



'I'm Not Listening', 2008, raku, ht 41 cm



'No Not That!', 2002, stoneware, ht 38 cm

FRED YOKEL: THIS IS IT!

Fred Yokel's figurative sculptures reveal a deep interest in human nature through an exploration of form, colour, texture and concept. Profile by Kevin V. Wallace.



'Piece O' Cake', 2008, low-fire oxidation, ht 30.5 cm

YES,' Fred Yokel answers, before the question is asked. 'I did play with dirt in my back yard when I was a kid. Little did I know where it would lead.'

A fourth generation Californian, Yokel was born and raised in the Santa Clara Valley, known today as Silicon Valley. It is where he continues to live and work. Yokel had his first experience with clay when he was 15 years of age, when a friend showed him a pot he had made.

'I thought it was cool so I asked him if he'd make me one,' he recalls. 'He said no way, go make your own!'

The next semester, Yokel signed up for an art class and was introduced to working with clay. The material and its potential became an obsession. He had initially been interested in architectural drafting, thinking he might want to be an architect and home designer, but now knew he wanted to be a potter or a ceramics teacher.

'As soon as I touched that goeey malleable earth, I knew that I wanted to play with clay for the rest of my life,' he says. 'For the next three years in high school I could be found in the ceramics class if I wasn't required to be in any other classes. I was lucky to know that ceramics was what I wanted to do at an early age.'

On Tuesday nights the school had an art club that was allowed to use the school facilities to produce work. Yokel enjoyed the healthy competition in the ceramics department, where he and several others tried to out-do each other by creating the largest and thinnest pots. For Yokel it was that competition and the works it inspired him to create that kept him going throughout his high school years, during which he enjoyed extra-curricular activities such as workshops and seminars.



'Say No More', 2003, raku, ht 43 cm



'How'd This Happen?', 2007, raku, ht 66 cm



'What Is That?', 2008, low-fire oxidation, ht 40.5 cm



'Check This Out', 2007, raku, ht 58 cm

Upon graduation, Yokel enrolled at San Jose State University, where he concentrated his studies in ceramics under James Lovera, Robert Fritz and Herbert Sanders. He identified with the way Lovera created his forms and his kind attitude as a teacher. He was always encouraging during critiques and helped to guide Yokel and push him to produce better work. Years later, coming upon Lovera's work in exhibitions, Yokel is still drawn to the artist's crusty lava and bark glazes.

Robert Fritz exposed Yokel to the practice of glass blowing and he gained an appreciation for the intensity and skill needed to work glass. Fritz also taught him glaze calculation – the first one to teach it in a way where he actually understood the process.

Sanders was his mentor for crystalline glazes, which he spent time exploring. 'This was at a time when the thrust of ceramics was cone 10 reduction-iron-speckled, earth-toned "hippie" pots,' Yokel recalls. 'And I had long hair and a beard then, so I fit right in!'

David Middlebrook started teaching at the university during Yokel's last two years and brought with him new

directions. 'He encouraged a more conceptual approach to ceramics when most people were throwing pots. The place really grew artistically and conceptually when he arrived. He gave me the knowledge and confidence not be afraid of working in larger scale.'

Viewing Yokel's work today, the influence of each of these early teachers is still evident in the ease with which he manipulates the material, controls the glazes and understands concept and sculptural intent.

Yokel's independent explorations paralleled his studies while at the university. He shared a studio off campus with friends, who built their own kilns and made items to sell at local art fairs. He also worked in a local ceramic supply shop building kilns. After graduating with a BA in Ceramics, he became a production potter for several years at two Bay Area production pottery houses. He also taught summer classes in production pottery and an Adult Education ceramics group

'Production pottery helped me learn throwing-off-the-mound and making pieces as quickly as possible, which helped me grow as a potter,' Yokel says of these formative years. 'The problem was that I didn't really derive satisfaction from making hundreds of cups, goblets or planters. I got more pleasure out of designing one-of-a-kind items and exploring raku surfaces and organic looking textures. My goal at the time was to make lightweight, visually attractive forms with pleasing colour and texture.'

Ultimately, he decided to go back to school at California Institute of the Arts, where he received a MFA in Design and Advertising. The influence of this education is also evident in the design of his sculptural works – the clean lines, sense of movement and gesture, and subtle, fully integrated use of colour.

'Over the years, I was searching for something that would make me exclaim "This is it!"' Yokel says of his journey as an artist working in clay. 'I was always making pieces, but they never seemed to have a direction or a focus, just experiments in form and texture.' The breakthrough came as Yokel was working on a series of bottles and thoughts



'The Clandestines', 2009, low-fire oxidation, ht 66 cm

came to mind about his early exposure to classical ceramic forms while studying with James Lovera.

'I remembered him going over the basic structure of pots and how they have human attributes such as a shoulder, neck, lip, foot and body,' he recalls. 'So I took these bottles and gave them some more literal marks and identifiable structure that was based on human body parts.'

It was an approach that had been explored in a variety of ways throughout history, but Yokel was on to something. Sharing the work with friends, he received an encouraging response and "something clicked". Suddenly, ideas came in quick succession and he knew to follow them. The works evolved further and further away from bottles and toward human forms.

'Over the past few years I have been concentrating on these loosely human-based sculptures that express emotions or whimsical stories through their stance and mass, rather than their detailed facial expressions or life-like anatomy,' says Yokel of his sculptures. 'They are far from anatomically correct humanoids, and I like it that way. They allow me to explore the tension in a larger-than-life figure performing a delicate action.'

Yokel's sculptural figures embody a singular experience, relating their reactions and emotions entirely through gesture, thereby allowing the viewer to see the humour in everyday life. While his chosen media is clay, his experience with two-dimensional approaches is important to the process.

In looking at other ceramists, Yokel sees specific aspects of the work that inspired him: 'I admire Richard Notkin's pursuit of perfection and attention to incredibly small detail; James Lovera's bark glazes, lava glazes and forms; Peter Beard's beautifully designed forms, excellent texture and colour combinations in glazing; the beautifully subtle colour nuances and forms of Duncan Ross; Kristin Doner's ability to make a piece look crusty and ancient, as if it had just been pulled out of the sea after a thousand years; and Jeff Margolin's incredible carved detail and sculpted and burnished horse-hair raku pieces.'

'Although the term "whimsical" can be a curse for some artists, my whole point is to let people see and relate to a situation that could happen to them in everyday life that elicits humour,' he explains. 'I want to make people laugh. It's actually a complement to me when people view my work and snigger. Then I know they have, on some level, figured out what I was trying to get across.'

More than technique or process, observing people is central to Yokel's approach. Like his interest in clay and painting, this pursuit dates back to high school when he, his brother and a friend invented a character who was a social outcast. It was a means of commenting on the cliques that formed in the environment and the human desire to fit in.

'The idea of watching people and trying to figure out what they were about and why they were doing things has stayed with me over the years and is a huge source of inspiration in the creation of my figurative work.'

It is an artistic process that requires research, and Yokel can often be found sitting on a bench on a street corner, inventing stories about the people he sees and their life struggles. In turn, situations come to mind that contain the idea for a piece.

'It could be a simple set of words, an action, or a look that makes it take off,' says Yokel. 'The funny thing is, I usually put myself in the story as the main character and try to come up with that perfect statement that would explain the whole situation in as few words as possible. The titles for my pieces are often these sets of words.'

Kevin V. Wallace



'Now That's Working!', 2005, raku, ht 40.5 cm

'Just Let Go', 1999, raku, ht 58 cm



'Oh Yeah, Watch This!', 1999, low-fire oxidation, ht 38 cm



Fred Yokel working on an untitled piece