

## A potter's impression

By Allison Campbell

Dinnerware is something that many people just eat from and ignore, something they wash and dry without notice or admiration. Like a doorknob that allows you to enter the next room, a plate functionally holds its entree and a mug serves its purpose by delivering hot coffee to early morning lips. But if dinnerware, these common use fixtures, can be described as functional, then Mississippi ceramics artist Claudia Ka Cartee's "functional pottery," her handcrafted plates, bowls, and mugs, need a different title. Cartee's clay work reaches the functional level and surpasses it — a platter might develop squared edges instead of perfect-circle form, and a mug might have a swirl impressed at its bottom, peeking out at you from beneath your finished drink.

Cartee, who has been crafting her trademarked "Ka Pottery" since 1974, produces more than 15 stock patterns of dinnerware, so her work is not always experimentation. She takes orders for table settings, letting her customers choose what size plates they would like and what color combinations they prefer. And while some artists might feel creatively stifled by an order for eight sea-green-and-black table settings, Cartee is rejuvenated by the rhythm this type of pottery provides. The forms of her tableware act as a relaxing break from her more creative work of ceramic wall pieces, detailed vessels, and ceramic figures. Cartee finds balance in moving back and forth between her functional and artistic ceramics.

"Food has always been very important to me, so I love doing the functional pottery, but I could not do just that — I'd wither and die — the vessels and river dolls renew my creativity and excitement," she says.

The river dolls Cartee mentions are

ceramic figures whose body shapes mimic river stones stacked upon each other; three stones are piled for the head, torso, and lower limbs of a miniature human. These figures, whose forms are simple, yet eye-catching, sprung from another of Cartee's influences, nature. She formulat-

ed it's obvious that the natural world is vital to her artistic production. Above a working counter, where she glazes the fired clay, large windows let in light and open upon layer after layer of pine trees. This environment, how it presses itself into Cartee's studio, is similar to how she presses artistic touches into the naturally circular shapes her potter's wheel creates. She blends of nature and art.

"Something that's thrown on a wheel has to be symmetrical because it's thrown on a wheel. What I want to do is put art into the natural result of the centripetal forces. I want to come in there and coax it to a different shape, I want it to have rhythm, I want to make that lip move or add texture so that when you look at it you're drawn to it," she says.

This mixture of natural forces and personal impression does draw you to Cartee's work, the pieces attract your eyes with their classical shapes and tease your curiosity with their subtle experimentation — she'll add texture to the smooth sides of a vase or playful feet to the bottom of a vessel. These techniques have drawn fine art collectors to Cartee's work and have brought in dinnerware orders, but the artist's commercial success as a potter is matched by national recognition. Cartee has won grants and multiple awards for



Photo by Bob Hubbard

her work including the 2003 Honored Artist Award granted to her by the Mississippi State Committee of the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Pieces of Claudia's work can be seen on exhibition at the Lauren Rodger's Museum in Laurel, and she shows each summer at the Walter Anderson Museum in Ocean Springs. Currently, The Kitchen Table, in Hattiesburg, carries pieces of Claudia's functional pottery, but she also receives visitors and customers, by appointment at her studio in Seminary. ■

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