

Ceramic Artist Michael Sherrill

Seeing with His Heart — Speaking with His Hands



Colored-barium, extruded teapot.

It is somehow appropriate that ceramic artist, Michael Sherrill lives at the end of road with no name. Labels seem to have no place in his life. Finding his home and studio is a challenge, yet an enjoyable drive though the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Hendersonville, NC.

Both Sherrill's studio and his life are filled with many works in progress. He feels being an artist is truly his calling — he strives to be a better craftsman as well as a better person. When he says "I don't want to be the Elvis Presley of making pots," he means that he has never felt the need to achieve wild popularity for his work. He only wishes to be able to express

himself though his art and to be appreciated by those with mature aesthetic values. Even so, Sherrill has experienced increasing national attention for his ceramic work in the past few years. After 20 years of producing, experimenting with, selling and evolving his craft he still says, "To be widely appreciated is great, but it's not an ego thing for me. Success for me is the end result of giving and receiving."

Recently invited to show in the Smithsonian Craft Show in Washington, D.C., Sherrill's reputation continues to grow. His work is in the permanent collections of The White House, the Mint Museum in North Carolina and the

Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Museum, to name but a few. He is represented by five major galleries and a few lesser known galleries throughout the United States. The closest to Columbia is Blue Spiral One in Asheville, NC.

Sherrill started making salt-glaze pottery and stoneware because he couldn't afford the two kiln firings required for normal glazing. Later he moved on to raku and recently he began making high-fired, barium-glazed, extruded vessels. His work has presence — his teapots dance, his bottles wiggle, his vessels have personality. They shine with metallic glaze that tricks the eye into believing they are



Sherrill's extruder is inverted and rotates to allow expedient production, consistent wall thickness and easier manipulation of each piece.

crafted from sterling or pewter. His use of negative space is dramatic and his color choices are bold and enticing. His vessels are visually stunning and tactilely enticing; one feels almost compelled to touch them.

His work is huge by traditional pottery standards — many exceed three feet in height. "I like the stoneware of Northern Italy because of the scale of the objects. Part of my work has to do with the volume of the object, its scale and its relationship to me as its maker," he says.

Sherrill also admires the permanence of ceramics. "Clay objects can stay buried for hundreds and maybe even thousands of years and you can still see the fingerprints of the maker. To me, that is the most wonderful thing about clay," he says. "It is a most immediately expressive and yet enduring material. And how great to be able to work

with the same materials that people worked with thousands of years ago."

Even though he has had little formal education, Sherrill is a highly sought instructor by many colleges and universities both at home and abroad. He cautions art students today that the learning process involved in producing and marketing work is the best experience. He says, "A lot of people feel that getting a degree and then taking their thesis show to New York and finding a gallery to represent them is how to become a star. I think schools need to teach how to survive in the world. Some academics are down on people who make a living from their art, but how else are people going to exercise their gift unless they are able to make it their livelihood? Students need to be taught how to make a living through doing their best art."

This brings up the question of the value of an art object. Most people today place relative values on purchases and those values depend on the similarity of objects. The market will pay only so much for a mug, no matter the maker or the materials used. Ironically, the same maker, using the same materials, could produce a vessel of some other sort, a vase perhaps, which would sell for hundreds of dollars.

Handmade craft depends not on similarity, but on each work's uniqueness. This points to the maturity of the purchaser's aesthetic values rather than an intrinsic value of a piece. According to Sherrill, ceramics have not enjoyed the financial success of other forms of art for a simple reason. He believes that people sometimes judge the value of an object not by the talent of the maker, but by the materials used to create the object.

"Clay is common. It's simple stuff. You can find it in your back yard. You have to clean it off your car. It's not valuable in itself. It is only valuable from the standpoint of things made from it. People think they understand clay and that it is a simple material to work with, but it has taken me 20 years to understand the characteristics of clay," Sherrill says.

Experimenting with clay allowed Sherrill to develop new processes, glazes and even machines to help him manipulate materials. When demand began to exceed his ability to hand-build or throw his pieces, he developed innovative techniques. He also invented or modified machines to help him with production. He made his own pug mill, a machine used to remove the air bubbles responsible for the loss of many pieces during firing. He also built an "extruder," a machine that allows him to pull pieces much as one would on a wheel. His extruder has two innovative modifications — it is in-



Extruded, metallic-glazed teapots.

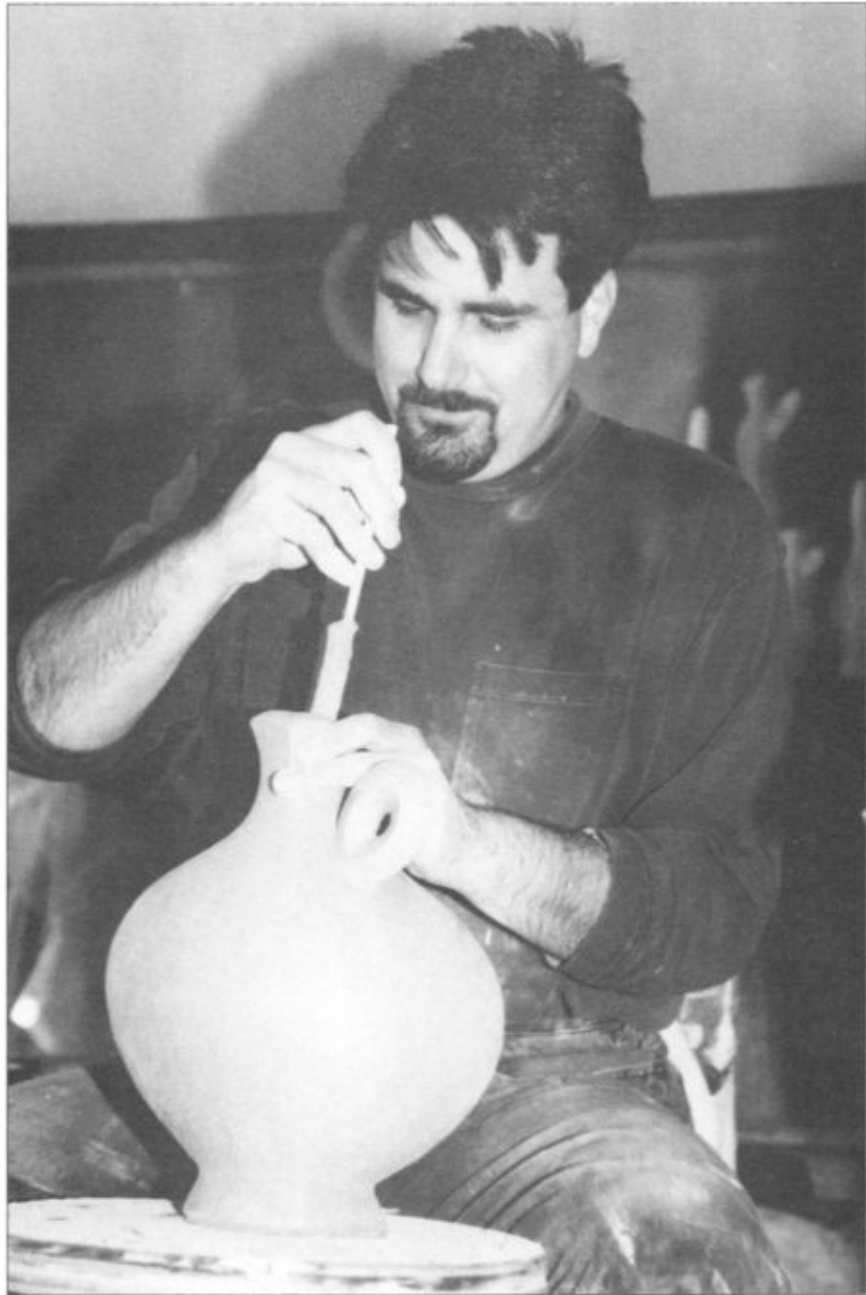
verted and it rotates. As the extruder presses clay from the top of the machine downward, Sherrill can insert his hand and arm up into a piece and manipulate it without fear of collapse. His extruder also allows him to create tiny openings to his vessels, which would be difficult using traditional throwing methods.

When asked about his creative vision, he points to frustration in his youth and spirituality as an adult. He feels his work is his language. As a teenager he experienced many frustrations due to dyslexia. Disheartened, watching other students able to do things that he struggled to understand, he remembers well his delight in his ability to throw on a wheel. Encouraged by a high school teacher, he learned to express himself with his hands.

Today, Sherrill still finds peace and expression through his ceramic work and he readily admits that his Christian background adds to his artistic vision. "Someone asked me why I was making bottles that look like serpents, and I never even thought about the fact that I was making these wiggly bottles. It's a unique language. I'm not necessarily trying to be overt, yet I'm not trying to be vague or ambiguous either. It's just me."

When asked about the commercialization of today's art world, Sherrill comments that being a one-man show works to his advantage. Because of limited production, he feels that he won't be overexposed, which will help keep his work in demand. Sherrill's requirements for his life and his craft are simple. "I've got to love what I do or else it doesn't show in my work. Yes, I have to sell myself and I have to do shows, but I don't want to become a commercial commodity. I just want to be myself and have a normal life as a father and husband and friend. What is it going to profit me if I am a great artist, yet I am not a decent human being?"

—Janna McMahan Cotterill



The surface of each piece is carefully worked to Sherrill's satisfaction.

Michael Sherrill was chosen as the Southeastern Art & Craft Exposition's 1995 Palmetto Award Winner for his superior vision and execution in ceramics and his contributions to craft education. His work will be on display at the entrance to the exposition. He will also have his work available for sale in his booth.