

# Bruce Gholson and



## Just the Facts

### Clay

BG: porcelain, dark and light stonewares  
SH: porcelain, white stoneware

### Primary forming method

BG and SH: throwing

### Primary firing temperature

BG and SH: high-fire reduction gas and mid-range electric

### Favorite surface treatment

BG: slip-trailing and resist techniques  
SH: slip-trailing, cuerda-seca, colored slip and subtractive resist techniques

### Favorite tools

BG: custom cut metal ribs to accentuate curves  
SH: table-top wheel and custom-made wooden platforms for when I throw my tall Jesse Vases (two- to three-part slender vases)

### Playlist

Pandora (some favorite stations are Bliss, Mazzy Star, Zero 7, Nightmares on Wax, Marissa Nadler) Podcasts: "Contenders" and "Winners of the Par-sec Award" [www.parsecawards.com](http://www.parsecawards.com)

## Studio

We are full-time studio potters in Seagrove, North Carolina, a place where pottery culture is a thread that is intertwined throughout the fabric of life, where pottery shops are open to the public throughout the year. Working in Seagrove, famous for its traditional pottery, immediately begs the question: Are we traditional potters? When we step back and look at what we do, we find ourselves thinking that maybe we are indie potters, because we feel free to make whatever we like, following no one tradition, and like most potters, we haven't signed with a major label. We make nouveau psychedelic pottery shaped by eclectic influences such as Art Nouveau's sinuous lines and an abiding interest in the interactive alchemic possibilities of clay and glaze chemistry to produce rich colors and textures.

Our new pottery studio is a 60x60-foot double-insulated, white metal building that stands at the center of our 15-acre property alongside our woods and ponds. We began work on our new studio and home in 2007 with Samantha's parents after they retired from Virginia Tech, and we moved in by 2010. The building took two years to design and over two years to build. It took another six to eight months to transition into our new studio from the old one on our property, which is now our gallery space and sales shop. We painted our walls and ceilings white and the cement floor light gray, which helps illuminate the studio. We like the light gray floor because of the brighter feeling it gives our workspace, but unfortunately the paint has proven itself to be fragile and chips easily. We installed a geothermal HVAC system and a solar hot water heater for both our house and studio. Since our sink is connected to the

# Samantha Henneke

Seagrove, North Carolina



septic system, we have wash-water buckets set up beside our wheels for the first clay rinse off.

We designed a few separate rooms in to our studio space: a glaze lab, plaster room, wood shop, and restroom. Overall we kept the space open and easily adjustable. All of our large tables are built on locking caster wheels, and our wheel stations are moveable, to allow ourselves the ability to rearrange the space to fit what we are working on at any given time. This flexibility allows us to adjust to our ever-evolving concept of efficient flow. We also included a lift that has a 1000-pound capacity to help us move clay, glaze materials, and other studio related items up to the second floor for storage.

We love the studio's natural light from the windows and our view looking into the trees. Stepping outside our studio's door we can see both of our ponds.

We are enthusiastic about our future plans for the studio, including designing a new gas kiln with Eddy Bernard and Wet Dog Glass, a glass furnace company working down the road in Star. This kiln will be slightly larger than our Skutt electric kiln and half the size of our existing gas kiln. This will allow us more versatility in scheduling

firings and glaze testing. We are also planning a dedicated outdoor area for the grinding equipment we use during the final clean up of our pottery, especially for pieces where we are creating effects using flowing glazes.

## Synergy, Research, and Inspiration

Our studio is a collaborative environment where we work together to research and experiment on an ever evolving array of ideas, techniques, clays, and glaze formulations. Because we are the primary retailer of our ceramics, we are able to flow and follow our muse, which keeps things interesting and challenging from day to day. By working together experimentally, we have developed unusual, fluid crystalline glazes based on the characteristics of molybdenum, as well as other special-effect glazes. This continued exploration to evolve unusual surfaces helps to keep our work distinctive.

BG: I am a devoted reader of clay and glaze chemistry, enjoying the formulas available to us all as puzzles to convert into something esoterically different through substitutions of materials and alterations of ratios. In recent years I have been reading about the chemistry and



processes of other disciplines, such as photography, printmaking, and the chemistry of dye, pigments, paint, and binders. I like to go into the glaze lab and peruse the accumulated materials there for inspiration, or look at my old notebooks of ideas. If I'm really stuck I can always resort to doing a correspondence or online course on some arcane subject from H.P. Lovecraft's fictional Miskatonic University. Recreationally I have been reading the *Expanse* novel series and other sci-fi, as well as stories about the life of Abdul Alhazred.

SH: A favorite hobby is collecting new books for our library. Since our days at Alfred University, we have supported Edward R. Hamilton, a bargain book company that is a great place to purchase ceramics and art books ([www.hamiltonbook.com](http://www.hamiltonbook.com)). A good way to search for a particular used book is [www.bookfinder.com](http://www.bookfinder.com). Recently, we've invested in books on alternative photography, painting and drawing, printmaking, insects and elephants, and as well as books on ceramics. I love learning new techniques and I have been continuing my education with online sites such as Skillshare ([www.skillshare.com](http://www.skillshare.com)), Artist Network ([www.artistsnetwork.tv](http://www.artistsnetwork.tv)), and Lenswork ([www.lenswork.com](http://www.lenswork.com)). The latter is a creative photography site that includes printed magazines, podcasts, and audio interviews of professional photographers, which provides us with plenty of listening entertainment as we work in the studio.

I have established a corner for two-dimensional art near my wheel where I can work on painting and drawing daily. This is a way to explore ideas and to satisfy a creative urge that influences my clay work. I love venturing out onto our property with my camera to photograph compositions and gather ideas to inspire my porcelain glaze paintings.

## Paying Dues (and Bills)

BG: I began my studies in Stillwater at Oklahoma State University and finished my BFA in ceramics at the University of Georgia, Athens. After being a professional studio potter for fifteen years, I returned to school and received my MFA from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred.

SH: I began my academic studies at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, and after four years transferred to the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred, where I earned my BFA in Ceramics.

We moved to Seagrove in August 1997 to work at Dover Pottery with the McCannless family. We worked part time, and were allowed to make our own work in the same space. Our goal was to find our own property and to set up our studio and retail pottery shop. On December 31, 1999 we received a loan, and along with the money we had saved, bought an old farm with a yellow cottage five miles south of Seagrove's single traffic light. Our farm was vacant for three years and it took us six months to make the small cottage livable. By August 2001 we opened Bulldog Pottery named in honor of our two American Staffordshire bulldogs, Moka and Babu.

We purchased our original studio building, the largest portable structure available, while working with Dover Pottery. The 12x24-foot building was our solution for immediate affordable workspace. After moving this structure to our property, we hired a skilled friend to help us expand this workspace in order to have more room for our wheels, a retail pottery shop, electric kilns, wood shop, and clay mixer.

In 2003 we rented a 2800-square-foot building in the town of Star after we caught ourselves repeatedly saying, "when we have a



larger space we will. . .” This space provided us room to add the slip-casting process to make our porcelain wall canvases. It gave Bruce space to make platters and other large-scale works, and we also did our packing and shipping there. Trying to maintain two separate studio spaces that were five miles apart was very cumbersome, so being able to consolidate everything in our new studio has been a major life improvement.

We balance making pots every day of the week with running our pottery business. Our daily routine revolves around our pottery sales shop and the frequent visits of customers during the day, which pushes us to make pottery into the evening. Actual daily pottery making can really fluctuate month-to-month and day-to-day, from four to fourteen hours. This is very dependent on what deadlines are imminent and the pottery-related chores that need to be done, such as photography, glaze mixing and testing, posting to social media, administrative work for the business, studio maintenance, and volunteer work.

## The Seagrove Pottery Community

Our rural community is filled with pottery traditions, history, and legend. The Seagrove pottery community encompasses areas of Randolph, Moore, and Montgomery counties in central North Carolina, with the name being derived from the fact that a large percentage of us have the mailing address of Seagrove, North Carolina. We once had a chicken farmer remark to us, “Potters are thicker than fleas on a dog’s back in Seagrove.” The Seagrove Area Potters Association (SAPA), a volunteer group, puts together a driving map and guide, maintains a website, and annually sponsors a Spring Kiln Opening Pottery Tour in April, and in November the Celebration

of Seagrove Potters, a marketplace under one roof. Eighty different potteries are listed on the current SAPA map, with works ranging from what is known as traditional Seagrove pottery, to contemporary pottery, vessels, and sculpture. The abundance of potters in this small geographic area, combined with its historic recognition and cultural support, creates a critical mass as a destination for everyone interested in collecting pottery. Our area is rich in ceramic activities, such as the annual North Carolina Potters Conference, now in its 29th year. The Randolph Arts Guild in Asheboro hosts the NC Potters Conference on the first full weekend in March. In downtown Seagrove, the North Carolina Pottery Center houses a permanent pottery collection and focuses on three exhibitions a year as well as a monthly presentation. In the town of Star, an arts organization called STARworks has clay and glass residencies and visiting artist programs, and a unique pottery supply business specializing in the formulation of clay bodies from raw local clays.

## Marketing

The majority of our work is sold in our home-based pottery shop next to our cottage garden. Our official hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10am to 5pm, though we are here most of the time anyway. We are usually open on Sunday and Monday as well.

With the recession in 2008 and the resulting reduction of visitors driving to Seagrove, it became evident that we needed to be proactive with our own promotional efforts for Bulldog Pottery. We stepped up in creating an online presence through social media, initially by blogging and Facebook activity, then Twitter and Flickr. We found the Flickr account to be a very valuable asset. Once, we were even able to connect a gallery to our Flickr site as a source of high-resolution images of our



work for their publicity while we were on the road driving to another event. Later, as they became available, we created Tumblr, Pinterest, and Instagram accounts. It is hard to fully keep these sites current all the time, but we find that the efforts we make on these platforms have ongoing visibility benefits that help people to discover us. We support our ceramics community by membership in organizations such as the Alfred Ceramic Art Museum, American Art Pottery Association, Contemporary Art Pottery Collectors Association, Delhom Service League, The Mint Museum, the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts, North Carolina Pottery Center, Piedmont Craftsman, Potters Council, Randolph Arts Guild, and Studio Potter.

We sell around 70% of our pottery from our physical gallery. Throughout the year a focus for us is to invite pottery enthusiasts for events here at Bulldog Pottery. We mail postcards and send out e-newsletters to our client lists, and write press releases for surrounding newspapers. Since 2009, we have concentrated on four special pottery events: Daffie Days, our spring kiln opening celebrating the ubiquitous daffodil and showcasing vases covered in flowing molybdenum crystalline glazes; a Holiday Kiln Opening in mid-December, and “Cousins in Clay,” which we co-host with Michael Kline twice a year (at Bulldog Pottery the weekend after Memorial Day, and at Michael Kline Pottery in Bakersville on Labor Day weekend (the 2016 guest artist is Kristen Kieffer)). The eighth annual “Cousins in Clay” will be at Bulldog Pottery on June 4–5, 2016, with guests Julia Galloway, Tara Wilson, and Dug Stanat. These two events are a big commitment for us and we are honored to have had an exceptional group of potters join us here at Bulldog Pottery and at Michael’s studio. Past clay cousins have been Dan Anderson, William Brouillard, A. Blair Clemo, Henry Crissman, Val Cushing, Judith

Duff, Adam Field, Rick Hensley, Peter Lenzo, David MacDonald, Jenny Mendes, Ron Myers, Doug Peltzman, Donna Polseno, Justin Rothshank, Mark Shapiro, Sam Taylor, and Jack Troy.

We also participate in events at other venues, such as the Potters Market Invitational hosted by the Delhom League at the Mint Museum Randolph in Charlotte, North Carolina; Pottery on the Hill, at The Hill Center in Washington, DC; and the American Pottery Festival at the Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

### Most Important Lesson

We have learned as working artists that the more you know about the world outside of your own discipline, the more analogies you can make that lead to possible directions and solutions for your own art. We try to remember that the biggest hurdle to developing new work is to physically start the idea, and then we can just enjoy the journey—even the failures, while we experience where the adventure takes us. Go fishing in the Miskatonic River—if things go well, maybe some magic will happen.

Email: [bulldog@bulldogpottery.com](mailto:bulldog@bulldogpottery.com)

[www.bulldogpottery.com](http://www.bulldogpottery.com)

[www.bulldogpottery.blogspot.com](http://www.bulldogpottery.blogspot.com)

Facebook: Bruce Gholsen and Samantha Henneke: Bulldog Pottery

Instagram: [@samanthahenneke](https://www.instagram.com/samanthahenneke); [@brucegholson](https://www.instagram.com/brucegholson); [@bulldogpottery](https://www.instagram.com/bulldogpottery)

[www.twitter.com/bulldogpottery](https://www.twitter.com/bulldogpottery)

[www.flickr.com/photos/bulldogpottery](https://www.flickr.com/photos/bulldogpottery)

[www.pinterest.com/bulldogpottery](https://www.pinterest.com/bulldogpottery)

[www.bulldogpottery.tumblr.com](http://www.bulldogpottery.tumblr.com)

[www.cousinsinclay.com](http://www.cousinsinclay.com)



1



2



3



4



5



6

1, 3, 6 Bruce Gholson.  
2, 4, 5 Samantha Henneke.