



260 Fingers and the Philosophy of Ubuntu

Paula Murray describes the collaborative efforts of 26 artists

UBUNTU IS AN AGE-OLD AFRICAN TERM DESCRIBING THE ESSENCE of being human. Specifically, *Ubuntu* means that human beings can not exist in isolation. Instead, we thrive in communities: we must live with others in a spirit of respect, generosity and trust; we must live in a way that improves the community around us. As an ideal, the concept of *Ubuntu* inspires co-operation between individuals, cultures and nations. It celebrates sharing instead of possessiveness and competitiveness and allegiance instead of self-interest. *260 Fingers*, an annual cooperative pottery exhibition in Ottawa, has flourished with *Ubuntu* as its guiding principle.

Nine years ago, Chandler Swain, a local potter, called together a group of friends to talk about mounting our own show. We were all long-time ceramics artists, deeply committed to clay and managing our diverse careers, yet without much occasion to interact. Knowing how much great work was being done in our region, we were frustrated by its lack of visibility in the community. Swain's vision and passion set in motion a show that allowed artists to spend time together, show our work and have it appreciated by a diverse, engaged and growing clientele.

The participating potters live in and around the capital region of Canada. Ottawa borders the provinces of Quebec and Ontario and is home to our national museums and arts institutions. In many cases the local arts scene is overshadowed by this national presence and municipal funding for the arts in general is far below that of other Canadian cities. There are no university ceramics programs and, as in many other locales, few galleries show ceramics in any serious way. If a scene was going to happen we had to do it ourselves.

Looking back it seemed so easy. Perhaps that meant it was the right time to hatch this idea. We chose the Glebe Community Centre as the site to mount a weekend exhibition and sale. Centrally located, this beautiful light-filled, historic domed building is home to a vibrant community ceramics studio. The size of the presentation hall determined the number of artists (26 fit comfortably, hence the name *260 Fingers*). We agreed that we wanted to display the diverse nature of our work in a gallery setting, while keeping the costs of participation low, so as not to be a deterrent for work with less commercial appeal. We wanted to make it easy to participate, so we set up a central cash system and divvied up jobs amongst us. Everything from mapping out the floor plan, organising food for the opening night party to designing the postcards is done in





house. Advertising is done through local community papers and our personal mailing lists. We have a devoted group of volunteers who return year after year for the sheer joy of being part of the spirit of this event. We manage to pull together this show with just one group meeting in the spring that includes a potluck lunch, something to look forward to after a long winter working in isolation. Further communication is easily handled through email.

Keeping the show fresh for the public and for us has been one of the strong points of *260 Fingers*. The core group tends to return every year but with the inevitable sabbaticals, we are able to invite an average of five new guest artists per year. We do not get bogged down with reviewing applications and jurying our peers. Guest artist suggestions can be made to Swain, then we leave it up to her to pin down the artists and, invariably, a diverse collection of fine work comes together. Artists come from hundreds of miles away to be part of this weekend and leave invigorated having been welcomed by this fabulous community of artists.

Generosity of spirit is infectious among the artists and the spill over to the vibe in the hall all weekend long is palpable. Guests are often billeted in our homes. One artist brings home-baked treats and fruit for sustenance in the adjoining kitchen throughout the weekend. All roll up their sleeves in the afternoon setting up the show, helping out where needed, carrying in the free-standing walls we rent from Canada's Art Bank, plinths, food and flowers. Although we all have our jobs, I have often found my job had been done by some kind soul before I got to it. There is never a sense of panic, no criticism, just help where needed. We open the doors at 6 o'clock and the party begins. Beautiful jazz plays from the piano in the hall, wine flows and tables of finger food abound. Loyal patrons have been lining up around the block. It is a sprint to get to see the work and snap up what calls to you. Our clientele is savvy enough to know that the best work

Facing page: Richard Skrobecki. *Systems, 3 Vessels*. 2012. Red earthenware with terra sigillatas, glazes and thrown forms.

Various 15 to 19 cm. Photo by the artist.

Top left: Paula Murray. *Let the Waves Wash Over Me*. 2012.

Slipcast porcelain, altered by embedding Fibreglas, multi-fired and polished terra sigillata. 6 x 16 x 16 in. Photo by David Barbour

Below left: Lisa Creskey. *Characteristics of Maps and Measures—York Boat*. 2011. Earthenware, slab built and carved, underglaze painted and clear glazed. 90 x 60 x 10 cm. Photo by the artist.

Above: Chandler Swain. *Mulling Things Over*. 2010. Cone 6 porcelain, handbuilt, stains, oxides and glazes. 22 in/h. Photo by Richard Skrobecki.

Lower border, all pages: *Artists' Finger Check*. Photo by Simon Wingar.

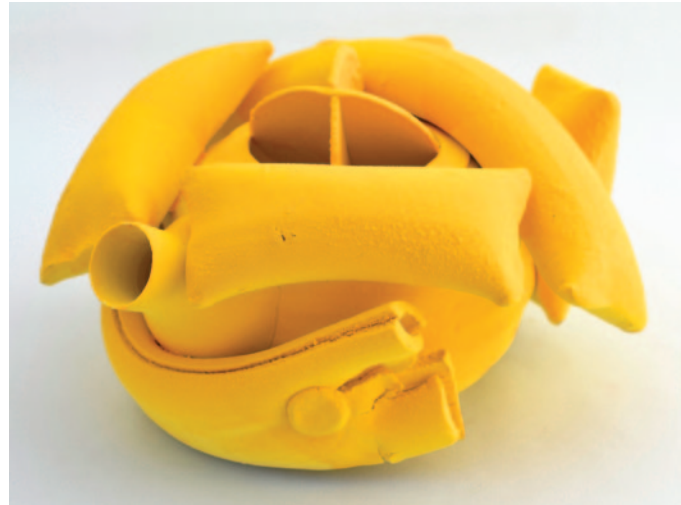




Above: Bill Reddick. *Vase*. 2012. Porcelain, reduction fired. 14 in/h. Photo by the artist.

Top right: Susie Osler. *Cylinders*. 2012. Cone 6 stoneware, slab built with white slip, underglazes, glazes, ceramic decals and gold lustre. Variable sizes, 5 x 4.5 x 4 in. Photo by the artist.

Below right: Reid Flock. *Teapot*. 2012. Cone 6 porcelain, thrown with extrusions, slab ornaments and powder yellow glaze. 6 x 7 x 7.5 in. Photo by the artist.



will not be there long. We now have three sales desks running Friday night to keep the lines manageable. A holding table becomes handy for buyers to park their intended purchases while they continue to take in the show. Friendships are renewed and new introductions are made. Curiosity abounds and handling pots is encouraged. There is so much joy in showing and discussing the work that there is never any pressure to buy.

Our guest artists are impressed by the knowledge of the clientele. The show is free and many return throughout the weekend to take it in at a more leisurely pace than Friday night allows. On Saturday and Sunday afternoons we host educational tours. Although artists are talking informally all weekend long, this structure offers an opportunity to discuss salient points of their practice.

One year was particularly memorable for me, as my annual participation at SOFA Chicago coincided with *260 Fingers*. Without blinking, my colleagues ensured that my work was at *260* and they looked after it all weekend. Maybe it is the excitement of the show, the simplicity of participation, the intimate scale, the beautiful showroom, the enthusiastic clientele, but when this show is over, I am filled with energy and a lot of work has found a home. We all enjoy the camaraderie of spending the weekend together, with the highlight being a group dinner Saturday night.

The quality of work is the reason that *260 Fingers* has developed a reputation of a 'not to be missed' event in Ottawa. Teachers bring their students, potters guilds travel from other cities, curators, collectors and art administrators all look forward to attending. Canada's Art Bank uses the opportunity to add to their collection each year. For the general public this is not an intimidating show. There is something for everyone regardless of their levels of exposure to the world of ceramics. There is work for the table, for the garden, for the wall. One can see functional, sculptural, conceptual, narrative, figurative, historically inspired and whimsical pieces. Wood, salt, gas, electric and pit firing traditions are represented. Prices range from a few dollars to several thousand. Sales are strong across the board and continue to grow despite the economic downturn of the past few years. We get the sense that our patrons appreciate the excellent value





Top left: John Ikeda. **Sauce Pitcher**. 2012. Earthenware. 4 x 5 x 5.5 in.

Photo by the artist.

Below left: Anne Creskey. **Teapot**. 2012. Woodfired stoneware, cone 11 with celadon glaze. 22 x 14 in. Photo by Jim Creskey.

Above: Maureen Marcotte. **Leaf Platter**. 2012. Wheel thrown porcelain, wax resist and slips on dry green ware, then clear glaze on bisque, fired to cone 10. 18 in/d. Photo by David McKenzie.

Below: **Opening Night of 260 Fingers**. Photo by Simon Wingar.

focus on a strong connection to their local clientele, others are attracted to international residencies; some participate in international competitions such as the Taiwan, Korean and Italian bienales, others work on public commissions, solo gallery exhibitions or they teach.

As Swain likes to say, this is a short, sweet show of worthwhile clay art. Making a living in ceramics is challenging around the world and, in doing so, both body and soul need nourishment. From the sense of community that has developed through working together, to the financial boost we receive from being able to connect with a public that values what we offer, it all contributes to making sense of what we do and why we do it. The definition of *Ubuntu* offered by Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee, "I am what I am because of who we all are," describes the values of *260 Fingers*. I believe this model can flourish anywhere and I am happy to share our secret of success in the hopes of helping other ceramics communities thrive. It is not a complicated secret: we work together, in a spirit of good will and with a genuine appreciation of each other's work; we work in the spirit of *Ubuntu*.



Paula Murray has worked in porcelain since 1980. From her studio on the shores of Meech Lake in Canada, she has developed a distinctive process casting porcelain that incorporates Fibreglas, establishing a body of work that is evocative of the human condition and the dynamics of change. Elected to the Royal Academy of the Arts in 2007, she exhibits nationally and internationally. Her work can be found in numerous public collections including the Icheon World Ceramic Centre, Korea; the International Museum of Ceramics, Faenza, Italy; the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec and the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, Canada (www.paulamurray.ca) (www.260fingers.ca).

