

Studio Of Dreams

A Weatherford potter's earthy art springs from her Native American roots

BY MEL W RHODES

For some, “living the dream” means getting their hands dirty. Take Choctaw potter Carolyn Bernard Young: using a potter’s wheel and electric kiln, her passion is coaxing form and beauty from clay.

“I try to bring a modern voice to the clay, while still trying to honor the art and tradition of my ancestors,” she said. “Using a sgraffito technique to carve totems, spirits and patterns into my pottery is an expression of my deep respect for all Native American culture and especially my beloved Choctaw tribe.”

Her mother was the granddaughter of survivors of the Trail of Tears, the well-known exodus resulting from the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The Act effected the forced relocation of the “Five Civilized Tribes” from their homelands in what would come to be known as the Deep South. The phrase “Trail of Tears” originated with the removal of the Choctaw Nation to what would become known as “Indian Territory” (later Oklahoma) in 1831. It was basically a land grab that opened up some 25 million acres for white settlement. The Choctaws were the first of the tribes to be removed. The trail was a hard one, and thousands died along the way.



Carolyn Bernard Young



Above: Bowl with purple inside

Left: Father Sky Home

Opposite page: Carolyn Bernard Young

Choctaw Ponies bowl



While she believes what happened to the Choctaw in particular and Native Americans in general was a travesty, she understands the need to move on.

“It was genocide, the same as the Holocaust,” she said. “Our government was complicit, and I don’t think that there is anything that can be done to repay that. But my philosophy is that there is no one living today who committed those atrocities, and there’s no one living today who was subjected to the atrocities. So we have to learn to live together and move forward in a way that doesn’t forget but does forgive.”

Though there is the aspect of ancestral respect and cultural identification in Young’s work, for her, throwing clay is not about strife or sorrow, but about peace. Midway through a 33-year career as a quality engineer in the aerospace industry, she began to look for a way to relieve the stress. She “discovered and fell in love with clay.” And it fit the bill for stress relief.

“The feel of the clay is soothing,” she explained. “I listen to Native American flute music while I carve. As the carvings come to life, the contrast between the black underglaze that I put on a piece and the white clay as I carve — it just





Through My Mother's Eyes



Earth to Art Studio



Pony Mug and Pony Mug bottom.

Note: Federal law requires that any art sold as Native American must have the artist's signature and tribe.





Tea Bowls



My Grandmother's
Medicine

makes my heart sing.”

The Fort Worth native retired and in 2012 moved with husband Sam to a home and two acres in Weatherford. There they built the “studio of her dreams.”

“Now I spend every day making pots and living that dream,” Young said.

As can be seen in a photograph of her turning a piece on her wheel, Young absolutely delights in her work. The toothy smile is boundless, her eyes are closed in elation. Her hands are covered in clay and her apron is mucky. And it’s a good mucky.

The pieces themselves are black and “white” with delicious bursts of color peeking out from the inside. There is a scratchboard or woodcut quality to the work. The Native American iconography is earthy, perhaps simple at first glance; but it is an intricate simplicity born of ethos — in the final evaluation, perhaps not simple at all. Certainly the joy of the potter shines through in each piece.

While it is tempting to assume Young has an innate ability to make visual music from clay (and this is likely true), she has worked at her art.

“Without a degree in art, I was determined to learn from the best,” she said. “For many years, I spent a week each summer at Arrowmont School of Art in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, learning from the best: Lana Wilson, Ellen Shankin, Josh DeWeese, Pete Pinnell and Kathy Triplett, to name a few. At home, I took classes from the best in Texas: Dale Neese, Daphne Hatcher, Mark Epstein and many others. I bought a wheel and practiced my craft every day, preparing for the day I could retire and live my dream — to be a full-time potter.”

Young keeps busy in her studio dreamworld and often participates in art shows and competitions. At the 2013 Peach Festival Art Show she won 2nd place for her piece Bear Totem, and she took 2nd at the 2013 Renaissance of Art competition for Spirit of the Bear. In 2014, she took 2nd place at the Choctaw Indian Art Show with Plenty to Share. This year she won 3rd place in contemporary pottery at the Red Earth Art Festival in

Oklahoma City for her work Flight.

Particularly gratifying was the November 2014 Choctaw Nation acquisition of two totem vases for display in the Hall of Chiefs. In September of 2014 the Choctaw Museum acquired her piece Summer by the River for its permanent collection.

Calling her artistic endeavor “Earth to Art,” Young markets her work through various galleries from

Houston to California and north to Ontario, Canada, and at shows and competitions. Her studio is open to the public on a very specific schedule — “If we’re here, we’re open.” Calling ahead might be a worthwhile consideration.

“And we’ll have an open studio for the holidays,” she added. “We call it a Holiday Open House, and it’s on the Saturday before Thanksgiving. 🍎

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