

ARTHUR'S
Garden

by Leigh Taylor Mickelson



Bedecked with flora, fauna, and other seemingly random objects, Arthur Halvorsen's colorful terra-cotta pots relay a personal narrative that is full of flavor, excess, fun, and joy. His lavish surfaces, crafted through layers of monoprinted newsprint stickers, reflect his up-bringing and the people and personalities that impact his daily life.

Finding a Creative Outlet

Halvorsen knew he wanted to be an artist when he was five. Growing up south of Boston in the town of Braintree, Massachusetts, he was surrounded by people who worked with their hands. His mom was always crocheting, crafting, or making something. His Norwegian grandfather was a clockmaker; his father, who was an outdoorsman and a lobsterman, made his own flies for fly fishing. When his mom passed away, Halvorsen was 9 years old. Clay and art became an important creative outlet for him. He created his own worlds out of polymer clay and Play-Doh, and then became serious about art in high school, exploring several mediums. He went to Maine College of Art and fell in love with clay, thanks to his teacher and mentor, Lucy Breslin. Her passion for terra cotta—from its remarkable history to its malleable iron-rich qualities—was infectious, and Halvorsen caught Breslin's love of the clay body, which he uses for all his work. His mentor's penchant for extravagant surfaces might have also been catching.

Since receiving his BFA from Maine College of Art in 2007, Halvorsen has been working as an educator and an artist, keeping his studio at Mudflat Studios in Boston. Teaching as an adjunct instructor at Lesley University, community classes at Mudflat, and in the outreach after-school programs in Boston's public school system, he is known to his students as "Auntie Arthur." Taking great joy in helping his students find those a-ha moments, like when centering

clicks, his gender-bending creative energy is contagious, and he manages to carry it back to his studio, where he works until midnight almost daily, catching the last train home.

Contagious Storytelling Canvases

At first glance, Halvorsen's pots are just fun. The bold surface decoration pulls you in and there is a childlike quality about them, much like a coloring book that delights in simple forms and objects that let you imagine your own story while you color them in. My pre-teen sticker collection also came to mind. Working on two or three "Big Ass Pots" at a time (yes, he does call them that), along with some smaller more functional objects, his forms are wheel-thrown and handbuilt.

Often simple in nature, Halvorsen's forms sometimes pull from his surface imagery. A vase neck will reference a bridge abutment or a buoy. Two pots side by side become a couple, differentiated by their vase rims, which suggest hats or crowns. The forms are then his storytelling canvases to play with. Likewise, Halvorsen's new series of one-of-a-kind, slab-built lunch plates are essentially collaged vignettes, with rims closely cut around each colorful scene, where larger-than-life flower forms coexist with ambulances, metal trash cans, and delivery trucks.

Halvorsen never draws right on the pot; instead, he decorates them with stickers (monoprint transfers made of newsprint and underglaze). Squeezing black underglaze out of a squirt bottle, he draws outlines of flowers, leaves, lobsters, trucks, buildings, polka dots, and other objects of his imagination. After 24 hours, when the outlines have dried, he colors them in using a bright palette of Amaco Velvet underglazes. Cutting the finished images into stickers, Halvorsen builds his library of characters—what he



Opposite *Garden Gate Plate*, 10 in. (25 cm) in diameter, earthenware, slip, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 02, 2019. **1** *East Boston Buoy*, 26 in. (66 cm) in height, earthenware, slip, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 02, 2018. **2** *Boston Pride*, 27¼ in. (69 cm) in height, earthenware, slip, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 02, carpet tacks, 2019. **3** *Daddy Hunt*, to 23½ in. (60 cm) in height, earthenware, slip, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 02, 2018.

Applying Newsprint Transfers

by Arthur Halvorsen

After newsprint underglaze transfers have dried for at least 24 hours, they can be cut up and used as stickers (A). This way, I can pull from a library of pre-made images to use at the ready in a spontaneous manner. First, I select which transfers I am going to use and arrange them in a composition (B), knowing that whatever images I have chosen are going to print backwards. Then, I put the transfers off to the side so I can start creating the clay form.

Next, I roll out a slab of clay between about $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick and large enough to hold the whole composition (C). Prepare the slab with the use of various serrated and smooth metal ribs. I choose which sticker would be the most captivating in the foreground. This is the one that I put down first, and then add other stickers that will appear to be in back of the ones placed before it. I then paint white slip onto the side of the newsprint with the dried underglaze on it (D). (I like for my slip to be the consistency of thick frosting.) When the slip loses its sheen, I lift the sticker from the table and place it on the slab.

Once the sticker is on the slab, I rub the back of the newsprint with a rib to remove air bubbles and get as much contact as possible between the slip and the clay (E). The background imagery is placed next (F).

Before peeling off the stickers, I trim the slab to its finished shape, flip the slab over and add a coil for the foot, then flip it back over and press the plate into the shape defined by the coil foot. I also use the paper as a resist and apply the underglaze I want to use for the background (G). After the underglaze has lost its sheen, the paper is removed.

With the very fine tip of a knife, I begin to lift the paper until I'm able to grasp it and peel it up. Try to peel as close to the slab as possible, so that if the underglaze is not adhered, it hopefully rolls off the paper and onto the clay (H).

I bisque fire to cone 07–08, then glaze fire to cone 02, using Arbuckle Majolica as a liner glaze and apply a commercial Amaco clear glaze to all underglazed areas. I also use a squeeze bottle to apply colored commercial glazes to accentuate and pump up the color.



A Newsprint underglaze image transfers cut into stickers. **B** Lay out a composition of selected stickers. **C** Roll out, compress, and texture a slab, which will be layered with underglaze stickers and formed into a plate. **D** Apply white slip to the back of the foreground image transfer. The slip will adhere the transfer to the slab. **E, F** After placing the stickers on the slab, rub the back of the newsprint with a rib to remove air bubbles. **G** Cut the slab to its final shape, add a coil foot to the back of the slab, and press the plate into the shape defined by the coil. Add white underglaze to any exposed clay for the background. **H** Remove the newsprint to reveal the image.

calls his “Cirque du So Gay” (his pun on the name of the theater company Cirque du Soleil). He builds narrative and composition by transferring his stickers onto the pots, layering them one by one, then using white slip to make them adhere to the leather-hard, terra-cotta surface. Peeling off the paper (which must be incredibly satisfying), each drawing is revealed, and the pot comes to life. The white slip background gives each object a bit of a halo, which makes the drawings pop. The process is simple and imprecise, adding a sense of spontaneity to the work.

Sourcing Inspiration

Halvorsen’s source material includes Pop Art, graffiti, street art, stained-glass windows, Keith Haring’s paintings and drawings, and tattoo art. They impact his style, choice of color, and creative voice. But his main inspiration are his friends and family. In fact, there are six recurring motifs on his pots that represent six important people in his life, and they are the main characters in his narratives. For example, Halvorsen himself is on stage as a chartreuse and red hyacinth, while his mom is a lotus flower he describes as “pretty and on a pedestal.” His sister is a dragon flower because, he explains, they “don’t always get along,” and his dad is the cornflower, because, Halvorsen describes, he “sways in the wind.” Other characters that make regular appearances are friend and drag queen Misery, who is a big coneflower; his fairy godchild Otto who he says is a “sweet little red flower;” and his best friend Jen, who often appears as a traffic cone.

These are the people that are on his mind when he is layering on his imagery. He is remembering them, telling stories about them, expressing feelings about them. But, of course, people will make up their own stories when they look at his pots. And that is the point. For Halvorsen, humanizing these objects is a form of creative therapy and it makes the work personal for him.

Halvorsen’s work also inherently reflects a sense of place. His pots are Boston, his hometown, him. Finished with a glossy clear glaze and enriched with smatterings of colorful satin matte and mottled low-fire glazes, they are buoys and lobsters from his summers in Gloucester, abundant gardens full of expressive flowers, and in between it all, Boston’s cityscapes, bridges, and streets. They are moments in time, and for Halvorsen a reflection of what kind of world he wants to live in: which he describes as colorful, “in contradiction of the ordinary,” and full of “over-the-top people, places, and things.” I think we can all relate.

Follow Halvorsen’s latest work on Facebook: *Arthur Halvorsen Ceramics*, Instagram *@arthurhalvorsen*, and on his website, www.arthurhalvorsenceramics.com.

the author *Leigh Taylor Mickelson is an artist, writer, curator, and independent consultant working with arts businesses and nonprofits to help them develop and grow. To learn more, visit www.leightaylormickelson.com.*



4 MOM, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, earthenware, slip, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 02. **5** Boston Harbor Buoy, 29 in. (74 cm) in height, earthenware, slip, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 02, 2018. **6** Ambulance Plate, 10 in. (25 cm) in diameter, earthenware, slip, underglaze, glaze, fired to cone 02, 2019.