

# The Accidental Artist

*A writer finds escape — and obsession — in a new medium*

By Melinda Blau

The stoic philosopher Epictetus, enjoying newfound celebrity thanks to Tom Wolfe, suggests that we behave in life as we would at a banquet: "As something is being passed around, it comes to you; stretch out your hand and take a portion of it politely."

Since Dec. 4, my 55th birthday, I have unwittingly followed that advice and taken my share, albeit with more fervor than Epictetus would consider appropriate. The opportunity presented itself when I decided to invite 20 friends to celebrate with me over pizza and pottery at Claytopia, Northampton's paint-your-own ceramic studio. Even considering my history as an inveterate party-giver (including an end-of-*Seinfeld* gala last May, where among other delicacies I served Junior Mints and Mendy's pea soup), it was the best bash I'd ever thrown. It was also the beginning of my obsession.

Writing non-fiction books and articles is my day job, but lately I find myself avoiding my computer. I sit for hours in a storefront on Main Street, totally absorbed, pausing only now and then to check my messages. Buoyed by the butter dish I painted at my party — and on subsequent visits, the three Christmas ornaments for my friends in New York, the cookie jar for my son, the salt and pepper shakers for my daughter, the napkin holder and platter for friends — I decided to tackle a complete set of dishes for myself. Now I can't stop.

As it turns out, I am not alone. In other cities, such studios are called by various clever names — the Clay Room in Boston, Come Out and Clay in Norwalk, Conn., Our Name is Mud in my native Manhattan — but the principle is the same. You pick out a piece of naked pottery — the bisque — and dress it in the style and colors of your choice. You pay for the cost of the piece and your time. While you're working, staffers explain what kinds of effects can be achieved with brushes, sponges, stencils, scratching tools, squeeze bottles, or, if it pleases you, your own fingerprints. When you're finished, they fire your objet d'art in an 1,800-degree kiln.

The first contemporary ceramics studio, as these emporia are known, was conceived in 1990 when Emily Goodman, an artist and tilemaker in New York City, opened her door to novices and supplied them with materials that even a child could use. A close friend of Goodman's sister later brought the concept to California, where, according to Philip Mekelburg, owner of Art & Soul in Atlanta and president of the Contemporary Ceramics Studio Organization, "it spread like wildfire" and took hold in other parts of the country as well. By the end of 1995, there were 80 such studios in the United States; now there are close to 800.

It's no accident that the paint-your-own phenomenon has taken off. I'm hard pressed to think of another activity that so effectively transcends age and gender and skill — and, at the same time, is so calming. Until I discovered the Zen-like state I achieve while paint-

ing pottery, I was convinced I couldn't do one thing at a time. I tend to do the Sunday Times crossword puzzle with the TV on, cook with a phone at my ear, edit with the radio on. Sure, I go at a somewhat slower pace in the Happy Valley than in Manhattan, my home until 1990, when I escaped the city's gravitational pull. But last year I wrote two books and doctored another. It wasn't uncommon for me to sit at my computer 12 hours a day, some weeks six or seven days.

Thanks to my new obsession, I've discovered that I am capable of carefully and slowly applying a first coat of paint, then a second, and then a third. Sometimes, to fill in a tiny corner, I even have the patience to use a delicate wisp of a brush that has only two bristles. My mind

successful in their day jobs, all shifting in their chairs like a group of jittery teenagers. The way each person approached the task and coped with the pressure was a window into the psyche. A well-known writer, a self-avowed class clown in high school, cracked jokes to cover her anxiety. An editor/writer, undoubtedly a Goody-Two-Shoes type in the old days, chose a piece without hesitation and sat down to work, while the rest of us floundered.

"Oh, I can't do a piece like this," said a fellow displaced New Yorker, a lawyer with a Woody Allen-esque sense of humor, picking up a serving platter. "I'm afraid I'll ruin it." She opted for a simple square tile — a would-be trivet.

One by one, people chose their pieces, selected paint colors and settled down to

experiment without fear. In the days that followed, when I developed the disposable Kodaks I'd left on the tables, I discovered a telling sameness: One picture after another showed heads bowed and faces fixed in absolute focus.

Sitting at my perch in the front of the store, I've seen the look of joy — and shock — on neophytes' faces when they come in to pick up their first creation. The results invariably surpass people's expectations. The colors are more vibrant, and the little mistakes barely show. "I'm better at this than I thought I'd be," one stranger confided to me.

I understood how she felt. I've started on my plates, and I'm amazed, too. I'm accustomed to thinking in words, not pictures. I work with design, but of a far different sort — a tantalizing hook to draw readers in, a compelling succession of paragraphs to keep them captive, a memorable finish. With a blank piece of pottery, I'm literally faced with a tabula rasa. Until now my artwork has been limited to the doodles I create while talking on the phone (which is often). I have no history, no technique, no expectations.

I don't know how long this obsession will last. I do know that at this moment, sitting at my computer, I would rather be painting. It engages my senses in a different way. I look at baubles of ice glittering on the branches outside my window, and wonder if I can recreate them with paint, not my vocabulary. When I'm in the midst of working on an article or book, I tend to wake up and scribble ideas down. Lately, I wake up seeing images, not words.

I first felt guilty about spending so much time painting, but on reflection the hours I've been putting in don't even begin to approximate the time it takes me to research and write an article or chapter. And time matters to me, as I recently discovered when the first of my plates shattered in the kiln (an unfortunate happenstance with large items). I took it remarkably well, far better in fact than if a 5,000-word piece I'd been working on had disappeared into cyberspace. At least the loss was tangible; there was a body to bury and mourn.

No doubt, I'll finish my 12 dinner plates and other pieces I've envisioned. But it's unlikely that I'll give up my day job. I am, after all, a writer. And painting pottery has its downside. Where writing allows me to keep the original piece and still share my ideas and images with hundreds, even thousands, of people, ceramics are one-of-a-kind. Giving them up has been difficult.

That might change. Years ago, when my byline first appeared on the cover of *New York* magazine, I thought, "I can't do that again." I've only been painting for a month. Maybe I'll gain the confidence to believe that each good piece isn't my last. I might even part with the salt and pepper shakers I made for my daughter. Complete with beach, ocean, palm trees, spouting whale and a lone swimmer being chased by a shark, the shakers are so far the best evidence of my skill in this new medium. But for now they sit on my dining room shelf, waiting to be swathed in bubble wrap. ■



No history, no technique, no expectations: Blau spends time away from her computer and traffics in the unfamiliar.

is empty, and I am living in the moment. I am there for myself, not on assignment, not for money, but for the pure pleasure of creating.

Removed from daily pressures, I am not removed from myself. The designs I conceive come from some surprising place deep inside me. I don't feel the need to talk while painting — a fact that amazes those who know me. I suspect that many first-timers are similarly seduced. A renowned artist from Vermont regularly makes the drive to Northampton because he enjoys applying his talent to a new medium.

The same is true for us novices: We are invigorated when we traffic in the unfamiliar. I saw this at my birthday party. My guests and I, ranging in age from 37 to 62, listened wide-eyed and rapt as one of the owners of Claytopia explained the procedure. We were back in art class, and our teacher was giving us instructions.

Here were several lawyers, an assistant district attorney, a few therapists, writers, teachers, entrepreneurs, an esteemed professor of psychology at UMass, even a diplomat — all

work. For what seemed like an eternity, I looked at the two-piece butter dish I had chosen and, to my surprise, suddenly saw the design I wanted. An art-teacher-turned-lawyer coddled a ceramic fish. With a remarkably steady hand, she applied tropical colors and looked calmer and happier than usual, undoubtedly because she was using skills she rarely has an opportunity to draw upon.

After selecting a giraffe figurine, the head of one of Northampton's municipal departments ran next door to Faces to buy a faux-fur postcard that she could copy. Our collective apprehension was transformed by concentration. Even the angst-ridden ex-New Yorker quieted as she began to paint a stick-figure drawing on her tile.

Unrestrained, we sang along to "Leader of the Pack" and "Dedicated to the One I Love." We regressed, immersing ourselves in our work the way children do before they learn to shrink from the unknown. This was how art class should have been — a place where one could

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