



A Potter In His Place

Josh Manning belongs to his clay as much as he belongs to his native Floyd

JOSH MANNING STANDS OUTSIDE the green-roofed, white-washed barn his grandfather built and milked cows in decades ago. He looks out over the fields and fences that are still his family's farmland, where he lives and works. Down the road, his great-uncle raises cattle.

He is a Floyd potter with as much claim to the place as the purple coneflowers and goldenrod that bloom on it.

But if Manning belongs to Floyd, he belongs, too, to his clay.

He is 37 years old. He has been a potter for 20 of them.

Growing up in Floyd, Manning knew plenty who worked the land, but there were enough others who created with clay and pigment and fire to show him that the life of an artist — while perhaps no more profitable than that of a farmer — was at least a life he could choose.

He threw his first pots as a high schooler, majored in art at Virginia Tech and continued to West Virginia University for his master's. Along the way, he learned to embrace the pure audacity of what art — and pottery in particular — does.

"You're creating a form out of something that's formless," he says.

Manning's pieces are dark and swirling, often on a larger scale, with delicate curves and heavy glazes.

"I'm really pushing the glaze to be interesting," he explains, holding an elegant gray pitcher. "If it wasn't that thick, it would be less interesting."

On a series of jumbled shelves, hundreds of domino-sized rectangles are piled together. Each is glazed and fired and described in a scribbled pencil code: mustard, cobalt, red.

This is Manning, testing his glazes. He



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mixes all his own clay and colors in order to have more control over each part of pottery's many processes. Some glazes are derived from stones and dust he comes across in his day-to-day.

Everything about his work is rooted in this place. Manning has taught as an adjunct professor at Virginia Tech and is a visiting professor at Ferrum College this fall. He enjoys the classroom, he says, both for the exchange with his students and the financial stability a paycheck provides.

But it's in his studio — a space he shares with his fiancée and fellow potter Hona Leigh Knudsen — that he is most alive.

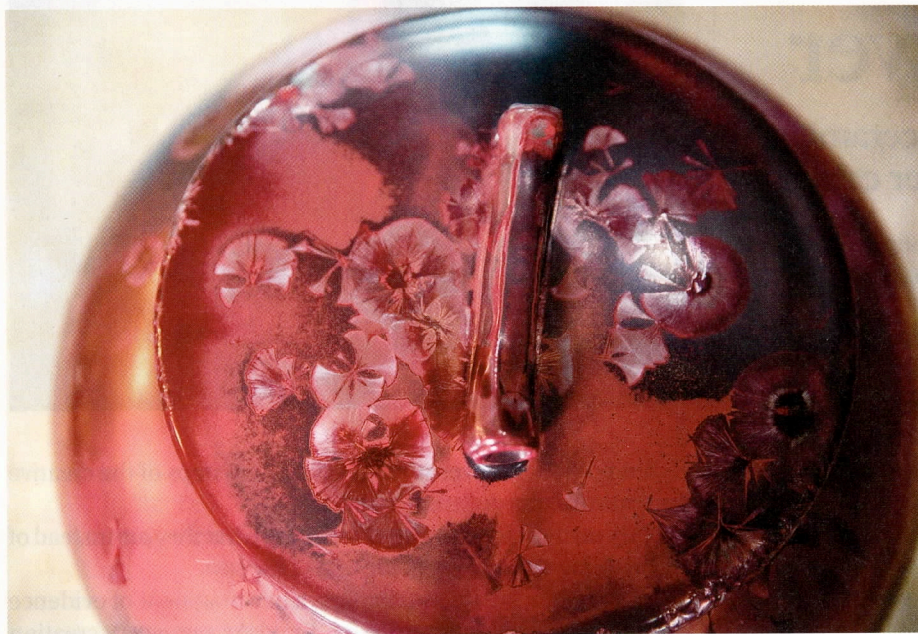
"The field of ceramics really is limitless," he says, with a mix of awe and exhaustion in his voice.

Knudsen and Manning and a handful of other young Floyd potters began a studio tour — Terra Floyd — a few years ago. This month, Terra Floyd joins forces with their mentors, the 16 Hands potters, to create a 12-artist, Floyd-wide tour the weekend after Thanksgiving.

It will be a rare coming together of this small town's outsized pottery talent.

As Manning unpacks a few pieces from a recent pottery show, he sums up the medium he has chosen for his life's work.

"All of ceramics is just ground up rocks and dirt. You can make it as technical as you want it — or not — but in essence, it's all rocks and dirt." ★



IN AN OPEN LIVING ROOM with limestone floors covered in red Oriental rugs, Steve Mitchell sits at a small table lit by a wall of windows. He is drawing geometric designs on elegant white vases — pieces he has shaped but not yet transformed into the works of art they will become.

Everywhere, atop every table and floor and shelf and bookcase perches pottery — some are flawed pieces of Mitchell's that he cannot sell, others are among his most striking.

Yet, despite 12 years as a full-time artist, despite national recognition, despite collaborating with some of the most celebrated potters in their fields, Mitchell is the inverse of arrogant.

When asked what makes him successful, he shakes his salt-and-pepper beard, his beige UPenn ball cap (his son went there), and shrugs.

"I've been lucky," he says, incredulity staring from his blue eyes. "I have such a loyal following. There are people who've bought 15, 20 of my pots."

As a child, Mitchell, loved to draw and sketch, but his larger-than-life father — a manager at Roanoke's Magic City Ford for 50 years — modeled a path for Mitchell that led straight to a manager's desk at Nationwide Insurance. There, he opened offices across the state, managed hun-

Claimed By The Clay

In pottery, Steve Mitchell finds a beautiful antidote to life's myriad stresses

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dreds of employees and oversaw lawsuits filed as a result of bodily injuries claims.

He took up pottery as an antidote to the stress. "I've always kind of needed a little outlet," he says.

Even when pottery was more hobby than vocation, Mitchell pushed himself to keep trying new techniques. He used his vacation hours to take workshops with top potters across the country.

In 2006, his company reorganized; staying with them would have meant a



move away from Roanoke. Instead, Mitchell retired early and dedicated himself to his art.

He began with Raku, a technique that takes a glazed pot and fires it hot, then when it's glowing orange, it's removed to a container filled with combustibles that burst into flame upon contact. A lid smothers the flame and the glaze finishes shiny and crackling.

"When you push things as far as they can be pushed, you usually get some pretty sweet results," he says.

By 2007, Mitchell had decided to build a wood-fired kiln. He began creating crystalline pottery, a technique that's hard to master, requiring high-heat firings over long times in order to grow crystals in the pottery's glazes.

"It's beautiful the way fire leaves patterns on the work," he says.

But 2018 has been a punishing year. His wife, Deborah, has spent most of it battling breast cancer. Mitchell, 67, lost his mother in August.

It's made Mitchell — typically a happy-go-lucky guy — face his mortality. And make some tough choices.

He's moved away from crystalline and back to Raku. "I guess you could say I've come full circle."

But even as he throws and designs his new collection, he talks of slowing down, of getting a little place at Virginia's Eastern Shore.

After decades of concocting glazes and experimenting with finishes, of becoming an expert in stone and fire and clay, what is it that Mitchell wants to do next?

"I want to go fishing," he says quietly, his gaze stretching far beyond the mountains in his backyard. ★



Pottery's Power

From her first experience with ceramics, Hona Knudsen knew it was her calling

IN 2004, HONA LEIGH KNUDSEN was a sophomore art major at West Virginia University when she took her first ceramics class.

"I got hooked right away," she says, her dark hair tied in a loose knot. "I just had this need to be in the studio."

"I tasked myself: How can I make a living at this?"

Fourteen years later, Knudsen throws, glazes and fires her Asian-inspired cups, bowls, pitchers and platters in an old Floyd milking barn she shares with her fiancé, Josh Manning. She

produces mugs for Red Rooster Coffee Roaster and others. Her work is sold in galleries across North Carolina and Virginia. She's experimenting with clay jewelry for upcoming shows.

She has answered her long ago question: She is making a living as a potter by shaping and firing and selling — and then doing it all again.

It was 2009 when Knudsen moved to Floyd to apprentice with renowned potters Donna Polseno and Richard Hensley, making glazes, cleaning pots and

helping with shows in exchange for a studio to create in, a kiln for firing and the support of established artists. She moved her then-8-year-old son with her and worked a part-time job to pay the bills. But she loved it.

"There are so many potters around here, you can't help but be influenced by what you're seeing," she explains.

The greatest influence on her work came from a trip to Jingdezhen, China — internationally known for its thin, white, glassy-glazed porcelain — that she took at the end of her university days.

"There was just pottery everywhere," she remembers. "It was completely mind-blowing." In the years since, she has dedicated herself to working in white porcelain clay, thrown on a wheel, glazed with a blueish translucent finish and fired in a 2,300-degree kiln. Her pieces are dainty and shiny and whimsical. Classically shaped and striped or polka-dotted, with a distinctive palette of pinks and turquoises and deep browns.

Knudsen, 36, is one of an up-and-coming group of Floyd potters drawn to the area by apprenticeships and the welcoming artistic community. She makes all of her own clay and glazes, creating her designs by manipulating how her glazes combine and layer on her pieces.



But no potter is ever sure how the many steps of the creative process will come together in the end.

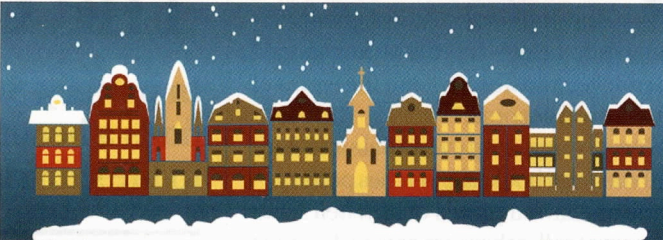
"I try really hard to see [my pieces] for what they are instead of what I thought they were going to be," she says.

Every failure is a lesson, though, a new fragment of evidence gathered in a lifelong experiment. Knudsen says every creation inspires her to want to try a new variation or expansion on what she has just made.


"It's almost like you can't ever keep up with all the ideas."

That, she explains, is pottery's power over her. ★


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Naturally Inspired

Nell Frederickson's life-long love of the outdoors finds its way into her work

WHEN NELL FREDERICKSEN WAS A CHILD, she could most often be found outside, observing creeks and critters, reveling in nature's revelations.

Not much has changed.

These days Frederickson is a potter and metalsmith, but she lives on 32 acres up a rutted gravel road in Franklin County with her two horses, four dogs, four cats, gerbil, collection of reptiles, ecologist husband and two teenagers. She gardens in the summer and is teaching a class on animal behavior at Ferrum College this fall.

Leaves and wildflowers, gourds and branches, turtles and streams and mountains surround her — and find their way into her work.

From her first hand-fashioned bowls that featured painted native plants to today's collection of dusty blues and mossy greens with vines and dragon flies twirling off their edges, her work has always been joyful and playful and inspired by the outdoors.

"If I'm going to create something, I want it to have a lot of beauty," she explains, sitting in her breakfast nook surrounded by stained glass and sculpture, blown glass and pottery, hers and that made by artists she admires. "The most beautiful things on Earth are found in nature."

Frederickson's focus is the functional — she makes mugs and bowls, platters and vases. She creates art to be used, not merely admired.

"Pottery fits into the little niche between everyday and lovely," she says.

Frederickson, 55, set out to be a scientist. She has a masters in reptile physiology and was on her way to vet school at Virginia Tech when her funding fell through. With free time on her hands, she enrolled in stained-glass, metalsmith and pottery classes. At the end, still hungry to create, she worked in a stained-glass shop and interned with a potter.

Soon, she asked herself: "Why don't I become an artist?"

Her path allowed her still to work at nature centers and with wildlife rehabilitation wherever she landed. She and her husband researched for six years in lowland Bolivian tropical forests.

"It's good because I don't think I could have given up that world," she says.

Many cautioned she would not be able to continue both ceramics and jewelry making. But she has, carving out two separate studios in her rambling log cabin-esque home.

"If smooshing clay is frustrating me, I can go and whack on some metal with a hammer and anvil," she says with an easy laugh. "If I had to choose, I think my head would explode."



Frederickson shows her work in galleries from Danville to Rocky Mount to Blacksburg and in six to nine shows a year. She also co-leads the Empty Bowls event each March at Ferrum College, where students and local potters fashion hundreds of soup bowls to raise thousands of dollars for students in need attending Ferrum Elementary School.

Frederickson reaches into her kitchen cabinets to pull out samples of her work: mugs with the mist of a foggy morning, bowls that bring to mind lichen-covered river rocks.

"Art tells stories and those stories are always personal to the artist," she explains, her eyes the color of her favorite glaze. "My whole background and interest is based on the natural world. So my story is, too." ★



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