have found my life's work, a time when I no longer have to ponder what is next as it is unfolding naturally in front of me.

How did you develop a focus on widening people's access to handmade ceramics?

In 1996, during graduate school at the University of Nebraska, I proposed what became the series of projects that I continue to do called *ArtStimulus*. This simple project targets rural communities with cups that are delivered quietly on the doorsteps of an entire town. When I was able to bring this project to full scale in 2010, it was in response to the financial stimulus projects that were going on via the federal government in the post-financial-collapse years. How could projects that engage community advocate for and seek to expand our own field? I continue to think about this as I develop new initiatives in new locations. I am still sowing seeds, with the ultimate goal of providing younger makers with new ways to consider being relevant in contemporary society.

How has your identity as a maker changed over time?

I did a lecture recently where, during the question and answer section of the engagement, a gentleman asked me, "That second cup you showed at the start, what kind of feldspar do you use?"—At first I thought he was kidding, as this was one of few images of singular, studio-shot objects I showed. But he was serious. I fell in love with that guy, first, because I imagined him the entire time wrestling with what I used to create the minty green on this cup. The entire time I am weaving stories of individuals I had met, he is totally fixated on feldspar. In many regards my identity as a maker is like this story. I am a potter, I love making things, I am a ceramics nerd (like many of us) and love the challenge of figuring out how to make a better thing. I have just expanded this geekiness into an area that also satisfies my heart. I do not identify what I do as social practice as I find that term to be highly problematic. Instead, I am a village potter, but I look at the village through a completely new lens.

1, 3 Cups, soda-fired porcelain, glaze. Created for use in the *Misfit Cup Liberation Project*. 2 Wheel-thrown and soda-fired stoneware bowl with carrying case, created for the *Bowls Around Town* project. 4 Michael Strand in his studio, pictured with one of the cups made for the *Misfit Cup Liberation Project*. Photos: Mark Anthony.



5–9 A library patron signing out and using a bowl from the *Bowls Around Town* project in Portland, Oregon. Strand worked on this original iteration of the project with curator Namita Gupta Wiggers. It coincided with an exhibition she curated at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in Portland called “Object Focus: The Bowl.”

What is the most important thing that has happened in your career so far? Without a doubt, attending the University of Nebraska at Lincoln to learn from the best team of mentors and fellow graduate students imaginable. Eddie Dominguez, Pete Pinnell, and Gail Kendall were my teachers. Those who know each of these three understand the diverse perspectives presented and the professional accountability that they demanded from those in the program. They continue to be mentors and friends 15 years after I graduated in 1999. What a gift. Additionally, those in the learning community were equally influential. Jason Briggs, Matt Kelleher, Chad Wolf, Amy Smith, Adeena Kravet, Leigh Cohen, and Garth Johnson (as an undergraduate) all had a profound impact in the development of my work.

This extends then into 2009, when I invited Garth Johnson to North Dakota State University as a visiting artist. It was an amazing three days, with Garth blowing people away with his lectures and then doing a demonstration utilizing a paint gun filled with glaze to finish plates. In the middle of this visit, Garth came to my studio and I was preparing two separate bodies of work. The first was a series of 150 cups that were intended to be the first launch of my *ArtStimulus* projects, and the second consisted of wall-based drawings in clay (that I continue to make today). Garth remembered my project from graduate school and totally geeked out over its potential. In essence stating, in a way that only Garth can do—“Dude you gotta hit this path hard, this is who you are.” I knew this, but this extra burst of support, which we all need at times, totally focused my work. This led to a connection from Garth to Jill Foote-Hutton at Red Lodge Clay Center and the opportunity to do a series of projects with several of my students along with long-time friend and maker, Larry Pelter, and one of my very best friends, Amy Smith. This time spent with Jill was one of the most formative and important moments in my career. She is a life-long friend and I have such a fondness for her; she is amazing. You see, it is all about people, relationships, and the heart.

How do you approach other organizations or artists with ideas for community outreach and interactive projects and exhibitions?

This is a complex answer, but important to understand the work that I do. I no longer think of art as the reason for what I do. In fact, I am no longer preoccupied with questions of art production, but rather look at what I do as miniature ceramic start-up ventures. I am far more concerned with finding new ways and avenues to move work into cultural systems that are not usually connected with the value of handcraft. With this mind set, the gatekeepers are no longer the usual suspects—directors, curators, etc. Currently, I am working with a variety of fire-station networks globally to participate in a project to create a cookbook of recipes harvested through the use of handcrafted bowls that will move through their spaces. I am speaking with fire fighting unions, fire chiefs, and civic leaders to inspire partnerships.

This experience has made it possible to have conversations with art institutions about how this way of working brings new kinds of value to their organization. A great example is a current project I am launching with the Clay Art Center (CAC) in Port Chester, New York. I will be facilitating a craft version of “start-up weekends.” Potters, community members, and purveyors of mischief will work collectively to develop a project that connects the CAC mission with Port Chester communities.

In the end this will be an exhibition, but we have faith that through effective and collective facilitation we will tap into the significant genius that every community of individuals contains. Trusting in the process, and giving space for everyone to enjoy ownership of the project will produce something remarkable. Working in a community is not dropping in and doing something. Working in a community means being adept at listening carefully and getting out of the way of ideas that evolve when a group of people begins working together creatively. I love that the Clay Art Center is willing to trust the process and take risks.

What is the most unexpected or surprising thing that you have learned through your work?

I now design and create work in ways I would have never imagined before creating conceptual projects. For instance, the *Misfit Cup Lib-*



PHOTOS: HEATHER ZINGER.

eration Project cups that I make have changed completely from the first iteration in Fargo. In Fargo they were soda fired, complex and charged surfaces that contained much of my own aesthetic voice. As the project has progressed, and stories have consistently contained far more emotional content than I anticipated, the cups in response have become quiet and contemplative. They are monochromatic and electric fired so that I can control the surfaces. I see the cups I make now as elegant and quiet objects that listen effectively. This is important because conceptually the objects that are exchanged, are replaced with an object that will always be connected in memory to the one that was brought in.

You were recently awarded the Bush Fellowship and traveled to Europe to complete the fifth iteration of the Misfit Cup Liberation Project. How have the results, reactions, and responses changed for each iteration, and how have they changed from culture to culture or region to region?

The remarkable thing about the project is that it is beginning to form a pattern of sorts—in each location there are common types of stories, i.e. the break-up cup, the cup from a former job, the stolen cup, etc. I love seeing these trends, and then comparing the objects connected to this content. As the project continues to progress—next year it will happen in both Brazil and South Africa—I am finding that there is at least one iconic object. In Estonia, there was a cup brought to the Museum by a woman who heard about the project that morning on *Good Morning Estonia*—a popular morning television show that highlighted the project. She immediately knew she needed to take the ferry into Tallinn to bring in her cup, which was the last cup remaining of the objects that were issued by the Soviet Union to the citizens. This uninspired tan object beautifully symbolizes the transition of Estonia from an occupied nation to what is today a free country.

The changes of the project are directly related to the types of objects that are exchanged. Fargo certainly had a fair share of agriculture related objects, Houston had a definitive Texas flair, Estonia had far more hand crafted objects exchanged and Holland did not disappoint with Delft-esque ware exchanged. I am looking

forward to what stories and objects will come out of both Brazil and South Africa.

What additional projects do you have planned as part of your funding?

I am just launching *Cuplomaticy*. This project will culminate in the early spring of 2015 with the delivery of boxes of cups and saucers to each of our US Senators as a start to the new legislative session. I am working throughout North Dakota and Fargo, engaging with civic groups, churches, clubs, politicians, cafe goers, student groups, and Bakken-shale-oil workers in “man camps,” among other communities, to gather feedback on the value of dialog between our elected officials in and outside of political dividing lines. I am also asking some straightforward questions about perceptions of each political party to assemble enough information to design a cup and saucer set for each.

With each set completed, I will create a box that contains the cup that represents the senator’s own party with a mismatched saucer of the opposing party. These cups and saucers will not fit or work together by design. I am then providing a very simple prompt, powered by the words gathered throughout North Dakota (and beyond as the project gains traction) to go across the aisle to invite a member of the opposite party for coffee. When this happens, they are asked to swap saucers and *voila!* each person has a matched set. I am providing a variety of platforms for participants to share the conversation and images.

This project will test the inherent participatory nature of what we make as ceramic artists as it accompanies a narrative-driven request from the people. It all comes back to some pretty basic stuff—but it seems that base-level reconnection would have some value, given the level of dysfunction that we are experiencing in American politics. I am not naïve enough to believe that this will change the dynamics of our political reality; however, I believe it will demonstrate that we *do* have access to our political system. If that inspires others to consider how they too can become involved, then the project is a success. *To Washington, D.C.,...Love, Fargo* is the subtitle; I love the idea that this project extends from an unsuspecting location. There is something a bit like the film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* about the effort. I am



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also working on extending the original *Cuplomacy* project that travelled between religious leaders from a variety of faith traditions, and plan to implement it globally in 2015.

What cultural differences do you see in people's responses to other projects you have exhibited in different regions in the US and other countries?

The Bowls Around Project was well received in Holland, partly because of the strong slow- and ethical-food movement in the Netherlands. The project is currently in the hands of prominent chefs there who are documenting what they cook and eat at home rather than in the restaurant. The fantastic thing is that an experimental food organization, Steinbesser, is curating and organizing the project. Steinbesser has significant food connections in Europe, and I envision this being the start to a long relationship between the various strata of food cultures there as a significant partnership. I will test this even further, with the bowls project extending to Munich and Rome in the next two years.

I did *ArtStimulus* in a small village in Estonia with some graduate students from the Estonian Academy of Art. The response to the project was two-fold. First, the artists I worked with were totally dedicated to the project and were far better at being sneaky than I am. They were more daring, more adventurous, and more into the concept that I had considered. We delivered handmade pots to houses in the village at night and because of that, there was an element of surprise for the recipients that was not the same as with the other projects. In fact, no one noticed or caught up with us as we were delivering the pieces. What resulted was some great feedback from those who received the cups. I had several questions come in via email about how to use the object, whether it is safe to use in the oven, etc. In the end the percentage of respondents to this project was higher than in the US. This was highly gratifying. I will continue this project in both Brazil and South Africa, and I am looking forward to learning more.

If you haven't already covered it above, what's your best advice for those aspiring to make social practice a part of their career as a ceramic artist?

First of all, if you are interested in this kind of work because you think it will make great art—pause and consider your motivation. We can theorize, and talk about relational aesthetics all day long, but in reality it is all about what is in your heart. I love the intellectual side of our field, but not at the expense of soul. We tend to shy away from conversations of feeling or heart because it is not quantifiable. The very field that expects people to have transformative responses to the work we make turns its critical back on the things that really matter—personal connections. If in your heart you are called to connect to people, to stand up for an issue, or activate in community and if what you make allows you to do this in an effective manner, then move with courage. It is that simple; examine what you make and what you value and find the space where the two connect. In doing so I think you will find yourself in the same rabbit hole that I am joyfully lost in.

10–11 *Misfit Cup Liberation Project*, Holland. For this iteration of the project, Strand's cups were part of Steinbesser Experimental Gastronomy's event that included a meal prepared by Dutch chef Emile van der Staak as the accompaniment to the final course, a sweet and tangy dessert. The guests filled out their forms at the table, discussed their stories, then exchanged 80 of their own cups for Strand's cups to conclude the evening. **12** *Misfit Cup Liberation Project*: Estonia. **13** *Misfit Cup Liberation Project*: Houston, NCECA Biennial. **14** *ArtStimulus*, students and faculty members Dylan Beck and Amy Santoferraro from Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, worked with Strand to deliver pieces to the residents of Dwight, Kansas in 2013.