

Transforming the Mundane

Warren Frederick





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objects to impel imaginative use

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Sketchbook Press

Frontispiece: Hand shadow cast over clay drying in a meadow.
Photograph by Catherine White.

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A big ~~stone~~^{log} on a deserted beach
is a motionless thing,
but it sets loose great movements in my mind

Joan Miró



Storm Grist,
Heron Island, Maine, 2001
Thirty-foot castaway piling

Art commemorates nature—a recounting of emotional ideas fabricated from sorrows rooted in decay and joys springing from growth. As an idiosyncratic prism that translates the unspeakable and the sublime, art reflects human complicity within nature. It is itself a symptom of nature because we stand within—never outside—the world. Our acts embody nature.

Yet, how does art really relate to our lives? Over-scheduled at home and at work, daily life often proceeds helter skelter, poorly seen and little reflected upon. Activities are quickly enjoyed or endured so that the next endeavor can take its place. Initially, the objects that engage our passions may be carefully chosen. But the senses, habituated to the familiar, become desensitized. Celebrating life becomes less of an everyday experience and more of a sporadic punctuation, instigated by transitional births or deaths, by momentary glimpses of maturing children, by irregular trips to theaters and concert halls.

Objects in themselves are merely commodities. But emeshed in rituals and relationships, pregnant with idea and emotion, objects can enhance and engage the spiritual. Yet too often art is an infrequent foray into museums and other institutions, rather than an integral, gleaming facet of daily life.

Physically usable objects have the potential to re-energize our senses and our behaviors. Creatively transformed into pottery and furniture, the commonplace materials of clay and wood can infiltrate art into life in ways not open to painting and sculpture. When objects are compelling enough to inspire imaginative use, they succeed in transforming mundane materials and mundane behaviors into celebratory experiences.

Collaborating with Natural Materials

One essential first step is choosing materials and a process that create a dialogue between nature as found around us and nature as expressed within us. My search is for an eloquent tension between natural roughness and human refinement.

The fundamental influence of material—clay or wood—cannot be overstated; all else partially derives from its character. One craft ethos touts the moral primacy of indigenous, local materials. But *what* a material communicates is far more essential than where, how, or by whom a material is obtained. When achievable, saving money or maintaining self-reliance are subsidiary, personal goals. Developing one's own sources, however, circumvents the typical commercial unavailability of impure, evocative materials. Rational



Crisscross Slab Table H 23" × W 61" × D 52"
Tulip poplar planks, each H 2.75" × W 21" × L 49.5"
Maple branch legs



economic decisions unintentionally denude natural substances of personality because pure deposits can be produced more cheaply and because uniformity and repeatability sells.

But art is about communication not efficiency. Self-procured materials can provide an enlarged, poetic vocabulary. There are primal yet nuanced meanings in the age and resistance of deeply gnarled bark or the complex tactile mixtures of rocks and minerals that define clay.

Beyond one's evolving choice of material, roughness and refinement are also manipulated by the process of making. What traces of human touch should be left visible in wheel-thrown pottery? How can the eddies of atmospheric flame be harnessed to layer wood ash for dense, dark glaze effects?

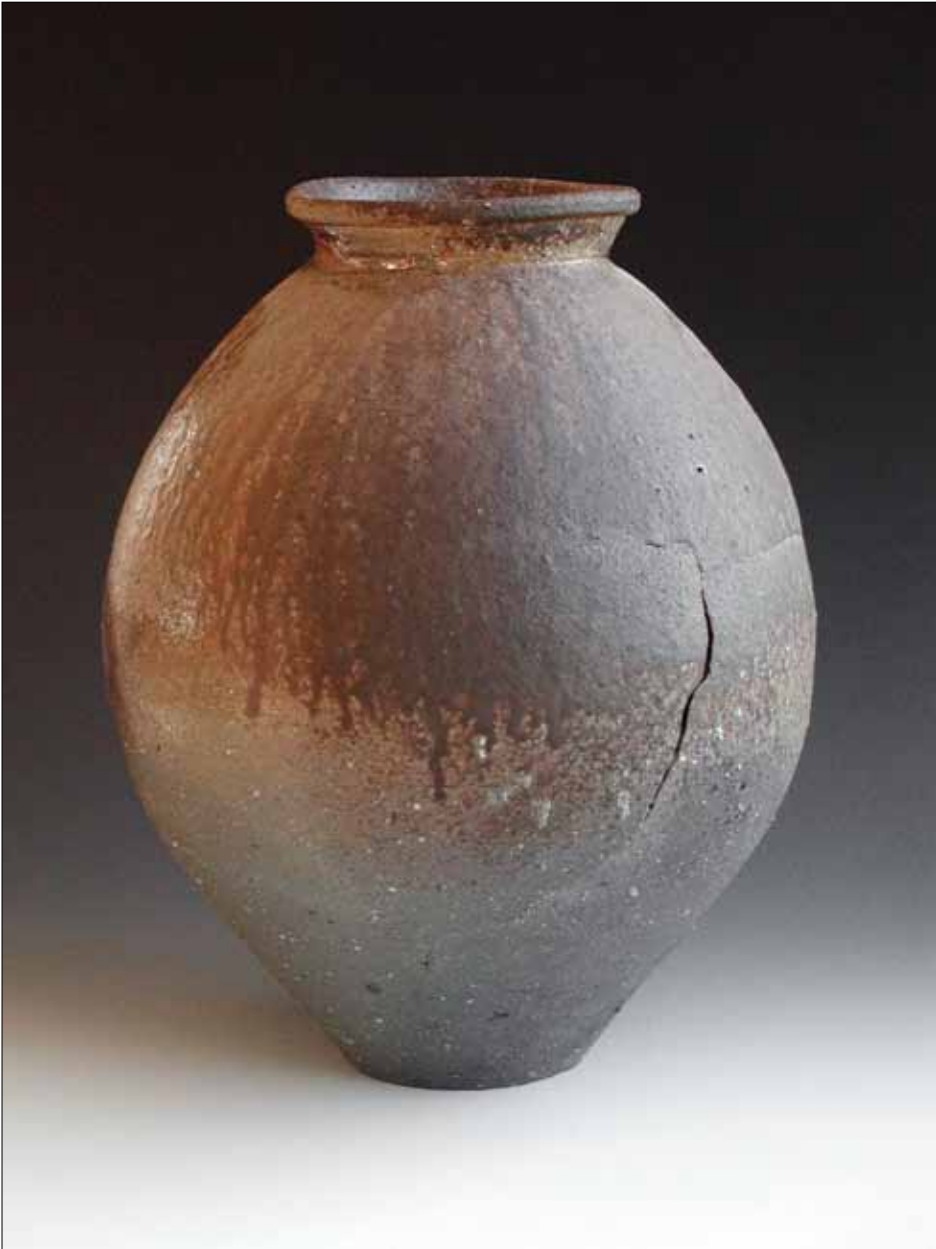
Sensibilities in choosing and handling materials never involve isolated questions. One preference focuses subsequent judgments. Process choices can lead full-circle to an alteration in material qualities. All is intertwined, yet decisions proceed step-by-step: where to cut; what to leave or remove, whether to saw by hand or by chain; whether to encourage or impede cracking? Should bark be left or stripped; should there be evidence of sawmarks or finely sanded grain?

This wealth of options derives from a maker's goals and impulses, not from listening to how "the wood or clay speaks." It is not "what does this material 'want' to be," but "what can be revealed from the personality of this substance?"

Yet it would be accurate to say that all choices are informed by a dialogue between maker and material. How should the two personalities of maker and material—two perspectives into nature—be balanced and tensioned? Which facets of character are essential for the conscious, poetic hand to choose? What is indispensable to understanding and what is diverting and extraneous?

How does the nature of human refinement resolve natural roughness?

Right: *Storage Jar with Crack* H 18" × W 14"
Woodfired stoneware, natural ash glaze



Finding Uses for Provocative Objects

The alternative to designing the “perfect” object or finding the “proper” vase is to move through the world with curiosity and attentiveness. One will then encounter intriguing objects that impel imaginative making or use.

A thirty-foot storm castaway piling sang out, “find a use for me.” (See photograph on page 7.) I was initially fascinated by the hole slowly worn into a softened pulley-shaped groove by a thick rope that moored some large vessel.

After sawing thirty inches off the log’s end, the top and bottom crescents were removed to isolate the hole. Then irregular chain sawn rips and hand planing led to a softly undulating surface, usable, but never flat. Prosaic legs don’t vie for attention. The next focus was the log’s diameter—or more precisely its sense of





Fat Pulley-Hole Table H 17" × W 30" × D 19.5"
White pine slab with pulley shaped hole
Tulip poplar board legs
Left: *Pulley Detail*

age. Three discs were sequentially cut, handsawn to establish gently rolling surfaces. Drying cracks were encouraged. For support, a sculptural, tensioned integration of discs and branch legs was sought.

Cracks are clear marks of character. They are never inherent defects, but traits requiring a fair assessment. Checking cracks in wood (shown below) provoke a tangible awareness of drying and of shrinkage. They are emotional evidence of the transformation



Triple Disc Storm Table H 30" × W 34" × D 32"
White pine discs, diameter 19" to 20"
Debarked maple branch legs



from living tree to usable surface. Most critically they can enliven rather than impede use. Cracks in a large jar (page 13) convey a sensation of compromised resistance to the firing's intensity. Amid this imprint of birth, an interior water container can be used to maintain physical use.

The cocoon-shaped vases were initially derived from black Chinese Han prototypes. Over the years variations in form have emerged such as the recent rectangular shape below. A crack in the earlier *Encrusted Cocoon* (shown right) was repaired, although a friend argued for some other solution to enable the crack and use to coexist. At that time I found this crack more objectionable than the feeling imparted by a repair. There is no rote answer.

When glimpsing the sparkle of a fruitful interaction, there are no certain ways to proceed, just imaginative possibilities.

Intriguing objects impel creative solutions.



Gray White Rectangular Cocoon H 6.5" × W 7.5" × D 4"
Woodfired stoneware, natural ash glaze



Encrusted Cocoon Vase H 9.5" × W 12" × D 7.5"
Woodfired stoneware, natural ash glaze



Collaborative Makers and Users

The shape of this sculptural table can be varied, responsive to one's needs and whims. This interaction parallels the many creative choices available to those who use pottery with focused, aesthetic attention.

When makers and users are working in tandem, the full potential of such collaboration is achieved. Just as a poet makes unexpected word associations, there is value in poetic hand-made objects that can jar commonplace patterns, permitting us to rejuvenate mundane, rote behaviors. For a listener or reader, a poet's edifice of words impels personal and unique associations.



Left: *Swivel Plank Table (Zigzag)*

Above repositioning: *Spiral with Teapot and Ladle Cup*
 Overleaf repositionings: *Akimbo* (left) and *Crisscross* (right)
 Pivoting tulip poplar boards (12), H 32" × W/D up to 32"
 [Interior steel rod, each board 2.25" thick × W 8" × L 20"]





An object is a poem made concrete, an ode of wood or clay, where insights are derived from sequential, interactive “readings” through imaginative physical use.

Conceptually, ornate objects often occupy a distinctly separate genre because their fullness of expression leaves less space for creative physical use. Such work, akin to painting, effectively resides on a mantel, a feast for the eyes but not the interactive hand. As distinct realms of endeavor both are valuable, but they are not interchangeable.

The *Stone Branch Table* verges on joining this other realm. Its relative complexity tends to make it less incitant of inspired use. Perhaps it is better suited to hold the non-aesthetic—one’s mail?—because its completeness competes too vigorously should we, for instance, place upon it a vase of daffodils.

Conciseness and restraint reward creative use, as witnessed by a Duchampian ready-made stone plate.



Above: *Stone Plate with Pears*

Right: *Stone Branch Table* H 30" × W 20" × D 12"
Granite, tulip poplar top, debarked maple branch supports



Sometimes objects function too easily. They merely reassure and thus fall away from our attention. We no longer notice presence or use. Thus, the (occasional) advantage of cracked bowls that serve to compromise normal assumptions. Or a shimmy in a table forcing consideration of exactly how can a wobbly table be used?

Physical use is a realm for sensitizing and altering perceptions.



Cracked Rim Bowls (set of 6) H 3.5" × W 5"
Woodfired stoneware, natural ash glaze



Wobble Table H 17" × W 17"
Tulip poplar boards, crisscrossed and nailed, aluminum wire legs



Dark and Purple Jar H 18" × W 17"
Woodfired stoneware, natural ash glaze
(description for all pottery)

Austere Pottery

Austerity leaves space for physical use and psychic imagination. Understated pottery becomes complete for a short time through and during use. Each occasion achieves meaning in a improvisational choreography of guests, season, menu, juxtaposed forms, and contrasting materials. Wooden trays with metal cups may be followed by porcelain plates or flat stones with fruit, perhaps capped off with woodfired stoneware bowls. The mundane mechanical meal is transformed.

“Austerity” has several meanings. Historically in relation to pottery, one lineage derives from the medieval development of the tea ceremony in Japan. Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591) rejected the existing lavish style and perfected a sensibility of refined rusticity—minimal food in a rustic hut. Rikyu’s teahut is a meeting place beyond worldly cares, where the host and guests are equal, where interaction occurs with “pure hearts.” Freedom devolves from restraint. Rikyu said that the “utensils used in the small tea room should be crude and incomplete.” Spare, woodfired pottery used for tea has thus been described as “chilled and withered” (*wabi*).

In America few people know about the precepts of the tea ceremony and even fewer practice tea, but the underlying lessons are cross-culturally essential and potent. Incompleteness inspires use. Reticence enhances contrast. Restraint leads to limitless expression.

It is within this meaning that pottery can escape its commodity status and regain a nonmonetary, spiritual value. It is in avoiding the immediate seductiveness of lush and glassy glazes, or vibrant and brilliant decoration that pottery can be austere—*relatively* “unadorned and simple,” “somber and grave,” and to some people even “stern and forbidding.”

The ascetic practices self-conscious limits to obtain boundless, spiritual rewards. Excess is always possible, even in woodfired work. Austerity can be easily circumvented; seductive effects are an ever-present temptation. The manner and ambience of use are as instrumental as the object in establishing austerity.

Austerity is an attitude and presence, not an absolute quality.



Rolled Rim Jar H 21" x W 16"



Flanged Rim Jar H 17" x W 13"



Fat Lined Bottle H 11" × W 10"



Narrow Lined Vase H 14.25" x W 5.25"

The pottery is primarily wheel-thrown. Large jars are coiled, thinned by paddling against an interior anvil and shaped. Clays from Kentucky, Tennessee and Maryland are sometimes leavened with a local, rock-strewn stoneware from a friend's farm in Marshall (Virginia). Most work is naturally ash glazed in a woodfired tunnel kiln (anagama) inspired by Neolithic and medieval gray wares.

How the pots are placed in the kiln affects how the flame deposits wood ash to create the distinctive patterns, colors, and textures seen here. Variations in the clay and the firing atmosphere are also used to alter the palette.



Squared Plates (set of 6) H 1.25" × W 6.75" (each)



Platter H 1.5" × W 19.5"



Teapot H 5" × W 7" × D 5.25"



Side-Handled Teapot H 5" × W 7" × D 5.25"



Double Neck Vase H 10.75" × W 5.5" × D 4"



Pilgrim Pitcher H 10.75" × W 4" × D 3.75"

Biography

Warren Frederick moved to Washington, DC in 1978 to work at The Urban Institute. Equipped with a Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering from Northwestern University, his prior career as a social scientist/engineer was forever interrupted by a passion for clay, awakened by a 1981 ceramics class.

Juggling a role as part-time administrator, Frederick obtained an MFA in Ceramics from the Columbia Visual Arts College in Columbia, Maryland. In 1984, he and Catherine White set up their first studio in Dayton, Maryland. As artists they work separately, but share mechanical tasks such as mixing clay and firing kilns. They re-established their studio in Warrenton, Virginia in 1989.

Frederick exhibits across the United States. His work is included in the collections of the Mint Museum of Craft + Design, Charlotte, North Carolina; The Renwick Gallery (Smithsonian American Art Museum), Washington, DC; The Kennedy-Douglass Center for the Arts, Florence, Alabama; and The Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art, Alfred, New York. His articles and reviews have appeared in *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, *The New Art Examiner*, *Ceramics Monthly*, and *American Ceramics*.



BIOGRAPHY

- 2002 Southern Market Center, Lancaster, PA, *10th Annual Strictly Functional Pottery National*, First Place Award.
- 2001 Renwick Gallery (Smithsonian American Art Museum), Washington, DC, *USA Clay*.
Lancaster Museum of Art, Lancaster, PA, *9th Annual Strictly Functional Pottery National*.
Blue Pony Gallery, Charlotte, NC, *To Have and To Hold*, Invitational exhibit.
Cort/Lefferts, Washington, DC, *Recent Pottery*, Exhibit with C. White.
- 2000 gallery W.D.O., Charlotte, NC, *The Poetics of Austerity*, Invitational exhibit.
Chester Springs Studio, Chester Springs, PA, *Impressions in Clay*, Juried exhibit.
Pewabic Pottery, Detroit, MI, *Plates and Platters*, Invitational exhibit.
Salve Regina Gallery, Washington, DC, *Warren Frederick and Catherine White*.
- 1999 Omen, New York, NY, *Plates*, Exhibit with C. White.
Astra Design, Richmond, VA, *To Have and To Hold*, Invitational exhibit.
Studiolo Gallery, Iowa City, Iowa, *Different Stokes: The 1999 International Woodfire Exhibition*.
Cort/Lefferts, Washington, DC, *Pottery*, Exhibit with C. White.
- 1998 International Museum of Ceramic Art at Alfred, Alfred, NY, *Premeditated Function: The Corsaw Collection of American Ceramics*, September 24, 1998 - February 4, 1999.
- 1997 Cort/Lefferts, Washington, DC, *Pottery*, Exhibit with C. White.
Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC, *Hot Ice II: A Tea Ceremony*, Invitational exhibit.
Pewabic Pottery, Detroit, MI, *Plates: Salon Style*, Invitational exhibit.
- 1996 Omen, New York, NY, *Plates*, Exhibit with C. White.
Blue Spiral 1, Asheville, NC, *Wood-Fired Clay: Ancient Techniques, Modern Interpretations*, Invitational exhibit.
Longwood Center For the Visual Arts, Farmville, VA, *Virginia Clay*, Invitational exhibit.
- 1995 Kennedy-Douglass Center for the Arts, Florence, AL, *1995 Monarch National Ceramic Competition*.
Chester Springs Studio, Chester Springs, PA, *Hero Pots*, Invitational exhibit.
Market House Craft Center, Lancaster, PA, *Third Annual Strictly Functional Pottery National*.
- 1994 Anton Gallery, Washington, DC, *Pottery Is Pure Art*, Three person exhibit.
Market House Craft Center, Lancaster, PA, *Second Annual Strictly Functional Pottery National*.
San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, San Angelo, TX, *Ninth Annual San Angelo National Ceramic Competition*, April 14 - May 29.
- 1993 Lill Street Gallery, Chicago, IL, *Seventh Annual Great Lakes National*.
Tenri Gallery, New York, NY, *Modern American Potters*, Five person exhibit.
- 1992 Arrowmont, Gatlinburg, TN, *Utilitarian Clay: Celebrate the Object*.
Bedford Gallery, Longwood College, Farmville, VA, *Virginia Clay Invitational Exhibition*,
Hand Workshop, Richmond, VA, *Function and Metaphor: Dinnerware by Artists*.
- 1991 Lill Street Gallery, Chicago, IL, *Fifth Annual Great Lakes Show*.
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Colophon

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Contact Warren Frederick at: www.artistpotters.com

Creativity is piercing the mundane
to find the marvelous.

Bill Moyers