

Bringing Millennia Forward: Conservation through Clay

by Pamela Sund

Imagine a ceramic artist's work described as Rembrandt meets blacksmith, a potter with a painter's eye for light. Then follow the artist on an intermittent six-year odyssey into some of the most beautiful and treasured US National Parks. Envision 200 vessels, created in situ and in the studio, that represent distinctive geological formations, artworks informed by the iconography of petroglyphs and the history of indigenous cultures, art that

utilizes local clays and expresses ecological concerns. Meet ceramic artist Brad Bachmeier, recipient of five juried artist-in-residence awards, including Lewis and Clark, Petrified Forest, Mesa Verde, Parashant, and Red Rock, which are also the names of the parks where he absorbed nature's beauty, researched each park's character and history, set up shop, and created some of his most important works to date.



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With significant drama involving American artists, and after long-standing congressional reluctance, in 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant preserved Yellowstone as the first US National Park and a symbiotic relationship between the parks and art was born. It was the revelatory paintings, photographs, and drawings of artists like Thomas Moran and photographer William Henry Jackson that convinced lawmakers to preserve the pristine wilderness for public enjoyment. A century and a half later, a vital connection between art and the parks remains—though sadly, ceramic art has been largely missing, a lack that Bachmeier is determined to set right.

Giving Voice to the Parks

Bachmeier's park residencies fit perfectly into his core ceramic mission: "to explore humankind's ancient and universal partnership with clay." Geological processes became literal as he examined park formations at ground level. At Petrified Forest in northeastern Arizona, for example, direct observation led to his signature *Ceramic Genealogy* series, a three-tiered stacking process that symbolizes earth becoming clay, becoming art. The bottom tier represents rock, clay's parent material. The middle tier is clay, the weathered rock, as a fired vessel. The top tier includes the finishing touches: including rock-handled lids and petrified wood flourishes. For instance, *Ceramic Genealogy II* features a rock base and white-toned vessel with a wide, dark circular band at the shoulder. The band is dotted with white flecks that represent stars, signifying Petrified Forest's International Dark Sky Association's Dark Sky Places status. The top-tier is a petrified rock lid. *Ceramic Genealogy I* exhibits the same structure; for the vessel's texture, Bachmeier pressed petrified wood from an extinct indigenous tree, the *Araucarioxylon arizonicum*, into the clay, thereby preserving part of the tree, via its texture, in a living work of art.

Struck by the otherworldliness of the park's badland formation, Bachmeier created his trompe l'oeil vessel, *Badlands*, which mimics the eroded stratified badlands bluff, achieved by stretching and pushing the form, expanding it sufficiently to create surface texture, then enhancing the graininess using sodium silicate and water to further capture the quality of erosion. With pitch-perfect match of color and the use of



1, 2 *Canyon Remnants* and inspiration. 1 *Canyon Remnants*, 26 in. (66 cm) in height, wheel-thrown, carved, paddled, expanded, and eroded ceramic, stains, slips, underglazes, canyon varnish finish, fired multiple times, branch-handled lid, rock base. 2 Toroweap overlook, north rim of the Grand Canyon/Parashant National Monument. 3, 4 *Badlands* and inspiration. 3 Blue Mesa Formation at Petrified Forest National Park. 4 *Badlands*, 18 in. (46 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown, carved, expanded, and eroded raku clay, slips, stains, underglazes, fired multiple times in reduction, 2015. 5, 6 *Bullion Creek Formation* and inspiration. 5 *Bullion Creek Formation*, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, wheel-thrown ceramic, terra sigillata, saggar fired, driftwood base, 2014. 6 Lignite seam and colored clinker at Bullion Creek Formation, Lewis and Clark State Park.



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7 *Kota Osa (basket-rim jug)*, 20 in. (51 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown raku clay, burnished, pit fired, reed and cane weaving, 2019.
8 *Sandstone Striations*, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, wheel-thrown white earthenware, wild clay slips, abraded, low fired, sandstone rock-handled lid, 2017. **9** *Paleo archaic Presence*, 26 in. (66 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and sculpted earthenware and brick clay, stains, underglaze, saggar fired, branch-handled lid, 2019. **10** Bachmeier during his residency at Mount Trumbull Lodge, Grand Canyon Parashant National Monument, 2018. Photo: Mark Draper.



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subtle gradient value, viewing this vessel is like standing in the Petrified Forest's badlands environment.

Mesa Verde, a park of enormous cultural significance located in southwest Colorado, was the first US National Park to preserve both nature and human artifacts, including ancestral Pueblo cliff dwellings and petroglyphs. Bachmeier's Mesa Verde vessels pay homage to the remarkable Puebloan architectural accomplishments, including the iconic cliff dwellings. Ladders used to access the adobe residences appear in *Canyon Voices* as horizontal rungs in the central panel that thrusts upward toward the vessel's symbolism-packed lid: stacked rock denotes human endeavor; archways reference human dwellings; the leather side straps convey tying things down, holding cherished things in place, like sacred beliefs or objects. With permission, he dug and tested workable clay, which he used in *Sandstone Striations*, a vessel simulating carved wood, another trompe l'oeil feat.

Grand Canyon Parashant National Monument in northwest Arizona is remote and desolate, a million acres of wilderness. For safety, the residency required a high-clearance SUV and well-stocked survival kit. Here, Bachmeier explored difficult-to-access, rarely-seen Toroweap on the canyon's North Rim. Stunned by towering layers of stratified rock, he captured the formation's powerful ascent in *Canyon Remnants*, a vessel that defines the sandstone-shelf aesthetic. To depict the red-toned rock crevices, he devised his proprietary canyon varnish, which replicates the dark brown staining caused by iron and magnesium. In advance of the residency, he investigated ancestral Pueblo basketry and pottery traditions. Bringing millennia-old traditions forward, in *Kota Opo and Kota Osa*, he paired and honored the ancient practices by combining pit-fired earthenware and raku-fired clay vessels with reed and cane weaving that intricately surrounds the rims. Echoes of Puebloan kiva spaces—ceremonial rooms—come alive in the mixed-media works.

Nevada's Red Rock National Conservation Area has been inhabited since 3000 BCE, settlements Bachmeier depicts in his Red Rock tour-de-force *Paleo archaic Presence*. The globe-like shape of the vessel suggests at once, and with visual power, earth, sky, and space beyond. The atmospheric quality stuns, as do the unusual blue and greenish tones of the surface washes of



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color. This piece speaks to the primordial quality of nature still present in the park. The lid, in turn, tells the story of human settlements, by the Southern Paiute, for example. Rock walls with alcove entrances atop the vessel suggest abodes in high places, free from predators and enemies. The large, branch handle serves as an exclamation point—its wing-like appendages symbolizing flight—while the raw clay base denotes origins, the clay that ceramic art is made of.

Coming Full Circle

Bachmeier's first residency was on the shores of Lake Sakakawea in North Dakota, his home state. Along trails in Lewis and Clark State Park, Bachmeier examined geoformations the explorers recorded in their journals. Here, too, he dug several colored-clay samples, fired them for suitability, and mixed the clay into numerous vessels. Driftwood bases characterize his Lewis and Clark State Park works, as in *Bullion Creek Formation*. A 400-year-old cottonwood base anchors the vessel, its horizontal bands achieved by embedding the clay work in sawdust, with alternating layers of sand, steel wool, and copper wire. The painterly use of light enlivens the bands: lower ones exhibit an underwater appearance and the top layers have lakeshore textures. It was at Lewis and Clark, viewing dozens of oil wells flare natural gas, lighting up the night sky, that conservation concerns pressed heavily upon Bachmeier.

In fact, Bachmeier's conservation focus deepened with each residency. Aware of the respect indigenous peoples felt for nature, he contrasted their reverence with contemporary disregard, including the looting of tons of rock annually at Petrified Forest and the impending danger to Mesa Verde caused by encroaching oil activity.

At a time in human history when conservation concerns are paramount and nature-deficit disorder is an actual ailment, Bachmeier calls attention, through ceramic art, to the US National Parks as places of healing and beauty, treasures to be preserved.

His park works are exquisite art; but more, they bring a dialog to the table: a conversation between the artist and the public, conservationists and nature lovers, and with the art world at large, as Bachmeier gains for ceramic art a significant place in the "art and parks" narrative and in the canon of art. The dialog began in earnest at the North Dakota Museum of Art in March of 2021, where "Conservation through Clay" premiered, before traveling to points across the Plains and to states where the journey began.

the author *Pamela Sund is an art critic and writer. She resides in Fargo, North Dakota.*

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11, 12 *Canyon Voices* and inspiration. **11** *Canyon Voices*, 21 in. (53 cm) in height, wheel-thrown earthenware, carved and textured, slips, underglaze, stains, glaze, lid, leather cord, multi fired, reduced, 2017. **12** Long House cliff-dwelling structures built during Pueblo III (1150–1300 CE) at Mesa Verde. **13–15** *Ceramic Genealogy* and inspiration. **13** Petrified Forest National Park. **14** *Ceramic Genealogy I*, 20 in. (51 cm) in height, wheel-thrown earthenware, textured, terra sigillata, saggar fired, petrified rock-handled lid, 2014. **15** *Ceramic Genealogy II*, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, wheel-thrown earthenware, terra sigillata, saggar fired, cut and polished petrified-rock lid, rock base, 2014.