

# HEIDI MCKENZIE

## MIXED CLAY AND COLOR by D Wood

When Heidi McKenzie was 9 or 10 years old, a school assignment required her to write a message-in-a-bottle account of herself. Fortunately, the message was not put into the Bay of Fundy near McKenzie's home in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. She kept it. Chapter 14, "My Plans for the Future," begins with text and a drawing that portend a career in ceramics.

McKenzie wrote, "I want to teach. Yes, that's right, teach. Do you think I'll teach school like the rest of my family? If you do, you're wrong. I want to teach pottery. I think working with clay is fun. I would like to learn how to use the pottery wheel. Then I could teach you how to do it."

The drawing says a great deal too. A tall, thin girl with brown skin grins as she throws a red clay vessel on a potter's wheel. She wears a T-shirt with "HEIDI" on the front. McKenzie was christened Heather, but early on, she rejected what she describes as "the blandness and conformity" of her birth name and adopted Heidi, becoming legally so at 17. The electric wheel with three legs in the drawing indicates that the aspiring potter had seen this type of device rather than a foot-operated one. Her own legs are missing, placing emphasis on the machine labeled "Wheel." There are three sealed bags of reddish-brown clay and one opened on a table beside a White child with blonde ponytails. The check mark

on the drawing is the teacher's approval—I recognize that mark from my own school days.

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that each child is born with a unique character. While the child is under the parental roof, choices are made for her that may or may not align with that character. Eventually, for some, the child who has been forgotten in the unconscious asserts itself, because Jungian psychology also posits that creativity is a force implanted in the human psyche that must be recognized, respected, and expressed. In McKenzie's case, the 10-year-old potter insisted on attention 30 years later.

### Before the Wheel

As McKenzie's drawing attests, she was aware of her brown skin while that of everyone around her was White. There were so few non-Whites in Fredericton in the 1970s–1980s that race was not an issue.

Heidi's father, Joseph Addison McKenzie, was born in Trinidad of Indian ancestry and sailed to Canada in 1953. In 1957, he married Ellen Joyce McMenemy, a fellow university student in Ontario. Joyce, born in Ohio of Canadian/Irish descent, and Joseph faced considerable vitriol at a time when mixed marriages were illegal in some American states and rare in Canada. Joseph



subsequently specialized in biology and was appointed the dean of science at the University of New Brunswick in 1995, while Joyce taught music in primary school and violin from her home. With this background, says McKenzie, “I grew up in a White town, with a White name [Joseph’s grandfather, Jadoo Maharaj Machedine, anglicized his name to James McKenzie], in a white clapboard house, in a White neighborhood.”

The presence of classical music in the McKenzie household prompted McKenzie’s registration for a degree in piano performance. She had won competitions in the Atlantic provinces, but realized that the competitiveness at McGill University in Montreal was out of her league. The withdrawal outraged her parents so she sought studies of which they would approve: a bachelor’s degree in arts administration (1991) and a master of arts in comparative cultural policy (1994). These credentials and her knowledge of music enabled employment with a number of cultural organizations in Toronto.

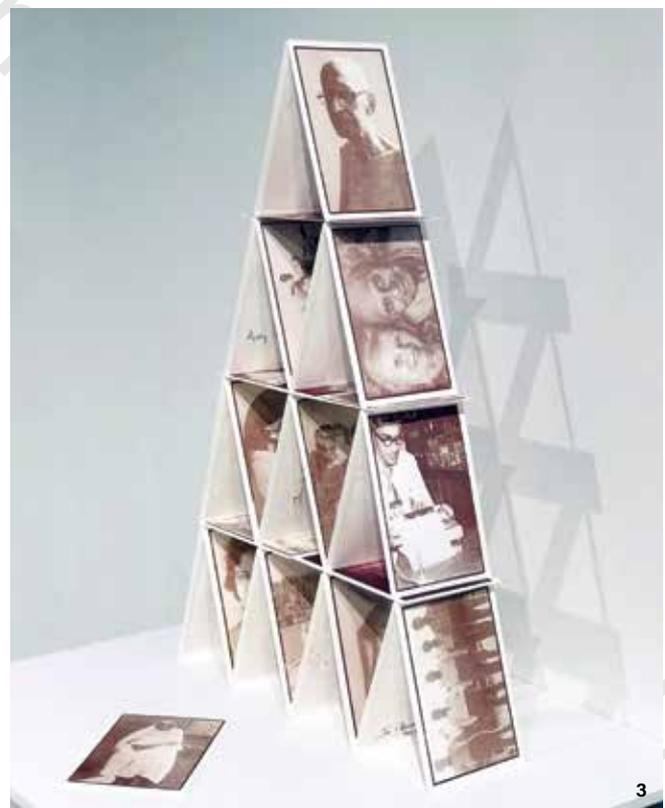
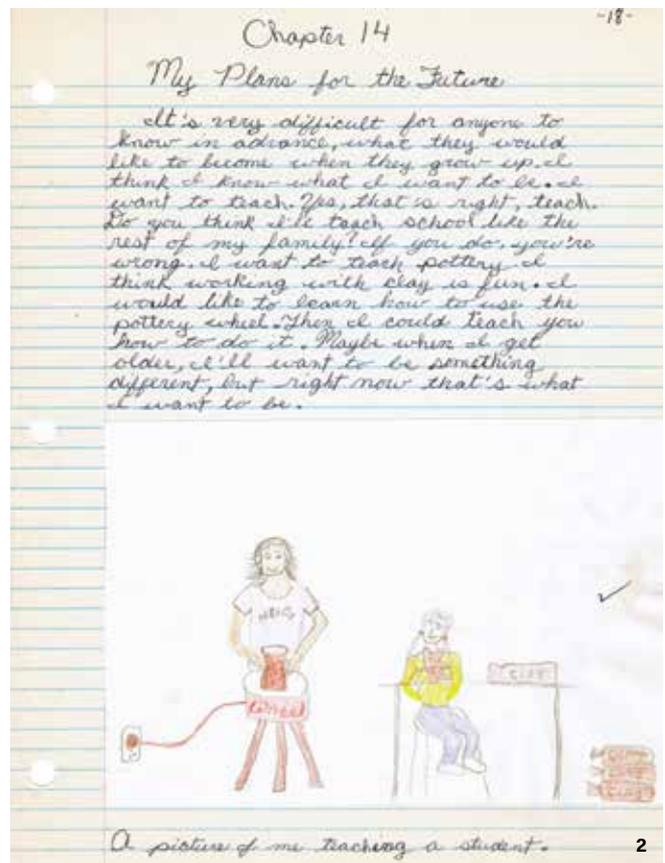
By 2009, the novelty of arts administration had worn off. A proverbial mid-life crisis—thoughts of “who am I?” complemented by years of fibromyalgia pain—provoked McKenzie to apply for a 12-week residency at Andretta Pottery in India, under the tutelage of Mansimran Singh, a former student of Bernard Leach. Singh, known as Mini, a master craftsman and traditionalist, was ideal for instilling the rudiments of ceramics. In her field notes, McKenzie states: “My speed is increasing which is important—now easily producing ten to twelve pieces in an afternoon as opposed to three (which was where I started two weeks ago). Pretty much 95% of what I make gets cut in two to observe and learn from, or smashed at the end of the week to get recycled in the clay bin.” The Andretta sojourn convinced her that clay was her profession. A clay hobby would be unsatisfactory.

### Mixing Color

On returning to Canada, McKenzie enrolled at Sheridan College to study ceramics. Her hybridity began to be manifest in works of mixed clay, dark and light. She threw “different shades of clay together on the wheel, altering them and intertwining the bands somewhat like the interconnected strands of DNA sequencing,” resulting in free-standing and wall-mounted sculptures. The amalgamations refer not only to gene makeup, but also to her hybrid background’s convoluted past, which McKenzie is untangling in recent and current work.

A paucity of ceramics masters-degree programs in Canada prompted McKenzie’s obtaining an MFA in criticism and curatorial practice. Immediately afterward, she attended a 12-week artist residency at the Guldagergaard International Research Center for Contemporary Ceramics in Denmark (2014). There she learned the process of applying photographic images to clay. Pieces using this technique addressed the body, featuring McKenzie’s diagnostic imaging amassed over years due to medical interventions for congenital kidney disease.

In the year of Canada’s 150th birthday (2015), McKenzie says “my experience of being raised in a virtually monolithically White community served as the inspiration for *Postmarked*.” It consists of a series of cast porcelain tetrahedrons. The majority bear Canadian



1 *Self Reflection*, 3 ft. 5 in. (1.2 m) in length, wheel-thrown and altered stoneware, 2012. 2 “My Plans for the Future” excerpted from *All About Me*, written by Heidi McKenzie, May 31, 1978. 3 *House of Cards*, 24 in. (61 cm) in height, porcelain substrate, iron-oxide ceramic decals, archival tape, graphite pencil, 2019. Courtesy of Latham Gallery, Stouffville, Ontario, Canada.



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images: a loon, beaver, Wayne Gretzky, the Queen. Others are natural or dark sepia. On the corners of the tetrahedrons are images of McKenzie's young self. "I am featured doing 'Canadian' activities—skating, ballet, Western classical music lessons, etc. As a child, I was unaware of my otherness or the realities of Indigenous communities within the city limits of my hometown." Whereas McKenzie's inspiration for *Postmarked* was her racialization as an adult, the series was purchased by Global Affairs Canada for exhibition in Canadian embassies, undoubtedly for its Canadian-ness.

#### Self and Image

The national focus of *Postmarked* was brought closer to home, so to speak, with *Building Blocks*. Replicating forms from a toddler's

set of blocks, "the work is intended to underscore the juxtaposition of cultures." McKenzie's family's mixed heritage is balanced with an equal number of McMenemy family archival images and McKenzie family images. Starting as a series of 5, it grew to 12 and will be shown at the Canadian Clay and Glass Museum in 2021 as a group of 23. *House of Cards*, which won the Award of Merit at CraftForms 2019 at the Wayne Art Center in Pennsylvania is dedicated to Joseph McKenzie. Images of his life and family are applied by means of an iron-oxide-rich photographic decal to a 0.02-inch-thick porcelain ceramic substrate. McKenzie's inspiration for the 26 stacked cards, "speaks to the precarious nature of my father's life as an immigrant from Trinidad," addressing his struggles as a non-White scientist in a conservative parochial environment, as well as his medical issues, which included diagnosis of seven terminal illnesses over three decades.

McKenzie's family research has broadened into imagery of the experience of South Asian immigrants to the Caribbean. *Illuminated* consists of handmade porcelain panes bearing archival photographs of indentured women displayed in finery (not their own) against a backdrop that emphasized the exotic. Archival exploration for the lanterns uncovered a history whereby "the images were often used on postcards for the colonial locals and tourists to send back home to show the 'happy, wealthy, thriving East Indian community' in the colonies." *Division* expands on the lives of these immigrants on sugar plantations owned by White British settlers. A room divider, an object that normally conceals, in this context brings to light, literally, the substandard living conditions of enslaved South Asian servants juxtaposed with those of their owners.

Heidi McKenzie's "My Plans for the Future" warrants another look, particularly at the writing. The young girl has a grasp of



**4** *Building Blocks*, 23 pieces, installation variable, slab-built stoneware, iron-oxide decals, 2020. *Photo: Ali Kazimi.* **5** *Postmarked* (installation view at the Gardiner Museum, Toronto), 6 in. (15 cm) in height each, 21 slip-cast porcelain tetrahedrons, iron-oxide ceramic decals, 2017. *Photo: Josie Slaughter.* **6** *Illuminated* (detail, 3 of 15 lanterns), to 10 in. (25 cm) in height, hand-pressed low-fire porcelain tiles, iron-oxide ceramic decals, wood, metal, LED fixture, 2020. *Photo: Dale Roddick.* **7, 8** *Division* (detail and overall), 5 ft. 4 in. (1.7 m) in height, hand-pressed low-fire porcelain tiles, Plexiglas, acrylic tape, wood, metal hinges, 2020. *Photo: Dale Roddick.*

punctuation and sentence variety; there are no spelling or grammatical errors. Not only does the content tell of a desire for a future in ceramics, but the presentation also suggests a future that includes writing. McKenzie has been a frequent contributor to this and other ceramic publications, in addition to creating curatorial projects. But while the teaching portion of the prognostication has not eventuated, McKenzie is indeed educating: bringing recognition to class, race, migration, and colonialization, both in the past and today.

**the author** *D Wood has a PhD in design studies and is an independent craft scholar whose artist profiles and exhibition reviews have appeared in an international roster of art and design publications.*