

AN EVENING WITH GEORGE CUMMINGS IN HIS CERAMICS STUDIO

by Kate Evans and Alexandra Howard

Many of us, while isolated during COVID, did a lot of baking, gardening, reading, or starting a new hobby or project. Long-time Mazama George Cummings revisited a previous passion in his life, ceramics, and returned to playing with clay. George was a prolific potter from 1966 to 1979, while teaching at the Museum Art School (which became the Pacific Northwest College of Art) and the late Arts and Crafts Society of Portland. His recent return to ceramics has resulted in new styles and forms when compared with his previous work. His current studio is rich with dynamic and textured handbuilt sculptures, with exuberant glazes, and features such as coiled tubes (#6 on p. 21) that demonstrate a deft understanding of clay.

We visited George's studio in May 2022 to see what he had been working on. Captivated by his work, and with a hint about George's life in and out of ceramics, we came back to learn more about what he was doing, how he works, and the path he took.

George's previous ceramics life began in 1961 with an evening class at the Museum Art School in downtown Portland. George, who moved to Oregon in 1959 after graduating from the University of British Columbia in philosophy, was working in life sciences at the University of Oregon Medical School and sharing an apartment in Goose Hollow with fellow Mazama and architect, Bob Belcher. Bob suggested that they take an evening class in life drawing at the Museum Art School just half a mile away. George had been active in art all through grade and high schools but had put it aside when it came time to prepare for college, art being generally viewed as a nice avocation but not as a suitable career for someone bright enough for higher education. Bob promptly signed up for life drawing, but George delayed and was told the class was full. "What else do you have?" he asked. "We have ceramics," the registrar replied. "OK, I'll take that," said George. He signed up and began his career in ceramics.

At the Museum Art School, he studied pottery with Bennet Welsh, who owned Pacific Stoneware. One evening in late 1962, Bennet mentioned that he sometimes hired beginning potters to



Above: George Cummings with 39" tower, clear glaze over colored slips, steel base, 2022. Photo by Alexandra Howard.

continued on next page

George Cummings, continued from previous page

work in his factory. Not very seriously, George asked, "Would you hire me?" and Bennet very seriously replied, "Yes, I would." Thus ended George's career in science. He quit his job at the medical school and began working at Pacific Stoneware making everything from kitchen wares to umbrella holders to completing random commissions. In 1964–1965, his position at Pacific Stoneware transitioned to working abroad in the studios of Bryan Newman in London, U.K., Philippe Lambercy in Geneva, Switzerland, and Lifas in Ferney-Voltaire, France. He returned to Portland in 1966 and taught ceramics, as noted above, and gave summer workshops in British Columbia, Maine, and Oregon.

In 1979, George left his position at the Museum Art School. At that time, he considered becoming a studio potter and borrowed space from a friend to throw and initially fire about 60 of the thin-rimmed vases ("Cummings pots") he was known for. He found, however, that physical pain from being hunched sideways over a potter's wheel severely limited his productivity, and that the cost of setting up a studio was beyond his means. So he wrapped the vases in newspaper, packed them in boxes and looked for a job. George stopped making ceramics, and after another short stint at the medical school, he was hired by Standard Insurance where he worked in IT for nearly 15 years until retiring in 1996.

Sometime not long before COVID, George decided to open some of the boxes of vases he had thrown in 1979–1980. He was surprised to find four bowls suitable for "a whole-meal salad" that he wanted to use. He reached out to his former student, Pat Horsley, who has a pottery studio in southeast Portland (patrickhorsley.com), and asked him if he would glaze them. Pat did, and George asked if he would glaze some of the thin-rimmed vases too. Again Pat obliged, but instead of the restrained earthen tones characteristic of George's earlier vases (#4 on p. 21) he chose brilliant,

contrasting colors. At first taken aback by them, George soon changed his mind about the bright glazes.



Above: George Cummings with three flower arrangements, colored glazes, 202. Photo by Huy Nguyen

In the spring of 2020, inspired by these successful glazes and with time on his hands due to the cancellation of Mazama activities because of COVID, George got some clay from Horsley and started handbuilding pottery. Though each piece was a vessel, usually with a fluted opening that could be used to hold a weed or flower, his intention was sculptural rather than utilitarian. Again, Pat generously glazed and fired George's new work. By summer, it was clear that George needed to get his own materials and a kiln.

Since that time, George has been refining his skill in handbuilding using pinch, coil, and slab techniques, or a combination of them, instead of throwing on a potter's wheel. He also began developing his own glaze palette by testing readily available published recipes. It has been two years of trial and error, experimentation, problem solving, and play, which still continues. George said he

typically spends about five hours every day in the studio. The intricate and engaging work we saw there is evidence of his

rekindled passion. He credits Pat Horsley for supporting his return to ceramics. "Without him, I wouldn't be playing with clay."

The first things he made when he began to play with clay again were pinch pots. "I've made dozens of them. It's relaxing, and they are great for testing glazes and as small gifts" (#7 on p. 21). Paulus Berensohn's seminal work on pinch pots, *Finding One's Way with Clay* (1972), includes a full-page spread of three of George's pinch pots.

George's current work is almost entirely sculptural but typically based on his background as a potter. Like pottery, it's all hollow, and there's often an opening at the top, but unlike most pottery, it's simply decorative rather than utilitarian. The early trumpet-like openings, for example, evolved into flowers, and then the flowers were arranged in bouquets with quite different bases (#1, #2,

and #5 on p. 21). New ideas often emerge in this way with a successful idea becoming a theme, which George develops in a series of pieces until he has another idea.

His improvisational creativity can be seen in his series of "towers" up to 39 inches tall that consist of separate segments stacked on top of one another and either glaze fired together or glued with a strong epoxy after glaze firing. Some of the shorter towers are topped with small houses (#1 and #3 on p. 21) which friends said were whimsical and reminded them of Dr. Seuss. Whimsy is a feeling that typifies most of George's work. "Playing with clay is fun—well, not always—and I want people to enjoy what I make. Smiling and laughing when they see my work is a high compliment."

On one recent occasion, necessity was the source of creativity. George had been working on small, complex pieces that look like parts for something mechanical and take a day or more to finish (#6 on p.



Above

1. House with red-glazed roof, clear glaze over slip decoration, 2021, 12"
2. Flowerpot, colored glazes, Jan. 2022, 12.5"
3. House tower, clear glaze over colored slips, Feb. 2022, 14.5"
4. Thin-rimmed vase, colored glazes, late 1970s, 9"

5. Four-flower bouquet, clear glaze over colored slips, base with blue and red glazes, 2022, 8"
6. Slab construction with coiled tube, unglazed, 2022, 5.5"
7. Pinch pot with clear glaze over colored slips, 2022, 5"
8. Slab vessel with textured sides, black glazes, Sept. 2022, 8"

21). At this rate, he realized it would take him months to fill his small (6 cubic foot) kiln. So he turned to rough slab building and in a week had ten pieces that filled the remaining two-thirds of the kiln (slab building is like carpentry with clay "boards" that can be roughly slapped together or carefully joined).

There are two series of slab work in marked contrast to the rough slabs and, in fact, to the rest of his work: a mechanical series just mentioned and one with an architectural feel (#8 above). Both are characterized by clean lines and sharp edges—no flowers. The former are like toys with round and rectangular tubes with mysterious functions, and just for the fun

of it, you may be able to blow into the end of a tube and after several twists and turns have air come out the other end. There are also tubes you can see through. The architectural pieces are more serious with slab sides that are textured with a variety of rollers, the first of which was rebar. Now, George has a dozen rollers he made by cutting wood dowels on a table saw to make a simple pattern of parallel lines or a complex pattern of diamonds from a double helix. The rollers alone are works of art. George has also carved stamps out of insulating firebrick to provide another way of creating textures (windows in #1 and #3 above). These series with their clean lines

and sharp edges have a precision that is impressive.

Nearly a year ago, Pat Horsley gave George five pounds of white slip powder he wasn't going to use. Slip is just clay mixed with a little water. In this case, the clay is white and is used as the base for decorating with colors by adding metal oxides and ceramic stains to it. Cobalt oxide, for example, usually produces various shades of blue, depending on how much of it is added. George did nothing with the slip for several months before deciding to test it with red, orange, blue, green, and black colorants under a clear glaze on one of

continued on next page



Above: George Cummings with 19.5" tower, clear glaze over colored slips, 2022.
Photo by Alexandra Howard.

his little houses. The result surprised and delighted him, and when he showed it to Pat, his response was "Wow!" George now has a palette of a dozen colors and shades, which allow him to individualize the color of coils, textures, flowers, etc. instead of using a glaze of one color over everything. Slips have created a bright new world for George's ceramics (#3 on p. 21).

All over George's studio there is evidence of active hands and a curious mind. There are tools used to create new shapes and patterns, dozens of glaze and slip tests, labeled containers of glazes, and arrangements of completed and in-process sculptures on most of the flat surfaces. While there are clear distinctions among the current series, they are united by visual complexity and color, and show continued refinement in his handbuilding techniques.

The new work looks radically different from his earlier work from the 1960s and 70s, which has a different aesthetic: the surfaces are matte, the colors darker and earthen, and the shapes often, but

not always, simpler (#4 on p. 21). The apparent differences led us to ask him how his approach to work changed over the decades. He said it hasn't. He may begin working without a clear goal in mind, starting with a slab or coil and seeing what happens, seeing what isn't there but could be, playing with the clay, asking "What if?" until something new emerges—or doesn't. Or he may start with an idea or rework an old theme or have a specific need or decide that it's time to recycle the clay and start over. But no matter how he proceeds, there's always room for the unexpected, for going off in a different direction. Unlike a production potter, making sets of identical pieces, everything George makes is unique.

George has enrolled in a wheel-throwing class this fall at PCC Southeast Campus to see if he can still throw after a hiatus of 42 years and to extend his handbuilding by making units that can be assembled into something bigger.

When talking to George, we were often reminded that he has been an inspiring

teacher for much of his adult life, teaching ceramics at the art schools and workshops, and mountain climbing at Reed College and the Mazamas. He ever so patiently answered our many questions about gas and electric kilns, glazes, slips, tools to create special effects, his old versus his new work, the ways he works, and so on.

As we were finishing our tour of his studio and heading upstairs for a snack and some refreshing lime water, he held up an old vase, which he said would have been more interesting if a contrasting glaze had been used on the inside. While it was beautiful to our eyes as it was, George's statement and expression perfectly captured the feelings of openness, playfulness, and curiosity that seem to emanate from him. It was a wonderful summer evening in the studio with George.

George's current work is available for viewing and purchase. If you are interested in either, you may contact him at gcmummings@gmail.com.