

Deborah
Schwartzkopf: **FULL**
CIRCLE

by Molly Hatch



Pitchers, to 15 in. (38 cm)
in height, wheel-thrown and altered
parts combined with patterned slabs
that were shaped with hump molds.

Opposite page inset: Schwartzkopf darts a thrown cylinder that will become a tapered section of a pot at the Walnut Creek Art Center. While living in Montana, Schwartzkopf transported ware to the Archie Bray kilns through the snow in her truck—in four-wheel-drive, low gear.

Deborah Schwartzkopf seems to feel most at home in the back of her glossy black pick-up. I met her for the first time as she was pulling pots out of the back of her truck to set up our shared sale table for “Salad Days” at the Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts in Newcastle, Maine. In the back of her truck under the cover of a cap, a platform was installed to create a comfortable place for sleeping during her long drives across the country and weekend-long pottery sales. Under the sleeping platform, Schwartzkopf stores everything from a small bag of camping spices to her glazes and a back stock of pots. That evening, we were both invited to stay with fellow potter Ingrid Bathe. I happily accepted the cushy place to sleep while Schwartzkopf opted to make her bed in the back of her truck parked in their driveway, insisting that she would be most comfortable there. Her truck has likely been the most consistent roof over her head since Schwartzkopf finished her MFA at Penn State in 2005.

Schwartzkopf’s first introduction to ceramics was through a high school running start program in Seattle, Washington. She transferred to the University of Alaska in Anchorage in 1999 where her studies in ceramics intensified after taking a beginning-level course with visiting artist Pam Pemberton. While her studies at the University of Alaska were mainly with Steve Godfrey and Robert Banker, Schwartzkopf worked with Kris Bliss and Peter Brondz who mentored her career as a studio potter outside of the University. “(Working with them) really brought me into clay, because I needed a practical application for my degree,” she explains, “I came from a real working family and the whole idea of being an artist was pretty foreign. . . . My mom taught me to sew when I was young.

My dad is a woodworker. I grew up making useful objects. My grandparents immigrated, they came from a life where you make or grow what you need. To give handmade gifts was a way of showing affection and caring in my family . . . so I needed something that was real and practical. That was really what drove me into ceramics,” she continues, “I felt like I had a way to exist. I loved it. It was a way to make it turn into a life instead of just something you study in school. I think that happens with a lot of potters. It’s not just the artwork, you love the lifestyle.”

It was during her undergraduate career that Schwartzkopf developed her distinct approach to her complex utilitarian forms. As a result of the separate handbuilding and wheel-throwing studios in the ceramics department at the University of Alaska, Schwartzkopf developed two bodies of functional work, each constructed in very different ways. “It was good because I experimented a lot more in



Vase, 5½ in. (14 cm) in height, thrown and altered base with slab-built openings.



Left: Teapot, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, handbuilt with multiple slabs shaped over hump molds.

Below: Vase, 3 in. (8 cm) in height, thrown and altered base with slab-built openings.

totally unrelated ways with the same material.” As she grew as a student, Schwartzkopf merged those two processes within the same body of work, incorporating her inherited skills as a seamstress into her process. “Sewing is something I think particularly influences (my work). It starts with this flat two-dimensional piece that you turn into a hollow form. So learning how to fit flat material to a body is really similar to making paper patterns into voluminous pots.” Inspired by industrial designer Eva Zeisel and the buildings of architect Frank Gehry, Schwartzkopf’s pots marry the clean lines of modern architecture and the asymmetry of the natural world. The result is a vocabulary of forms that sing of the softness and malleability of wet clay and retain the rigidity of vitrified porcelain.

Shortly after finishing school, it became clear to Schwartzkopf that she needed to develop the surfaces of her work and refine her handbuilding skills. In a move that introduced her to the ceramics community beyond Alaska, Schwartzkopf packed up her truck and left to do a year of independent study at San Diego State University in California. During this time, Schwartzkopf focused on glaze chemistry, creating her distinct vocabulary of oxidation glazes ranging from glossy bright accents to soft pastel matts. “I want my work to look like it could be made out of the glazes. I want the work to look natural—where variation is (seeming to) occur because of a natural process. Whether it is because it grew like that or because the wind blew on it . . . I want the (glaze) accents to float on the body of the piece so it creates depth based on color and contrasts of shiny versus matt.”

This concentrated effort to develop her palette proved worthwhile as she was accepted to the MFA program at Penn State University starting in the fall of 2003. Schwartzkopf is clear that her reasons for attending graduate school were grounded in developing her career as a studio potter. “I wanted two years of feedback and practice before I had to be a real potter. It led me into a deeper search of



POTS AS PUZZLES

by Deborah Schwartzkopf

myself. I feel like in the school system (compared to working on my own) my learning curve was a lot higher. . . . Everyone else around me was failing too, and I could learn from their mistakes and get more feedback.” Her graduate school experience pushed her to refine conceptual ideas about the relationship between form and surface as well as the importance of color in her work.

After finishing her MFA in 2005, Schwartzkopf traveled to China as a resident artist at the San Bao Ceramic Art Institute in Jingdezhen, directly followed by a residency at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Helena, Montana, as a Lilian Fellow. Schwartzkopf describes her experience at the Bray as a career watershed. “When I got out of graduate school, I got into the Bray and got a fellowship, which was my highest goal. It happened, and it seems completely unbelievable . . . the Bray has given me a supportive community. It was amazing interacting with so many artists and meeting people from all over with so much energy, experience, and skill.” To propel her career forward and begin to earn a living as a potter, Schwartzkopf researched galleries that she felt her work might fit into and sent out over 15 packets in January of her first year at the Bray. “I was really well received—actually a little too well; I had five or six shows that year and (my career) kind of snowballed from there.”

Since leaving the Bray in 2007, Schwartzkopf has taught as a visiting professor at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston as well as the Harvard Community Arts Program in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In addition to teaching in universities, she has taught numerous workshops. She has also been a resident artist at the Ceramic Center in Berlin, Germany, and Mudflat Studio in Somerville, Massachusetts. Schwartzkopf has come full circle in her recent move across the country back to her hometown of Seattle, Washington, where she is an artist-in-residence and instructor at Pottery Northwest for the next two years. The nomadic nature of her lifestyle has become an important part of Schwartzkopf’s understanding of her place in the world as a potter. “I feel like you have to strive, and it’s worth it. I look at all the jobs that people do, and I feel so lucky that I get to make pottery. I enjoy the process as a whole.” With her approach to clay, Schwartzkopf stretches, cuts, and folds the material into new and exciting utilitarian forms, challenging us to pay closer attention to the moments and places that accent our day to day.

For further information about Deborah Schwartzkopf, and to see more of her work, see www.debspottery.com.

You can read the full transcript of Molly Hatch’s interview with Schwartzkopf at www.ceramicsmonthly.org.

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I puzzle together wheel thrown and altered porcelain parts and slabs that have been shaped over bisqued clay hump molds. In general, I work as wet as I can; as soon as the clay does not show fingerprints when touched lightly.

To make molds, I simply coil build non-round shapes focusing on bilaterally symmetrical angles and planes. These molds can be made out of most clays since they are only taken to bisque temperatures. At times, I build a mold not knowing what it will be used for, which is a great way to explore new finished shapes. Sometimes I have a specific drawing or picture in my mind and work from that to build a mold that gives me a particular form.

In conjunction with the molds, I use paper patterns made out of watercolor or a heavy stock paper. These patterns give consistency and guide the clay shapes that I lay over the molds. Each patterned piece, when laid on the molds in different way, yields a totally different building block to play with. If I want to make several of the same form, I use a permanent marker to mark a line on the mold itself where the patterned slab started and stopped so that I can put another slab on in the same place repeatedly.

For a full how-to demonstration of how Schwartzkopf plans and builds her pitchers, see the upcoming March/April issue of *Pottery Making Illustrated*.



Clockwise from top left: spout patterns, two white teapot patterns, round bisque hump mold, large bisque hump mold with lines indicating placement of patterned slabs, Mudtool ribs (red and green), cut metal rib, underglaze applicator bottle, wooden stick with ball for smoothing hard-to-reach seams, compass for making patterns, black horn tool for smoothing, X-Acto knife for cutting smooth lines, hole cutting tool, scoring tool, paint brush.

After Schwartzkopf cuts slabs to the right shape using templates, she forms them around bisque molds until they are leather hard, at which point they will be attached to form sections of pots.