

“Ceramics has the power to arrest you the way sublime music can make you stop what you’re doing and listen.”

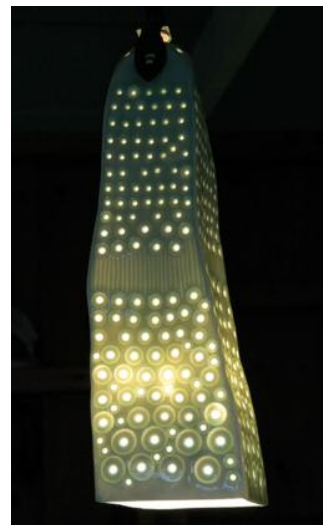
A Dance With Clay: Harlan House

Within ceramic circles, both here in Canada and abroad, Harlan House embodies what we mean by “living legend.” Full of life, Harlan has been living fully as a ceramicist for nearly half a century, if you consider that he hit the ground running upon graduating from the Alberta College of Art in 1969. Although his admission to art school was, by Harlan’s own telling, ‘accidental’, his contribution to the field through his ongoing commitment to growing, deciphering, learning, making, and the subsequent sharing of his practice is anything but unintended.

Harlan House was the featured presenter at FUSION’s Winter Workshop held March 23-24, 2018, onsite at Sheridan College’s Ceramics Studio. Harlan started the workshop by impressing upon the capacity audience that he is not a teacher, he’s a maker. Harlan did choose the path of maker and, as such, he chose the difficult path of making a living for himself and his family as a professional ceramicist “out on a limb,” without the support of a teaching salary. His oeuvre and what he has achieved as a professional artist speak volumes.

But I would also add that I have known Harlan since he came to Sheridan as a guest artist in 2011 to ignite passion within the students. Harlan has always been there to show the way; point, guide, suggest, to anyone who asked.

Harlan started as a painter, a way of seeing that he has carried over to his ceramics practice, his uncanny ability to see clay as canvas. He noted that he didn’t invent his own techniques, the Chinese did; but that what he makes, the Chinese don’t. Throughout the workshop he not only demonstrated his throwing, slab-built plates, luscious slipping, frog- and fish-sprigging; but for the very first



Harlan House, *M Extreme Happiness Ship*, 2011, and right, Harlan House, *Condo Lamp*, 2015.
Image Credit: David Kaye Gallery

time, he demo’d his unparalleled technique of fashioning the fragility of an iris, both in 2D on the clay canvas and 3D modeled in clay.

When he finished making the iris on the slip cast lamp, he walked it around to show us up close. A paparazzi phone camera melee ensued. After the break, Harlan reflected on his experience of our “learning.” He told us that we need to learn from our eyes and let it sink into our souls; that the immediacy of the camera is a way of forgetting something, not committing it to memory.

Within the first forty-five minutes of the workshop I learned two things that I directly applied to my own practice: casting slip works best at warmer than room temperature; and tilting your single-pour molds at an angle when draining avoids the annoying “bump” at the bottom of the pot. I’m certain I was not alone in learning, by visual osmosis, the discipline of Harlan’s focus: not able or willing

“From the point of view of a potter or a sculptor, we have to make art and fail in order to push the whole concept into an experience that starts to make sense.”



“This [ceramics] is an art form. We are actually making art!”

from his bench, wiped his hands, took off his apron, and walked over to the house and announced to

Maureen that he was quitting because he had become a “pottery slut.” Maureen, his right hand in business, was not happy - but tender and patiently encouraging. According to Harlan, “there’s no replacement for learning as you work; if not, why bother.”

And so Harlan, though he has officially retired, continues to dance: with clay, with his garden, with Maureen, and in his life. Thank you, Harlan.

FUSION: The Ontario Clay and Glass Association is grateful to Harlan House for his gracious presence as guest artist at the FUSION 2018 Winter Workshop at Sheridan College. Harlan’s work can be found at www.harlanhouse.com, as can his soon-to-be-published book, *Harlan House: Studio Potter*, which is both autobiography and open-source compendium of slip, clay, and glaze recipes and photography.

to entertain questions thrown at him while executing a technique; but always willing to stop at the end and field any unanswered concerns, always adding an anecdote from the wellspring of stories he has accumulated over his career, both personal and professional; standing up, using his hands, often dancing with a wiggle in his hips for emphasis.

There was the day he felt moved to make a shoe vase. Growing up, his mother had been severe with rules, “no shoes on the table.”

“As you’re making something, it’s lovely to have a dance with it – to feel like you’re part of the whole process.”

And so making a shoe vase to put on the table was a bemused, rebellious, act. It was Maureen, his life partner and wife, who took the sculpture and put it on the dinner table with a flower in it. Then happenstance kicked in:

he had to make a sleeve around the shoe to cast it. He realized when he removed the sleeve, that he’d made socks. Now he makes shoes with socks and they are tall vases. He’s quick to note that the crazier the socks the better - adding an iris to golf socks was a hit with his collectors.

Several of the participants mentioned to me that one of the most astounding things Harlan teaches is about love and life. His integral weaving together of his personal and professional life with Maureen was a constant in the room. Harlan shared the moment when he realized he was just cranking iris vases out because there was demand for the work, they sold, and he could make money. He got up

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*"A potter should wash
his own dishes."*