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WILLIAMSBURG'S

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PRICELESS

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## Williamsburg Holidays Seth Farrell

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"I hope to create an emotional response," Mike Jabbur says of his porcelain pottery. "If I can encourage a person who uses my mug, cup or tea pot, to experience certain emotions such as intimacy, generosity, loneliness, isolation, camaraderie, then I have begun to shape experience." That opportunity for a person to slow down and be in the moment brings Mike's work beyond utilitarian and adds a layer of artistic expression to his pottery style.

He focuses on the function of his pottery. "I make functional form for use. Not every potter does. Within that idea, there is a spectrum: from people who make work solely driven for use to pottery that is almost impossible to use."

For a time, he explored the more expressive/less functional end of the spectrum. "Until about two years ago," he says, "it became a goal to work utility in and open up my forms." Opening up his forms was literal. He had been making shapes that closed in on themselves or had tight restrictions. "The idea was the exploration of how to use it. The form made using it a meaningful experience in the day. You had to slow down and reflect on the coffee or tea you consumed from that particular cup."

Today, his award-winning work has evolved into more of a practical utility with the creative designs of fine art. "As a studio potter, my research focuses on the relationship between handmade objects and their role in everyday life. I make objects for daily use in a domestic setting, impelled by my belief that interesting and beautiful functional objects transform otherwise monotonous activities into meaningful life-affirming moments."

Mike spent his childhood in Sacramento, California. His family moved to northern Virginia as he started eighth grade. That's when he started taking art classes. "I wouldn't say I came from a particularly art-oriented family.

# Function & Emotion in the arts

By Greg Lilly, Editor



Corey Miller Photography

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My mom is an elementary school teacher, and my dad is an engineer. I took a lot of drawing classes in high school. In Fairfax County, they had a strong graphic design program.”

Graphic design appealed to Mike and he enrolled at Virginia Tech to study it. “At Virginia Tech, there were two tracks in art: graphic design and studio art,” he explains. The shared prerequisites introduced him to the different art mediums offered. “Life drawing, sculpture, painting and ceramics,” he lists. “I took the Ceramics 1 class and something clicked. I was really interested in the idea of functional art. There’s somewhat of a connection to functional art and graphic design. In graphic design, you’re creating for a client. There is a clear purpose to communicate in a certain way.”

Making pots, cups, bowls and platters to heighten the domestic experiences of eating and drinking clicked for him. “Really, more so than the visual part of pottery,” he admits. During his summers at Tech, he worked in a pottery studio and a pottery retailer. That was a conscious switch. “I wasn’t pursuing graphic design, but going toward pottery. I followed through with the graphic design degree. But somewhere around my junior year of college,

I realized I wanted to be a potter.”

The arts program was small at Tech so Mike and his fellow potters worked closely with the faculty and each other. “When I was coming through the program, there were about four of us that have gone on to be professional potters on the national scene.” The collection of talent sparked a valuable dynamic in that particular place and time. Nationally-known, widely-collected and worldwide-exhibited potters David Eichelberger, Dara Hartman, Andrew Gilliatt and Mike learned together and encouraged each other. “There were a lot of nights in the studio and synergy comes from that creative interaction.”

One of his Tech professors connected Mike with the owner of Red Star Studios in Kansas City. After graduation, he started as an intern and then became a resident artist at the studios. “I stayed for two years. Stephen Hill (the owner of Red Star Studios) was a mentor for a long time – he still is. That took me to grad school applications.”

Mike enrolled in the Ohio University’s MFA in ceramics program in Athens, Ohio. “They had strong faculty, grads and facilities. I wanted to work with Brad Schwieger, who is

the chair of the program. His work is different from mine, but has an architectural movement that is similar to the figurative movement I was interested in.”

Along with learning from some of the top potters in the country, the MFA program would allow Mike to teach at the college level. “I wanted teaching to be a component of what I did.” He had academic teaching experience along his way at Virginia Tech and at Ohio University and enjoyed it. From grad school, he moved to New Mexico to be the studio manager at Santa Fe Clay for three years. He applied for teaching positions during that time and found a fit at William and Mary.

“My grandfather graduated from William and Mary,” Mike says of the attraction to the area and the college. “My mom attended William and Mary. I knew Williamsburg. I wanted to get back east. It seemed like the perfect fit for me. The liberal arts’ style of learning art worked well for me. All those things came together here. This is my third year at the college.”

His work is distinctly his, in both form and finish. “I work in porcelain and stoneware with mostly Chinese glazes – celadon type glazes,”

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Mike explains. "These are fired in a gas kiln with an excess of gas that creates a reducing atmosphere or a reduction firing. This basically starves the kiln of oxygen. The small amount of iron in the glaze turns the finish somewhere between a pale blue to a pale olive green. It also turns the porcelain to an icy blue-white." He uses those glazes because of the calming quality of the colors.

"I see a relationship to water and tranquility in the colors. The glazes create a subtle hue. They also pool and break – break away from sharp color edges and flow to a white, really almost transparent edge. Then they puddle in recessed carvings, or any kind of mark-making, and that becomes richer." Mike creates spiral marks on the form while the piece is on his potter's wheel. The glaze then puddles in those marks and gives a highlight to the detail created on the wheel.

"Making form and glazing are not two separate ideas," he explains. "I like glazes that don't just fit, but accentuate what I do on the potter's wheel through gesture and mark-making."

Another feature of his style is that he leaves part of the porcelain unglazed. "Porcelain fired to that temperature is really tight and vitreous-

ness (glass-like). So forms like mug handles, teapot handles and spouts, and the bottom third of the forms are left unglazed. I do a lot of sanding at every stage to give it the look and feel I want."

He explains that with most potters, style evolves from a layering of information and a layering of influences. "Most potters aren't inventing every element of their work to something that is 100 percent brand new. It's often combining different elements in diverse ways to make something that is yours. This kind of porcelain and Chinese glazes, the bare clay, the way I handle the clay on the potter's wheel, the gestural marks make my style."

He throws his forms very clean and precise. "It's a very tight set form for every shape I make. Then I make a mark that is fairly aggressive." He stretches the pot from the inside. "That's where the gesture and volume come into the form. What I do on the wheel, the way I handle the clay has become a signature. I'm not the only potter who uses unglazed surface, but the way I break up form with glaze and no glaze is becoming my own."

A black line and dot ring the bottom of his pieces. "It isn't on all of my work. It was de-

veloped in the classroom, and I've moved it into my work because so much of what I do is drawing on a three-dimensional form with a mark. Lines become really important – both in the contour of the profile and the way the line moves up and across the form, hitting an area of the form and springing a handle. This line became a point of contrast, something to make the pot interesting from the bottom as well when you see someone drink from it or even in the dish rack."

His sketch book is handy and he's always trying different forms. He looks to historical shapes and to his own work, layering different histories to create something new.

"There isn't any form in my body of work that doesn't change, to a degree, every few months," Mike Jabbur says. "Everything is changing – part of that comes from hyper self-criticism. Every time I unload a kiln, if it's a good firing, there's a part where I look at it and appreciate it, but there is always criticism. I think: 'next time that foot should be a little taller' or 'that handle should push up more.' That critical eye keeps me excited to get back into the studio." NDN

See Mike's work at [www.MikeJabbur.com](http://www.MikeJabbur.com)

# Happy Holidays!

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