

Story Pots & Motherhood

BY MARLENE FERRELL PARILLO

My work in ceramics began when I became a mother. My oil paints were far too dangerous to have around my young children, and believing that ceramic materials posed less of a threat, I began to make pots. I had always been drawn to narrative art, and the transition to motherhood left me with more stories to tell than ever before. The balancing act of working, parenting, and being an artist gave me an unending source of inspiration.

Growing up on Long Island, New York, I was impressed by my father's handmade toys and furniture. The workshop was my favorite place to play, and I in fact earned a BFA in furniture design in 1986. My mother, who immigrated to this country from Germany in 1960, gave me an appreciation for the arts and an admiration for all things handmade. It is probably because of this upbringing that I have always enjoyed making objects that are useful.

My original interest in making pots was to create large, blank vessels that could later be adorned with narrative painting. I was disappointed to find that the pottery wheel was not an easy friend to make. I decided to conceal the obvious imperfections in my pots by explaining them with narrative sculpture. The narrative sculpture quickly became autobiographical, and my wheel-throwing skills improved. My concerns, feelings, and observations became the themes of these pieces. These very accessible topics included confinement, fertility, marriage, home ownership, anxiety, and the difficulties of balancing a lifestyle that included both children and art. I call these narrative vessels "story pots."

Over the years, I have appropriated symbols from various sources to use in my work. Lizards, for example, are emblematic of dreams in Native American culture. Fish are a fertility symbol in Christianity. Other signs are more personal. Frogs represent my home because my garden is often loaded with them in the summer months. Feet are a symbol of mobility in most cases, and hands represent the ability to do meaningful work.

My ceramic studio is located in the basement of my home, where my husband shares the space for his drawing and painting. This easy access is essential to my work because my studio time is often dependent on our children's napping schedule. Our young children also have space in the studio to make art or just play. This integration of work and play provides a model for them of working artists, keeps them in touch with what we do, and makes art a family activity.

My pots are thrown and altered or handbuilt in a cone 6 clay. All of the sculpture is done by hand, and refined in the leather-hard stage. After bisque firing, I usually apply a cone 6 glaze to the interior of the vessel. It is important that my pieces are fired to cone 6 or cone 10 to improve their density and strength. Durability is an essential consideration with two small children.

At right: *Secret to My Success.* Wheel-thrown and altered two-piece vessel. Stained with blackbird mixture and fired to cone 6 in electric brown clay. Finished with opaque watercolors and spray fixative. 16" x 18" x 12".



Above: *How I Spent My Summer Vacation.* Slab-constructed two-piece container in stoneware clay. Fired to cone 10 in reduction and finished with opaque watercolors and spray fixative. 14" x 6" x 10".

