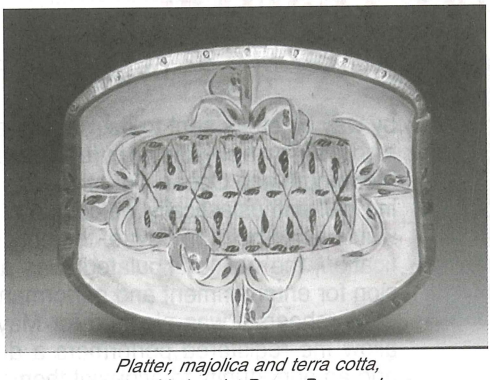
M.T. Burton Gallery Presents The Jersey Shore Clay National

by Victoria Ford



Platter, majolica and terra cotta, by New York artist Posey Bacopoulous

Both as a creative process and as a finished product, clay is among the most intimate of all artistic media, in the opinion of Matt Burton, owner and director of the M. T. burton gallery in Surf City. As a three-dimensional art form, a certain tactile appeal is integral to the pottery experience, he said.

While the fourth annual Jersey Shore Clay National is not exactly a "please touch" exhibit but rather a juried competition, by its nature it calls for some level of interaction between the viewer and the work of art. The exhibition also calls widespread attention to, and generates interest in, the Jersey Shore region as a hot spot for fresh and challenging ceramic work valued for both its aesthetic and functional attributes.

Burton admits that was part of his plan. He made sure to include "Jersey Shore" in the exhibition's name, he said, because he feels the area deserves recognition as a haven for artists and a destination for art appreciation.

By the same token, he added, the event provides "a chance for young artists ... to get their foot in the door."

As its name implies, the Clay National is open to any ceramicist, sculptor and potter in the United States. This year's exhibition, which opened Saturday, May 26 with a reception from 6 to 9 p.m., will run through June 27. Burton casts his line in the water by distributing a prospectus, by listing a "call for entry" in national trade publications and by posting on his website, www.mtburton-gallery.com.

One of the things he loves about the exhibition is the diversity it brings to his space. "You get work I wouldn't normally have in the gallery," he explained.

In organizing and hosting the event in the three previous years, Burton said, he has more or less clung to the same formula, but he has noticed most recently a dramatic shift in the way work is submitted, from the standard slide photography to digital. He intends for future shows, therefore, to adjust his submission acceptance methods accordingly.

Generally, he said, about 100 artists enter up to three pieces each, putting the total number of entries somewhere around 250 and representing at least 40 of the 50 states. The juror's task, then, is to select from the lot the 40 to 60 pieces he or she feels are of the highest quality. The juror changes each year, Burton said, but is always an artist considered to be successful or a leader in the field. The show gets installed in his gallery's approximately 500-square-foot main showroom, whose big picture windows front Long Beach Boulevard, the Island's main thoroughfare.

The whole of the gallery has five different rooms, with the front room reserved for rotating exhibits and the back rooms for what Burton called "house items." The gallery, now in eighth season, is open year 'round for workshops, classes and private lessons.

In the summer, the exhibit in the main showroom changes about every three weeks. The Jersey Shore Clay National kicks off the season, followed by three consecutive solo shows; a group show in September, usually the week after Labor Day, brings it to a close, he said.

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Burton commented on what a joy it is to receive the parcels of handcrafted objects as they arrive in the weeks leading up to the Clay National exhibition – some more fragile than others, some in need of assembly: "It is like Christmas," he said, "to open those boxes and to see these beautiful pieces of artwork inside."

He takes great care, he said, to do the installation himself and to show each and every piece, be it a tabletop or wall-mounted specimen, in the best possible position and light.

This year's juror is Liz Quackenbush, a Long Beach Island artist who teaches at Penn State University. Her ceramic sculpture work might be described as the point where centuries-old clay traditions and the small wonders of everyday life collide. Her aim is to bridge the divide between elegant china and down-to-earth pottery.

"My work romanticizes the creepy-crawly beauty of the great outdoors," Quackenbush writes in her artist statement. "The patterns of animal and reptile skins inspire my surface decoration decisions. The forms of these creatures give birth to my pottery forms."

Her relationship with clay, like Burton's, is underscored by the medium's physicality. "I deliberately leave clay surfaces irregular," she writes, "so that they look handled and handlable."

The guidelines she was given to judge the pieces in the Jersey Shore Clay National, according to Burton, were: "'Choose what you think is high quality' – it's that open-ended," he said.

Of course, much rides on her personal and professional sensibilities as they relate to the meaning of the word "quality." And therein lies the subjectivity that makes art, art. (After all, if art were grounded in objectivity, might not it be called science?)

As an artist himself, a gallery director and a college-level drawing instructor at Ocean County College and Rowan University, Burton has had his share of experience in wrestling with that very philosophical question and its wide-ranging implications.

There's quality in the Mom-loves-it sense, and then there's quality as the industry, academia, museums and the buying public might see it, he said. Some artists create pieces that have a certain Eastern, Zen-like quality, while others take a more cavalier approach to the medium. There are the artists' and the viewers' personal styles to take into account – realistic versus conceptual, for example – and one might not necessarily be the other's cup of tea.

Ultimately, Burton said, time is the only true litmus test for measuring quality, as only time can tell what will leave a permanent mark in the annals of art history.

Do not, however, mistake Burton's diplomatic stance for a lack of preference. As a wearer of so many hats, he has learned how to come at a critique from all sides.

Given any piece of artwork, he said, "I'll defend it. But it doesn't mean I'll hang it on my wall."

The first- through third-place award-winners and honorary mention recipients, as determined by Quackenbush, would be announced at the opening reception Memorial Day weekend, Burton said. In each competition there is also what he calls the "purchase award," which goes to the artist whose piece is chosen and bought by Burton himself to add to his personal collection.

"I want it to be able to stop me in my tracks," he said.