



Thomas C. Dorsey. Tea Bowl. BFA 2003. Edwardsville, Illinois.



Bob Wallace. John's Official Auxiliary Mug. San Diego, California.

# Coming of Age in Utah

Article by Owen Rye



Jennifer Hill. Tea-Bath Trio. MFA. 2001. Portland, Oregon.



John Neely. Tea Bowl. Logan, Utah.



Michelle Woods. Leaf Jar. 2001. Aspen, Colorado.



Rachel Berg. *Mug*. BFA. 2004. Norfolk, Connecticut.



Todd Burns. *Earthenware Jar*. BFA. 1996. Louisville, Kentucky.

“COMING OF AGE : 21 YEARS OF CERAMICS AT UTAH State University” (USU) is a tribute exhibition, intended as a celebration of the contributions of John Neely to USU. In addition it is a tribute to the quality of students graduating from USU, and an acknowledgement of the community that is USU ceramics. Tribute exhibitions mounted to honour respected teachers are a new phenomenon in ceramics. Early examples in Australia showed the work of Milton Moon and selected graduates (1993) and at The National Art School, Peter Rushforth’s graduates in 1985, and a later one myself and postgraduate students in 2003 (Rye Crop in Sydney). In the US recent examples include Lynn Munns in Casper, Wyoming.

The *21 Year* exhibition was organised over a two-year period by Assistant Professor Dan Murphy, ceramics program chair at USU. It highlights 63 USU alumni and features a wide range of ceramics in both

the vessel and sculptural traditions. It was first displayed in the Hall Gallery in Portland, Oregon, during NCECA 2006, where it was seen by some 6,000 visitors. It then travelled to the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art at Utah State University, Logan, Utah, to run July to December 2006.

The *21 Year* show traces the history of the Utah State ceramics program, now widely recognised as one of the best in the US, under the guidance of John Neely, Professor of Ceramics since 1984 and currently Head in the Department of Art. Neely’s role in building the reputation of Utah State is central to the spirit of the exhibition, which displays the strengths of the university’s ceramics program. “Alumni from USU are making a significant contribution to ceramic art”, said Murphy. “Many from the program have gone on to exhibit their work in galleries and museums, and 27 of the alumni are teaching in some capacity.” According to former



Mel Robson. *Untitled. International Student*. 2003. Brisbane, Australia.



Marty Kendall. *Untitled*. BFA. 1995. Salt Lake City, Utah.



Junko Kono. *Untitled*. MFA. 2002. Edwardsville, Illinois.

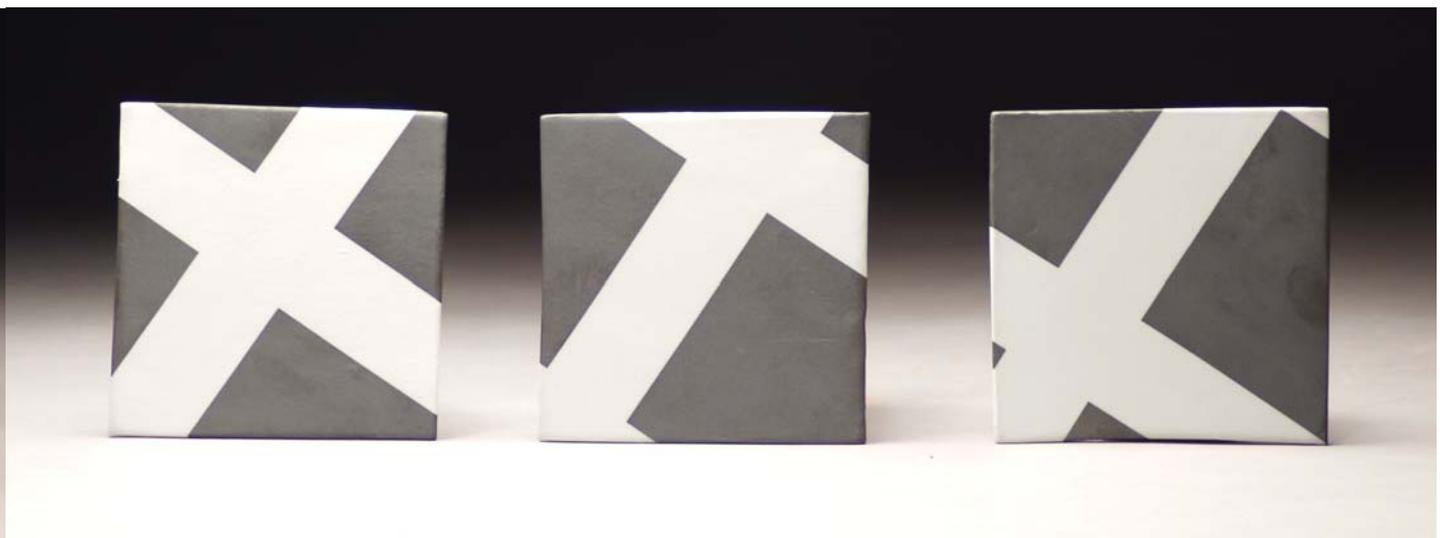
student Susan Harris, "John Neely is dedicated to teaching professionalism, which sets him apart from most, and so conscientious about steering his students toward great opportunities in ceramics, that many of us have found success. I'm certainly grateful for all of his support over the years. It doesn't end with graduation, either. We still consider him to be a valuable resource, a font of information and encouragement. And he made all of us more interested in eating, preparing and even growing great food."

Asked for a comment on the exhibition, Neely said: "The inclusion of work by colleagues and special students in the show is especially significant. They are an important part of the community that has grown here. University bean counters are focused on the number of degrees granted, but ceramics doesn't work that way. Degree programs constitute the formal structure, the skeleton, but it is

the community that forms the flesh and blood and makes it all work".

Neely continued "I don't know if I am seeing it through my own experience, but it reminds me of a standard Japanese social construct where there is a continuum in any institution, but especially schools, where the individuals with longer years in the institution – *senpai* – are obligated to take care of those with fewer years – *kohai*. Kohai are likewise obligated to a measure of subservience to *senpai*, to do their bidding, and further obligated to take care of those who come after them. The continuum extends back and forward in time far beyond the years that one might spend in the institution."

"I don't think this kind of relationship is typical of American universities at large, or even other disciplines within the art department, but it certainly seems operative in ceramics," Neely said. "I think that



Nick Bonner. *Squares in Squares in Part*. 1986-1988 Studio Co-ordinator. Cincinnati, OH.



Julie Johnson. *Five Ends*. MFA. 2002. Interlaken, New York.



Ryoichi Suzuki. *Torso*. MFA. 1987. Salt Lake City, Utah.



Neil Estrick. *Teapot*. MFA. 1998. Grayslake, Illinois.

if I deserve any credit for the success of the show, or the success of the individuals participating, it is for fostering that community rather than any kind of classroom effectiveness. On the other hand, perhaps I don't deserve that credit, either. I was just fortunate enough to find myself in the midst of such a community."

Students that I asked for comment to use in writing for this article would disagree, citing Neely's approach to teaching as an important element of their USU experience. They certainly would agree though that the community spirit at USU is strong. "Outside the studio during my many potluck experiences at John's house was where I learnt how clay and the ceramic arts live beyond what is made in the studio. They become a significant part of one's everyday life. Our gatherings were a celebration of the life of a material that introduced us to one another in the first place" said Kari Smith. And Brian Taylor added "I have visited other schools and met students from all over and it doesn't seem that anyone's studio was a community like ours. All the undergrads hung out with the graduates and we shared ideas and pushed each other."

Each school has its specialised areas of knowledge. USU has taken a leadership role in fuel efficient wood firing technologies, and a process called 'reduction cooling' that Neely has pioneered at Utah State. Tony Nankervis, an Australian colleague who was a regular visitor to USU, says: "John Neely is a significant world figure in the development of knowledge in contemporary woodfiring. His train kiln is well known around the world as non-traditional, environmentally friendly and effective. I would love to see a map of the world pinned with kilns built around Neely's innovative design – there would be many pins across most continents. He also wrote a seminal article called 'Nice Cooling'

The research leading up to the article on cooling was inspired by an archeological report of a Korean kiln excavation. In this report it was observed that there were some unburned but charcoaled logs in the firebox of the kiln. Usually with the normal cooling of a kiln the final pieces of wood will, in the oxidised environment, burn to ash. These had not, making unburned there must have been a reducing environment in the kiln in the cooling cycle. On his return to the US he experimented with this phenomenon achieving lustrous surface effects. The technique of reduced cooling is now common practice in wood-fired kilns around the world.

Although Neely is widely known for his contributions to woodfiring, and for his precisely-wrought functional ceramics, the diversity of work in this exhibition shows that the strength of the USU program lies in the development of individual talents and aspirations, a basic tenet of any good educational program. Clearly a powerful conjunction occurs at USU – the conjunction of a strong community nurturing the development of the individual.

Asked about Neely's approach to teaching, his students referred to his constant availability to help when asked, his unselfish sharing of knowledge, his technical skills and high regard for well-crafted objects, and his attention to detail – several mentioned that he had line blended coffee to achieve the ultimate quality. By example, he taught critical thinking and how to ask the right questions. Many mentioned his enthusiasm, the prime requirement of a good teacher; enthusiasm is infectious and will, above all, other qualities of a teacher create in students the desire and need to learn more.

"John Neely was occasionally merciless in critiques,



Ted Neal. Stovetop Teapot. BFA. 1995. Muncie, Indiana.



Karin Solberg. Social Elixir Set For One. MFA. 2004. Wagon town, Pennsylvania.



Kelli Sinner. Candy Dishes. BFA. 1997. Moorhead, Minnesota.



Daniel Brown. Tea Bowls. BFA. 2005. Derby, Kansas.



Alex Watson. Bowling. BFA. 2005. Amenia, New York.

but he taught me more about pots than I deserve to know, and I feel as if I barely scratched the surface of his understanding. I could (and ideally, will) spend a lifetime learning from him. He is the most consistently professional teacher I have ever met" said Dave Funk.

Susan Harris added: "He was a great role model. But he was a stickler for details at critiques. We called him our "Tor-mentor" on more than one occasion. I think his style has mellowed a bit since I was in school, but his students continue to produce outstanding work."

"Neely's technical and linguistic precision are useful resources. In personal critiques, reviewing a firing, discussing cooking, or whatever, he works hard to speak precisely, and he challenges his students to do the same," notes Jill Lawley. "Music, food, the pots the food is eaten from, writing, speaking, coffee, it is all expected to be above average" said Dave Banga.

A comment by many former students was to acknowledge the important role of Dan Murphy, who has been at USU for seven years, the last four in a teaching role, and Ted Neal and all his predecessor technical assistants, in consolidating and furthering the high standards set by Neely.

Neely has been influential in bringing an international flavour to the department. Having learnt his basic disciplines in Japan Neely has gone on to establish an international reputation for his contributions to the ceramic arts. As well as exhibiting in many states of the US – and in 1999 winning the prestigious *Ceramics Monthly* award – Neely has shown his work in China, Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Yugoslavia and France. He has conducted workshops in Australia, New Zealand, China, Taiwan, Korea,

Germany and Norway. He has published carefully considered influential articles on diverse topics such as education in ceramics, the use of computers, salt-glazing, and reduction cooling in various ceramics magazines.

"His fluency with the Japanese language and culture has placed Neely better than most to make culturally relevant works inspired by Japanese tradition. Despite this capacity, he has forged his own unique Western style which seemed not to draw on any particular Oriental tradition" said Tony Nankervis. Nankervis, formerly of Southern Cross University in Australia, and Neely established an exchange student program between the two ceramics courses. With both programs having extensive woodfiring facilities and similar research interests, it seemed appropriate to set up a program for students who wanted to broaden their ceramic experience in general and woodfiring in particular.

"Since then", according to Mel Robson, an Australian exchange student, "a whole network of personal and professional relationships have grown out of that exchange program, many of which have continued long after everyone has moved on from the institutions".

#### REFERENCE

1. Neely, John. Nice Cooling. *Ceramics Monthly*, April 1988, 48 -52.

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All images by Dan Murphy. The Nora Eccles Harrison website is [www.artmuseum.usu.edu](http://www.artmuseum.usu.edu).