

Colleen Black Semelka



I am Canadian-born and fell in love with clay soon after I discovered the medium. Reared on the wide open plains of Manitoba, the first ceramic piece I ever made was at our family farm at age six. It was a mold of my horse's hoof print!

Since my undergraduate degree, I have had many teachers, both people and places. I was introduced to raku by Shuji Ikeda at the Pottery 7 Studios in San Francisco in the late 1980's. I then studied hand-building in Germany and perfected wheel skills in Winnipeg with Valerie Metcalfe. Most importantly, I was fortunate enough to have two great mentors: Sally Bowen Prange and Paul Soldner.

Since the early 1990s, North Carolina and its rich artistic community has been the crucible of my creativity. I work from studios in Chapel Hill and rural Chatham County.

Raku is a Japanese term which implies ease, pleasure and spontaneity. In clay, it refers to a ceramic technique characteristic of 17th century tea-master ware. The process, relatively quick by ceramic standards, includes rapid kiln-firing and immediate reduction generating dynamic chemical changes and surface effects. It is this volatility and process which influences my work. Highlighted by simplicity, raku invites the artist to release control and accept change.

Ceramics fuses elemental energies, A marriage of earth, air, fire, and water birthing objects infused with spirit. For me, it's a process, similar to prayer, and I'm blessed to be a conduit. At work, I feel at ease and happy. The most elegant pieces "come through" me effortlessly. I don't really know where this energy comes from, divine intervention is my guess. It's something I tap into and get connected with. Sometimes the ideas come in the form of words, other times I sit at my potter's wheel and have no idea what shape will come. The firing process offers little control of color, and often only a hint of what the final outcome will be. It is this element of surprise from the very beginning that makes raku so interesting.

The unique technical challenges associated with ceramics allow me to utilize my university training in the basic sciences. I create glazes and continuously experiment with alternative raku firing methods to evolve metallic lusters, flashy iridescences, crackling, and smoke-blackening effects. In my art, I strive to sensitively maintain elements of traditional form while incorporating an inventive perspective. I seek to both honor and transcend the status quo of tradition.

The raku process is very much about change. Some outcomes are beyond our control, and others can be influenced by our thoughts, actions and perceptions. Acceptance is a big part of the raku process. This art came through me. Embracing my works challenges self-acceptance. Raku teaches one about judgment and about suspending judgment.

This current work is mainly wheel-thrown and altered. Each shape emphasizes fluidity and weightlessness of form, which provides the foundation for unique glazes and surface treatments. By merely changing the angle from which one views my work, the versatility of each shape can be seen. The pieces appear to move as they acquire different forms when viewed from different angles. The reflective properties of Raku glazes further embellish these changes in perception.