



Open Studio

Sharif Bey applies a model of open engagement to his work as an artist and an educator.



As a father of three, Bey can't always hunker down at the wheel. He relies on pinching as a way to work anywhere. "The possibilities are boundless," he says. He'd like to see the technique explored beyond introductory ceramics courses.

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By the time he was in high school, Sharif Bey was serious about becoming a ceramist. "When I say serious, I'm talking about NCECA and Ceramics Monthly posters all over my room," says the artist, 42, referring to the national ceramic art organization and the popular magazine for potters. "That was my rock band." Today a studio ceramist and associate professor of art education at Syracuse University, Bey can still picture himself at 15, making pots in a continuing education class near his hometown of Pittsburgh, alongside hobbyist retirees and art teachers there to fulfill professional requirements.

“There were no girls to chase, no friends to keep me company. Just what I call the studio hum,” he remembers. “Now we have cell phones, texting, and Snapchat to dissuade kids from enduring uncomfortable silences. What I had was the sound of the wheel and my own interest.”

He also had more clay know-how than his classmates did; they soon were asking him for help. “My shyness wore off, and I became comfortable talking to those folks, because they were part of my making community,” he recalls. “The powerful thing about that – as it relates not just to clay, but to life – was learning how to navigate and interact with people, through interracial, intergenerational, intercultural exchanges.”

Bey applies that model of open engagement to all aspects of his multifaceted career. As an artist immersed in clay from a young age, he has taken his unique exposure to a diverse range of influences and synthesized them into original statements – various bodies of work that allow him to express dimensions of clay and of himself. He considers himself a classical potter at heart, a maker of what he terms “subtle” functional wares and decorated vessels. Yet he has also rebelled against convention, with striking figurative sculptures that combine ceramic forms with nails and metal and clay shards. He has mined social and political issues from his own perspective as an artist of color. And in his series of dramatic neckpieces fashioned of oversized clay beads, he interprets traditional African adornment while exploring a new concept of what a ceramic form can be.

“I like to make stuff,” Bey says. “I’m inspired by being prolific. I like to surround myself with things. That’s how I cultivate my own energy, for the studio and for my life.”

That life is a busy one, encompassing frequent lectures and workshops along with his professorship. In other words, Bey makes art, teaches art, teaches teachers how to teach art, and researches and writes about it all for scholarly journals. By nature and necessity, he’s a multitasker, happy doing several things at once. He’ll pinch clay while giving a talk, spend time with his wife and three kids during a firing session in his backyard barbecue pit, tinker under the hood of his beloved 1984 BMW as he’s interviewed for a magazine. Underpinning his many endeavors, say those who know him, is a formidable work ethic and drive.

“Sharif is a calm yet intense artist, scholar, and person, as dedicated to his studio practice as he is to his academic scholarship. I know few artists and educators who work as hard and are as successful at both,” says B. Stephen Carpenter II, professor of art education and African American studies at Penn State University.

He was in college and Bey in high school when they first met. “My most vivid image is of Sharif wearing a white T-shirt, throwing pots. He was an eagerly tenacious kid, determined to master the wheel,” Carpenter recalls of that time. Today, he notes, his old friend’s work in the studio and academia “demonstrates the influence of a range of sources from within the African diaspora, rich in historical and cultural pride, social relevance, and visual presence.”

One of 12 children, Bey grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Pittsburgh. While there was artistic talent in the family (he still has some intricate wood totems his father whittled in the 1940s), most of his brothers became welders. Young Sharif was good at drawing monsters and superheroes, and in third grade, an art teacher recommended him for Saturday classes at the Carnegie Museum of Art (where Andy Warhol and Philip Pearlstein also had gone as kids). He ended up attending a creative arts middle school, as well as a pre-college arts program at Carnegie Mellon University. At 14, just as he was itching to swap art for sports, the local Manchester Craftsmen's Guild recruited him for its after-school apprenticeship program in pottery, and clay quickly became his passion.

The guild played a formative role for Bey throughout his teens, giving him a foundation of skills, extensive ceramics-world connections, and exposure to a who's who of visiting masters – the likes of Ron Nagle, Jun Kaneko, Karen Karnes, Edward Eberle, Norm Schulman, David Shaner, Judy Moonelis, and Paul Soldner, to name just a few. "I saw such a gamut of processes and rhythms of working in clay, different trajectories to consider," he says.

With an eye to becoming both an artist and an academic, he earned his undergraduate degree in ceramics at Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania, and began to expand his artistic vision, traveling to Europe (he would later get a Fulbright grant for a residency in Slovakia) and experimenting with amorphous forms and alternative materials, such as bronze. He enrolled at the University of North Carolina for his MFA, where he continued to stretch and question the clay canon. Meanwhile, on visits back to Pittsburgh, he saw his old neighborhood fall to what he describes as "gangs and crack and drive-by shootings and police brutality," prompting him to reevaluate his own situation.

"I realized I had been taking refuge in clay and art," he says. "It had taken me many places, stabilized me, put me on a path, kept me out of trouble. But I wanted to know what me being an artist and a student had to do with this world that I felt powerless to affect."

His artwork at this time evolved into "gnarly figurative imagery," culminating in an installation of thousands of small clay heads that he dumped in a heap in an outdoor courtyard – a sea of humanity, each a unique individual, yet anonymous and expendable. (It was a cathartic direction, and although his work today is less overtly provocative, vestiges remain in his continued use of timeless, haunting heads and faces.)

After grad school, Bey came home to clay, so to speak, returning to the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild to run its ceramics youth program and act as a teaching artist in public schools. With a fresh sense of purpose, he set about creating an open studio environment for his students, one where "we hang out, order pizza or Chinese, talk about life, and make things." In 2002, when the chance arose to pursue a PhD in art education at Penn State, he was ready to study that model in depth.

“What inspired me to take the plunge into art education was that I wanted change,” Bey says. “I felt everybody should have what I’d had, that there was a disparity in how people were being taught, and that opportunities were being missed to connect people.” His doctoral dissertation, “Aaron Douglas and Hale Woodruff: The Social Responsibility and Expanded Pedagogy of the Black Artist,” articulated his realization that, as he puts it, “certain kinds of studio environments can open up a space for different kinds of learning.”

“Too often, artists tend to separate themselves from the non-art-collecting community. Sharif seeks to make a difference in some young individual’s life, as others selflessly made opportunities available to him,” says his friend and mentor, ceramist David MacDonald. “What I admire most about him is that he is a complete, 360-degree person,” MacDonald says. “He dedicates as much energy and time to his family [as to his work], and also to being involved in making a difference in the community where he lives.”

It was that integration of creativity and everyday life – as opposed to artmaking as a discrete, isolated experience – that prompted Bey’s move into wearable pieces. He was in the thick of his doctoral work, teaching on the side, and he and his wife had a toddler and a newborn. He had little time or focus to throw pots, “which drove me nuts, because this is who I am.” So he changed his way of working, began pinching clay by hand into small containers – something he could do in his living room while the kids played. Inspired by a photo of a Berber princess wearing an opulent neckpiece of giant chunks of amber, he took to stringing the pinch pots on PVC tubing.

“Beads are pots, really,” Bey notes. “They have volume, form, and surface, but don’t really contain in the same way. Containment is referenced, not utilized.” It reminded him of something the late ceramist Don Reitz once told him that had resonated: “He said, ‘I don’t make pots – I make sculptures of pots.’ ”

With that mindset, Bey realized, he could pay homage to virtually any idea or form – for example, his sculptures of heads embedded with nails are a nod to African nkisi, or spirit figures, as well as ceremonial vessels. In the end, it’s not solely the materiality of objects that interests him, but also the making, and the actions and ceremonies we associate with them, which express who we are.

“Ritual and tradition become ways of sustaining one’s identity, whether it’s cultural memory or personal identity,” Bey observes. He points to his own obsession with working on his “clunker” of a car, a routine that grounds him and serves as a touchstone. As he puts it, “Maybe it’s because I’m from a blue-collar family, or because I’m a potter. But despite being an academic and wearing the suit a few days a week, I want to remind myself that I’m not afraid to crawl up under something to keep it ticking.” Joyce Lovelace is American Craft’s contributing editor.