

Shop Talk
**Engaging with
 Ceramics**

Cross MacKenzie Ceramic Arts
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Her two sons were nearly grown and she'd done 25 years of solo studio work, so the artist Rebecca Cross decided to do something "more engaged with the world." In 2006 she opened Cross MacKenzie Ceramic Arts in Washington, D.C. With support from her husband and business partner, the architectural photographer Max MacKenzie, she showcases the "incredible breadth of the clay medium" in pottery, sculpture and custom tilework.

Tell us about your background. I grew up outside of D.C. and went to Bennington College in Vermont. Max and I met there.

Then I went to London and studied sculpture at St. Martin's School of Art. I stayed in London six years, and got my master's in painting at the Royal College of Art. The program there invites artists in different departments to come experiment in the ceramics department, which is what I did. Ever since then I have gone back and forth between painting and ceramics.

In England you spent several years as a studio assistant to Sir Anthony Caro, the sculptor. What was that like? He was experimenting in bronze again, having done some

bronze in the 1950s. I made wax shapes for him that he could use in his sort of found-object approach. He would say, "Becca, go to your kitchen and come back with some wax shapes." So I'd cover pots and pans, and bring back shapes. Then he'd say, "I need musical instruments. Go get a tuba and bring me back a tuba shape." I admire him because here he is, in his 80s, excited about the new things he's doing.

What's the idea behind Cross MacKenzie Ceramic Arts? There can be art in the teacup you drink from as well as in the paintings on your wall, the



Left: Rebecca Cross stands next to *Toddle (Tsumasaki de Araku)* by Valerie Zimany (left) and *Rebana* by Gary Ericson (right) in the gallery she owns with her husband, Max Mackenzie.

Above: Michal Zehavi's *Jar* is also among the ceramic work shown at Cross Mackenzie.

furniture you sit on and the architecture that surrounds you. Perfectly symmetrical, harmonious bowls can be art. You also have artists like Walter McConnell, who builds whole installations out of wet clay. I'm trying to show the wide range of works in clay, some that are aesthetically gratifying and functional, others intellectually stimulating and full of meaning.

You've also done stage work. Does that inform the gallery?

For a Norwegian dance company, I painted the actual dancers to fit into a big painting that was the backdrop. The last few years I've been working with Tony Williams for his dance company, BalletRox, in Boston. We've designed the *Urban Nutsacker*, and I did all the sets and costumes for that. Tony and I are always talking about how lighting affects the design, and so lighting in the gallery is important. Also, I sort of stage the gallery. Before an opening, I look at where people will come in, and I want that when-the-curtain-comes-up feeling—the lights are set, there's a dramatic element.

My career has been working in different media and having them inform each other, and I think that's healthy for artists to do. I've said to my artist friends, "When you work in clay, I will show [your pieces]!"

It's great to promote that kind of experimentation.

Last year I had the first of what I hope will be biennial shows called "Architects Fired." I invited 12 of Washington's hottest architects—like Mark McInturff, Travis Price—to come and work in clay. I showed them a few rudimentary techniques, gave them each about 12 pounds of clay, then fired their completed work in my kiln. Architects like having

assignments, so I said they could do a cup and a sculpture, or only a cup or only a sculpture. A lot of them did this simple idea of a cup, and they were surprisingly inventive—or not surprisingly, really. My father was the octogenarian in the group, and he made the most amazing cup. He's an architect and has always done other things as well, such as paint. He influenced me in that way.

Along with established collectors, do you see new ones?

I do, because I'm not showing only works that are out of reach of ordinary people's budgets. Tourists walk by and see Angela Schwab's snap cups for \$50 each, and have to have them. The price level of some of the things I have invites people to understand that they can collect. Hopefully, that will lead them to collect the more substantial things in the gallery as well. I like having that range.

I feel strongly that I want to show young, up-and-coming, innovative artists as well as big names. So far I've been successful getting well-known artists like David Furman, but I also want to keep showing unknown people whom I have to help introduce to the world. That's a lot of fun.

How's the neighborhood?

We're in Georgetown. It's so charming—there are restaurants, bookstores, shops. On the square are five galleries. For years they've had their openings on the third Friday of each month, so I'm part of that. The restaurant we're facing gives us all free hors d'oeuvres for our openings. On third Fridays Canal Square is the place to go because we have such great hors d'oeuvres! —J.L.

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