



From Policing to
Potting

BY JO TAYLOR

I became serious about clay at age 21 when I learned to throw at an evening class. I loved the wheel as a tool for making and had found a satisfying hobby I could continue indefinitely. After several years I had to leave my beloved class as I moved away to become a police officer, seeking a more exciting career when layoffs meant that I lost my office job. I decided to continue my hobby at home. I purchased a wheel and a kiln, then made pots in my spare time for several years.

Eventually I wanted to know more about ceramics and felt going to college was the answer. I studied ceramics part time, and worked part time with the police—then my baby son made his entrance! Unable to juggle everything, I resigned from the police in order to finish my course studies, and when I graduated in 2005 a friend offered me a job teaching pottery in prison.

As a first teaching job it was daunting but a lot of the procedures were familiar and I enjoyed the work, staying for 5 years. Combining teaching and making has been my career since then, including a return to university to study for my masters, where my work changed from functional to sculptural. Having a career as an artist was not something I had ever considered until part way through my degree; I had always been encouraged to have a “proper job” with the security of a regular salary, pension, etc.

Career Connections

I think years of considering risk, problem solving, and decision making from my police days has been useful when working with clay and trying new ideas. It means I can be fairly logical in my approach and evaluation. Resilience during tough times is essential for both careers as is a cool head when outcomes are unexpected. I like variety in my

week, I enjoy talking to all kinds of people, and can cope with high loads of administration—these qualities are equally useful for both careers. Being proactive is another quality that is important for both, whether in preventing crime or researching exhibition opportunities. I often worked alone in my police career, rather than with a partner or unit; however, I was used to interacting with the wider community when responding to incidents, investigating crime, going to meetings, and working with schools and the community. I enjoy working alone in the studio while also having teaching and other activities scheduled throughout the week where I spend time with people. Having worked with people in all situations as a police officer, I have used this experience when teaching in a socially engaged context, working with those experiencing homelessness, domestic abuse, mental health difficulties, dementia, and in a prison setting. There was not much opportunity to be creative as a police officer; I feel I am better suited to make and teach, and I don't have to work such unsociable hours.

There are skills that I developed in policing that have helped me to be successful with this second career in clay. In fact, some skills are strangely similar. Much of the work outside of physically making is administration and communication, which also forms the bulk



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3

1 *Piceous ii*, 16½ in. (42 cm) in height, black clay, 2016.
2 *Apricity ii*, 18 in. (45 cm) in height, porcelain, 2016. 1, 2 Photos: John Taylor. 3 *Counterpoint i*, 10 in. (26 cm) in height, 2015.



4



5

4 *Riffing on Horsfield i*, colored porcelain, mixed media, 2016. 5 Wall pieces, colored porcelain, 2014. Photo: John Taylor.

of police work outside of attending incidents. Both are a mixture of the physical and written work, your day can be unpredictable, and you can meet people from all backgrounds. Organizational skills are important, and the ability to prioritize and work independently, making your own decisions is key. There is a clear relationship between policing and my teaching experience; working in the prison was only possible because of my police background. The physical making of work bears little relation except for relying on problem solving skills; considering different solutions to a physical or aesthetic issue and looking at a situation from different viewpoints. Both careers have given me, at varying times, euphoric satisfaction or enormous stress, but as an artist if I get stressed I need to remind myself that no one got hurt today, which puts things into perspective.

Inspiration

My ceramic sculptures are created using a combination of wheel-thrown and handbuilt pieces. Inspiration comes from decorative architectural features such as ornate plaster ceilings, elaborate wrought iron, stone façades and carved wood. I live near the Georgian city of Bath in England, and am influenced by the local architecture and country house interiors. I have also travelled around Europe and found inspiration in the extravagant palaces of Potsdam near Berlin, Gaudi's unique architecture in Barcelona and the villas and gardens of Rome and Florence in Italy. I enjoy how the ornate comes to life with light and shadow—there is a sense of organic growth frozen in time. I aim to capture this in my work, to show how soft the clay once was and suggest energy and movement.

the author *Jo Taylor is a ceramic artist living in Bath, England. To see more of her work, visit www.jotaylorceramics.com.*

COMPONENTS AND SERIES

My forms are created in series, and are built using a combination of wheel-thrown and handbuilt pieces. This sequence of processes is dictated by the drying time of the clay, to ensure all pieces are leather hard at the point of construction. The first stage is throwing, starting with the thickest pieces used

for supporting and stabilizing the structure as these pieces take longest to dry. I throw rings, which can be cut to make arches (see F), a strong form on which to build both technically and aesthetically. I use the speed of the wheel and various tools to create marks that provide direction and energy in the finished work. My favorite tools for mark making are an apple corer (A), a cake-decorating comb, and an old credit card with notches cut in the edge.



A



B



C



D



E



F



G



H

While the thrown pieces are drying (B), I continue with the handbuilt pieces. I make them on bisque-fired clay molds, which are still porous and absorbent. I smear a piece of clay onto the mold, adding more to make a motif (C), then use my hands and some water to give direction and fluidity (D). When these pieces have dried a little, they can be removed and sometimes gently twisted to add extra movement. After all of the pieces reach the leather-hard stage, they are smoothed with a sponge on a stick to eliminate any unwanted blemishes and to tidy up the reverse side.

Once both the thrown and handbuilt pieces are at the leather-hard stage (E), construction begins on a kiln shelf, so that the work can be placed easily in the kiln when dry to minimize breakages. The largest pieces are used first (F) and are joined with a standard slip-and-score process (see H). Sometimes the join is reinforced with a small coil of clay if extra strength is needed to support the structure. The building process continues organically (G, H)—there is no specific plan; joining and adding continues and the work slowly evolves with each addition until I decide to stop.

Each work is dried slowly as there will be shrinkage in different directions. Any cracks during drying are gently corrected. To control the drying, I drape thin sheets of dry-cleaner's plastic over the work, which stops the thinner pieces at the top from drying too quickly and allows some air to get to thicker pieces at the base. The work is checked daily for cracks, and any that appear are gently fettle with a tool.

After the work has dried it is fired once, slowly, to 2300°F (1260°C). To dry the work completely I soak the kiln at 86°F, 140°F, and 194°F (30°C, 60°C, and 90°C). The soak time depends on the thickness of the piece. I take it up to 1112°F (600°C) at 140°F (60°C) per hour, then 212°F (100°C) per hour to the top temperature.