

The Mimbres

CONNECTION

◆ KATE BROWN: MIMBRES POTTER

From Earth to Table

Artist Kate Brown has been making art from the red clay of the earth for more than a half century. Since the 1970s, she has lived and worked in a remote corner of the Mimbres Valley. From her straw bale studio there, Kate has made a name for herself with her deep, rich terra cotta pottery, slip-decorated and glazed in bright colors with animated designs of dragonflies, honey bees, birds and blooms and trees, turquoise swirls and royal blue skies.

WRITTEN BY CHRISTINE STEELE
PHOTOS BY JESSE OCHOA

After studying briefly at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, Kate left to start her training as a potter, with her first apprenticeship in New York City.

“My first goal in life was to live in New York City and I did that,” she said. “But you have to be able to make money to live there and I knew making money was not high on my list.”

From there, she went on to other apprenticeships, the most formative of which would be in a renowned clay town in North Carolina.

“Through potter lore, I knew about these rural potters in the south,” she said. “I found out they had an apprentice program, and I took a bus – or hitchhiked – to Jugtown Pottery in Seagrove, North Carolina. They had a very particular work cycle and I was really entranced by it. In American art pottery there was a whole generation of WWII vets working on the GI bill who were very influenced by Japanese pottery and established this very Japanese-influenced American pottery. When you studied clay at a university, that’s what you learned.”



But, as the daughter of a university professor, Kate wanted nothing to do with that, choosing instead to develop a path that was her own.

"I wanted to see what other American lineages there were and this work in the American south was a very specific Anglo American lineage that I was very interested in learning about. It was a very deliberate quest for me to not do what was sort of the current up and coming, or most influential thing."

The artists she began working with were sixth and seventh generation potters, whose families had been there for 150 years. "It was an anachronistic place to be," she said. "That's where I decided I was a rural potter."

From there, she moved around, landing in Montana and trying out several different jobs – modeling for an art class and joining the first women's firefighting crew in the country. It was there she would also meet the people who would lead her to New Mexico and to developing the life she has today.

"I came to Grant County with some traveling companions who were coming to prospect for turquoise," she said. "I did that for two years in a row and met some potters who lived in the Mimbres. They talked to me about the community that was being established there and I stayed in touch with a woman potter with this goal to eventually move here."

In November 1980, she made the move – with husband, two-year old daughter and with another one on the way.

"I moved here to be a potter in a potter community," she said, "but also because I knew there were other young families and I knew having other young mothers to be a mother with was a key ingredient to being a happy mother."

She started making pottery in the Mimbres Valley in 1983 in a communal clay studio, later establishing a studio of her own.

"That's when I started in earnest making pottery for a living. The first year, I remember the other potters had this big gas kiln and they fired stoneware, which fires to a much higher temperature," said Kate. "I've always been attracted to terracotta earthenware. It's what the crust of the earth is made of. If you clean your nails and stick in a kiln, it would come out red. It's iron-bearing clay. It's just ubiquitous. And, it doesn't take as many btus to fire. This was during the Carter



years, when the speed limit was 55, and we were all focused on conserving the amount of energy we used. It just seemed like a no-brainer to use a clay that fired at a lower temperature. It was the perfect synchronicity."

It was then that she also decided on her style – slip decorated, with ceramic pigments paint on, covered with a clear glaze and fired.

"It's a technique that has been used in many cultures," she said. "What people think of as Mexican pottery is mostly done that way. It is generally considered to be everyday ware and I was really interested in making that. I understand it holds a special place in people's lives, but I want it to be used and something that people bond with in their everyday life as an eater and a cooker. That has been my main interest, to have it be something that is integrated in people's lives, not something that is sacred and holy and put on a shelf."

It has been interesting over the years, she said, to watch people perceive her pieces as not art because it is for everyday use.

"I find that to be an obnoxious false dichotomy," she said. "I have devoted my life to knocking down that 'if it's useful, it's not art.' Bullshit. Why live like that?"

That a utilitarian piece, like a coffee mug, plate, tea pot, or bowl, could also be beautiful and a piece of art, is something Kate has proven over and over again with her work.

"That was also part of my North Carolina experience," she explained. "These folks actually ate off melmac because the association was that if you are dirt poor, you eat off dirt pottery. It just seemed so painful that attitude was integrated into these people whose lives for many generations had been making clay pottery."

For 15 years, she churned out pieces, turning herself into a one-woman sweatshop, throwing hundreds of mugs, plates and bowls, then loading up her van and driving thousands of miles to sell her wares at craft shows.

"It was not satisfying," she said. "I was a production line. It was not creative, but it did pay the bills."

Then her children grew up and graduated from college and she took a bad fall, walking off a balcony and breaking some bones in her back.

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“After that, I decided it was time to let the world come to me,” she said.

By then she had a following.

“People say, ‘you’re famous!’” she said. “You know how I got famous? By putting up posters of myself, saying ‘Pottery!’” she said. “Big fish, small town, very doable.”

She built a reputation as a working artist, giving tile classes to other Silver City artists, doing commissions and working as the lead artist on a number of tile murals with the Mimbres Regional Arts Council’s Youth Mural Program, including one on the Daily Press building on Market Street and another in the Hub.

For 37 years, the artists at the Mimbres Hot Springs Ranch held annual craft sales, inviting visitors out the first weekend in December for a weekend of crafts, food and live music. While the collective discontinued the sales a few years ago, Kate continued, holding her annual studio sale now twice a year, Mother’s Day weekend, and the first weekend in December.

“I’m well enough known now, when people have visitors, they bring them out to visit my studio and I make it really special. It’s not like coming to a store, it’s like a window into my life.”

▲ FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT
Kate Brown Pottery & Tile Showroom in the Mimbres
Open by Appointment
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