

Collaborative Companions

by Eric Botbyl and Justin Rothshank

Ceramics Monthly: The “Collaborative Companions” exhibition held at Union Project during the 2018 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, brought together 28 ceramic artists to make work individually and in pairs. Can you describe how you formulated this idea, and what you hoped for with this exhibition?

Eric Botbyl: The idea for a collaborative exhibition came to fruition only after Justin Rothshank and I collaborated on a few series of work. Our first experience could be chalked up to getting to know each other. The second experience widened my perspective and planted the seed of curiosity, leaving me hungry to pursue other collaborative projects.

Through Companion Gallery, I curated a collaborative exhibition of three contemporary trompe l’oeil artists: Tim Kowalczyk, Mitchell Spain, and Brett Kern. Each artist was asked to collaborate

on six pieces with each other, as well as present four individual pieces for points of reference.

During the planning stages of the “Mo Fauxs” exhibition, Rothshank asked me if I’d like team up with him and organize a collaborative show on a much larger scale during the NCECA conference in Pittsburgh.

Our hope was to expose a larger, more diverse group of artists to the exponential growth that stems from collaboration, as well as create an environment in which cross pollination was encouraged.

CM: How did prior collaborations with one another and with other artists impact your approach to organizing the show?

Justin Rothshank: I met Eric through an initial experimental collaboration. He offered me some cups to decorate . . . a first date perhaps? This got us talking and led to ongoing conversations about





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1 Mike Cinelli and Margaret Haden's urn, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, wheel-thrown earthenware, underglaze, luster, 2018. *Photo: Margaret Haden.* 2 José Sierra and Mark Arnold's vase, 10½ in. (27 cm) in height, handbuilt dark brown stoneware, AMACO underglaze, 2018. *Photo: Mark Arnold.* 3 Jen Allen and Margaret Haden's pitchers, 7¼ in. (18 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and altered red stoneware, glaze, gold luster, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, 2018. *Photo: Margaret Haden.* 4 Jared Peterson and Jessica Putnam-Phillips' *Gold Dog Vase*, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, handbuilt earthenware, slips, glaze, decals, gold luster, fired to cone 04 in oxidation, 2018. *Photo: Jessica Putnam-Phillips.* 5 Mike Cinelli and Shalene Valenzuela's tumblers, 6½ in. (17 cm) in height, wheel-thrown earthenware, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 04 in oxidation, 2018. *Photo: Shalene Valenzuela.*

our own work, life, and careers. It allowed us to build a friendship. I had been collaborating with other makers regularly for quite some time before, but I had always been the person bringing the surface to the collaboration. Eric wanted to change it up. He invited me to start the process with my own forms, which he then manipulated and expanded. Part of the excitement about this approach for me is learning new techniques and methods from others.

In the best case scenario, a collaborative project leads to work that is better, more compelling, than each artist could create alone. However, even in a failed collaboration there's still an opportunity for connection. The idea of connecting other artists to each other felt compelling to both of us. We're both eager to learn, experiment,

listen, and produce. This show was a way to do this on a much grander scale, while enlarging our own networks, and welcoming others to share the process with us.

CM: How were artists selected to participate? How were they paired up with other artists for the collaborative aspect of the show?

EB: Our goal was to pair unlikely suspects to begin a conversation, in vessel form, geared towards discovery, cross pollination, and understanding.

Collaborations are an invitation for possibility and potential. We offer up a clear vision for reinterpretation and a second opinion, and in return are challenged in our own way of thinking. Hopefully,

we welcome the opportunity to be shaken and view our work in a new or different light. What can we learn from working with artists of a different generation, gender, race, or religion? How do we propose questions in form or texture? How do we respond with color, pattern, or imagery? How do we approach a collaboration to ensure a dialog, rather than two consecutive monologues?

We began by inviting a broad spectrum of artists that we felt were identifiable by either form or surface. With encouragement from Kevin Snipes to let fate play an active role, we pulled names from a hat to determine who'd be working with whom. The selection process was by random chance. Each artist worked one-on-one with a total of three different artists.

CM: Did you provide a framework or parameters that the collaborative teams worked within?

EB: As far as Justin and I were concerned, anything and everything was welcomed. Concepts and themes including current events, humor, aesthetics, politics, race, religion, or lack thereof were all in bounds. We encouraged the artists to communicate with each other. For financial and space-constraint reasons, we limited the size of each piece to a maximum of 15×15×15 inches. This was a vessel show, although both functional and sculptural vessels were welcome.

JR: We selected two groupings of artists: fourteen artists were selected because of their distinct and recognizable forms, and fourteen artists were selected because of their distinct and recognizable surface treatments. Each form artist was paired with three surface artists, and vice versa. Each pair decided how many pieces to create. Some only made one while others made a small collection and chose the best for the exhibition.

CM: What type of calendar or specific deadlines were artists given in order to make sure the collaborative work was completed in time for the exhibition?

JR: The form people had 3½ months to send or deliver work to the surface people, who in turn had 3½ months to complete and photograph the work. We sent out a few periodic reminders to everyone in an effort to stay on track to meet deadlines.

CM: Were there any instances of struggle within the pairings?

JR: In short, yes, there was struggle. Some people dropped the ball and didn't produce. Others experienced catastrophes with materials. Some just didn't communicate. But others struggled and delivered. Some pairings have led to ongoing conversation and collaboration. In the end, the artists produced some truly phenomenal work.

EB: As with just about any human endeavor, there were certainly elements of struggle and conflict. Looking back, I would compare what happened behind the scenes to an extended family holiday dinner. Relationships were forged or deepened, and everyone was challenged in multiple ways. Some contributed more than others, communication could have been better, ego and self-esteem took their toll, and in the end, it was delicious. Honestly, it was messy . . . messy and beautiful.

CM: Have your perspectives on collaboration changed since organizing and participating in the exhibition?

JR: Prior to organizing this exhibition, I began several early collaborative projects with others in an intuitive way, truly as a way to play. It was a fun way to try to fix pieces that



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6 Jared Peterson and Kari Radasch's *Dog Vase*, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, red stoneware, underglaze, glaze, high-temperature wire, fired to cone 6 in oxidation, 2018. *Photo: Kari Radasch.* **7** Eric Botbyl and Damian Grava's *basket*, 15 in. (38 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and altered white stoneware, flashing slip, soda fired to cone 10, 2018. *Photo: Damian Grava.* **8** Eric Botbyl and Juan Barroso's *Patriarchs*, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain, AMACO underglaze, 2018. *Photo: Juan Barroso.*



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came out of a kiln with less than ideal results. A friend's glaze blemish could easily be patched with a decal or an oxidized wood-fired pot could be spiced up with some gold luster or added surface decoration. This led to more intentional planning, perhaps a form prepared with space intentionally designed for a poppy flower, or a friend making pots using a clay body that worked well with my glaze selection. As I've continued collaborating with many others, it's been rewarding to find that both planning ahead, and intuitively responding, are valuable to me in collaboration.

The process of organizing, participating in, and evaluating this exhibition has given us both an opportunity to reflect on what makes good collaborative work. It's clear that we all approach the challenge in a different way. Some of us prefer deep discussion, extended planning, and deliberate thought. Others prefer to approach the challenge through intuitive response and organic evolution. Still others find it overwhelming or confusing. I don't think there's a wrong way to begin, though there can be some duds in the process, as with our own work. The best collaborations, like any relationship, offer an opportunity to grow, change, build on past successes, and work through failures and challenges. This show was about risk taking, experimenting, and having fun. These are the important ingredients in growing as an artist.

CM: How will the concept evolve for the next iteration of this exhibition?

JR: We've planned a second exhibition for NCECA 2019. In this second show, Botbyl and I have chosen the pairings, instead of relying on randomness. We wanted to deliberately match artists, based on our knowledge and assumptions, with the hopes of cultivating deeper conversation. We've only paired artists with two unique collaborators, instead of three, in the hopes of making administration of the exhibition easier. Lastly, we didn't necessarily categorize artists as surface or form makers, but instead chose pairings that seemed to be a good fit. Thus each set of paired artists are left with a decision about how to pursue the collaboration. It was our hope that with more freedom to choose, the artists would take the op-



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9 Brenda Lichman and Paul Ide's teapot, 5½ in. (14 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and altered porcelain, underglaze, fired to cone 10 in oxidation, 2018. Photo: Paul Ide. 10 Deborah Schwartzkopf and Justin Rothshank's pitcher, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, wood-fired porcelain, decals, luster, 2018. Photo: Justin Rothshank.

portunity to delve deeper into the relationship, experimenting back and forth in different ways. We're eager to see how this develops.

"Collaborative Companions II" will be on view at the Crowne Plaza Minneapolis on the 7th floor during the 2019 NCECA conference. The exhibition is free and open to the public from 10am to 7pm for the duration of the conference.

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