

Pottery inspired by coastal forests



Artist Chasse Davidson (pictured above) enjoys the tactile quality of clay, and she likes experimenting with the proportions of vessels when creating pottery. Influenced by the forests of Oregon, potter Chasse Davidson has been working for the past two years on bark finish pieces, such as this mug (pictured below).

By: Leslie O'Donnell - Updated: 1 week ago

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Chasse Davidson fell in love with pottery in her high school art class. Many years later, that love remains, and it has helped her weather the isolation imposed by the COVID pandemic.

Davidson, who formerly operated Toledo Clayworks, now creates an array of pottery in her home studio, ranging from mugs and dishware to vessels of all forms and finishes. She recently has focused on working with bark, and looks forward to firing horsehair pieces in the spring, when she can use her raku kiln.

She said she particularly enjoys the tactile quality of clay and likes experimenting with the proportions of vessels. "I make a lot of dishware, and I like all the consideration that makes a quality piece," she said. "It's all about the way a piece feels in your hand, the way a mug feels on your lips. It's not just a piece of art or function — it's the convergence of those two things. When you look at a piece of pottery, your mind tells you what it should feel like just by looking at it.

"Pottery is a three-dimensional art form that is often picked up," she added. "This is a consideration that many other art forms need not take into account and an element of pottery that I try to be conscious of in my work."

A teacher once asked her what it was about a vessel's unseen interior that she was so drawn to. "So much of pottery can be a metaphor for life," Davidson responded. "The interior is unseen but contained by what we see and embellish. When you throw your forms, you have to think about the cavity within, which is just as important as the outside, if not more so."

Her work also impacts her state of mind. "I wake up early and go to bed late with fantasies of clay on my mind," she said. "When pieces come successfully out of the kiln, I get a smile on my face that just won't go away. When I throw, I lose track of time and feel mesmerized. It just makes me happy!"

Since a showing of her work in the Earth and Forest exhibit at the Chessman Gallery in Lincoln City in November 2019, Davidson has been experimenting with bark finishes and taking inspiration from the textures and patterns of coastal forests, applying horsehair to the heated clay pieces. The burning material creates smoke patterns and carbon trails that remain as embellishment.

"I've been drawn to nature in my work, whether it's horsehair pottery or raku or impressions of leaves," she said.

Since that show, she has been focusing on bark as inspiration. "Throughout my life I have been falling in love with the forests," she said. "One of my favorite pastimes is hiking, and in Oregon that means lots and lots of exposure to trees. My recent pottery is the result of much time looking and pondering at the complexity of texture on the bark of the towering fir trees in my backyard.

"I have always looked to nature for inspiration in my work, whether it be using leaves to make impressions in the clay, burning snake sheds and horsehair for carbon markings, to now also experimenting with sodium silicate stretching techniques along with oxide applications to capture the feel of bark."

Originally from Salem, Davidson moved to South Beach in 2007 and then to Newport in 2010, and not long afterward, learned that Toledo Clayworks was being put together. Eager to be involved with a clay group at the coast, as she had been in the Willamette Valley, she offered to help. She worked with the gallery in its first location at the old fire hall and later when it moved to Toledo's Main Street. She taught a variety of classes and ran the gallery for about four years. "And I loved it," she said. "It was a creative, community place.

"A lot was happening at once," she said of that time. "I felt I was wearing myself thin, so I started concentrating on the business and on what I could offer to the community in my teaching role."

But she continued to create her own work as well, and participated in the Oregon Potters Association show in Portland. Her work was also shown at a downtown Portland gallery.

Then came the COVID pandemic and social distancing — and the reality that the majority of her clientele were in the higher risk category. "I couldn't do the business and still be at home with my children, so rather than waiting it out, I closed the Clayworks and sold the equipment to the gallery members," she said. She used the money from the sale to create a workspace for herself at home.

"It was a bittersweet time, but in its wake, a whole bunch of home pottery studios popped up," she said, adding that when warmer weather arrives, several of the potters hope to work together outdoors.

"I didn't make anything for eight months," Davidson said. Just before Christmas, when a water line was added to her studio, she began to throw pots again.

"Being at home all the time and not being able to make pottery meant I was not tapping into a creative outlet," Davidson said. "When I went back to work, I felt a complete shift in wellbeing. People need to have access to their creative outlet."

Davidson studied art at Chemeketa Community College, where she became enamored of the pottery wheel, and then at Western Oregon University, where she received her Bachelor of Science in Studio Art. She focused on both ceramics and printmaking in school, then did a lot of decorative work, but ceramics remains her first love.

"My high school ceramics teacher encouraged me early on to pursue higher education in this area," she said, noting a "real strong" Don Hoskinson influence in her ceramics career — he was both her high school teacher and later her college professor.

"After college I started compiling parts of a studio, and I had a kiln when I moved to the coast," she said, noting that in spite of caring for an infant at the time, she tried to do a little ceramics work every day.

Now both of her children enjoy making pottery — her daughter likes to throw pots, while her son is a prolific sculptor. "It's exciting to be out in the studio with them," she said.

She recently has been collaborating on commissioned pieces with Ram Papish of Toledo, a wildlife artist and biologist. She throws the pottery and he employs scraffito, a carving technique that adds imagery to the pieces she has thrown.

"Some of the oldest artifacts that teach us about being human are shards of pottery," she said. "We've been making pottery so long. It leads to a sense of wellbeing from the tactile aspect of it — a change from the computer work that has taken over. It takes a moment to shift sides of the brain."

Davidson previously was a member of the Toledo Arts Guild and now serves on a new advisory committee to the Newport Visual Arts Center (VAC) that hopes to create a ceramics studio on the second floor of the facility. VAC director Tom Webb said they are awaiting word on a grant and seek to create a professional facility, supervised by VAC staff.

"We're still a bit of a way from that right now," Webb said. "But it's wonderful to have an advisory group of professional potters to think about how to do things."

Davidson's main inspiration rests with nature. "I stand in awe of the natural beauty that surrounds us in this state and notably here on the coast, and love bringing my surroundings into my work," Davidson said. "To me, working with clay is mainly about how it makes me feel, like a saner human being."

Davidson's pottery can be seen at Oceanic Arts on the Newport Bayfront and at Of Land and Sea Gallery in Old Town Florence, as well as on Instagram. She can be reached at chassedavidson@outlook.com or 541-270-9899. Images of her work can be seen at chassedavidson.com.

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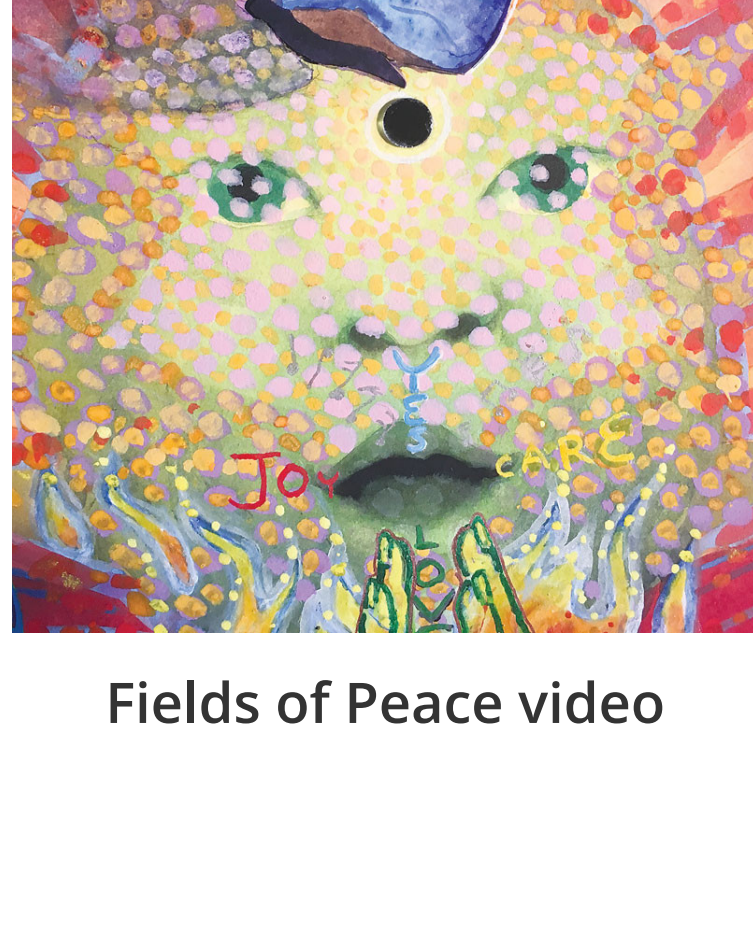
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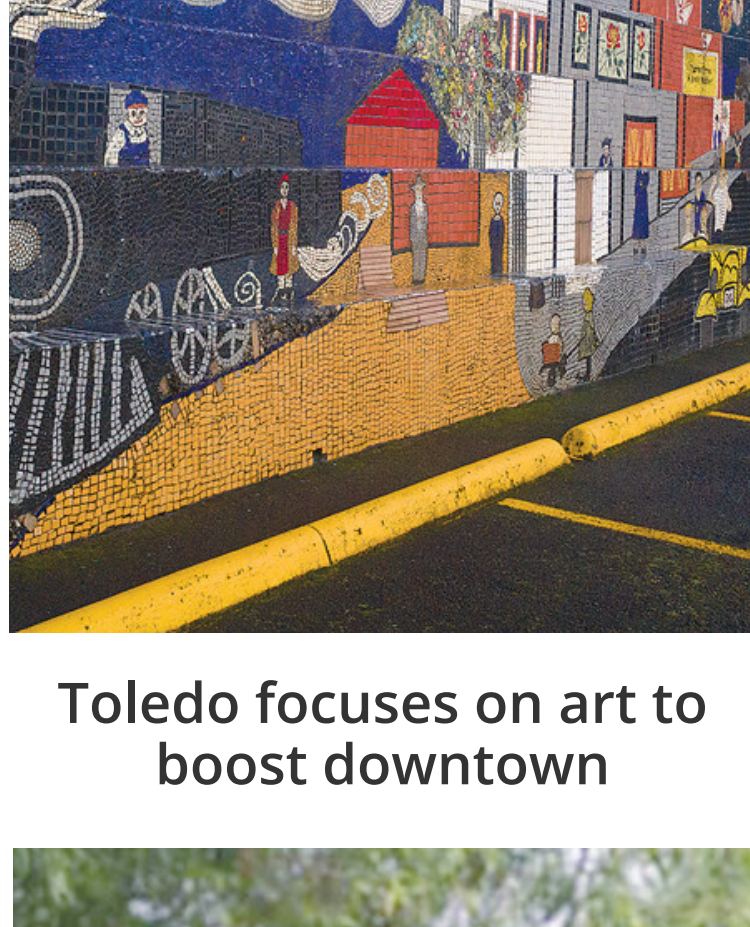
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