

A Delicate Balance

PAUL BRIGGS

by Leigh Taylor Mickelson

Paul Briggs makes art the way he lives his life—as if the world matters. From the outside looking in (which these days most often means via social media), you'll see that Briggs is a dedicated ceramic artist and educator with two active bodies of work: abstract, organic, pinch-formed vessels and highly contemplative slab-built sculptures exploring issues around social justice. Without knowing Briggs, if you were to see these two bodies of work side by side, you would not know they were made by the same artist. Clearly,

there is a delicate balance at work. I had to dig deeper, so I sat down with Briggs via Zoom and we talked about his life and work.

Beginning a Journey

Briggs' journey as an artist has been shaped by a myriad of balancing acts. He grew up in the Hudson Valley region of New York and lost his mom when he was just seven years old. Raised by his father, a Baptist pastor, Briggs established an inner spiritual life





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1 *Corolla Bowl*, 15 in. (38 cm) in diameter, stoneware, 2016. 2 *Knots Inside*, 16 in. (41 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, 2019. 3 *Recidivism*, 9½ in. (24 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, 2019. 4 Paul Briggs at St. Olaf College, 2019. Photo: M.P. Brandt.

at a young age, one that is with him still today. Describing himself as “one of those kids who doodled all the time,” Briggs found solace in the meditative qualities of art and fell in love with clay as a freshman in high school. Cradling his passion for both art and spirituality, Briggs “explored the continuum between [the two] for many years while continuing his education.” Ultimately, he earned four degrees over a 30-year period of teaching and learning, with studies in education, research in theology, a PhD in education from Penn State, an MA from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, and finishing with an MFA from the Massachusetts College of Art and Design.

After earning his first degree in art education and ceramics from City College of New York, Briggs was teaching alongside his studio practice. While his first foray into teaching was at the K-12 level, he soon found his niche in higher education and taught at various universities until he returned to where he is now, at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. But there was an interesting sidetrack.

In 2001, Briggs’ journey in clay took a turn. His dad became ill and he went home to help him with his ministry. What he thought would be a brief stint in his father’s shoes became a 10-year career as a pastor. Just as his father’s health was improving, Briggs was invited to speak at a local progressive Baptist church and there, he quickly realized he didn’t have to be the traditional Black Baptist preacher. He got up there and just talked. He quoted Baldwin, Shakespeare, and Rilke, and looking out at the diverse congregation, Briggs

found an unexpected passion for this unorthodox delivery and the ideas that came with it. They asked him to stay, and Briggs agreed. There, he did award-winning work in the community, working with youth groups as well as initiating an interfaith group with a rabbi that brought together community members from Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faiths, along with some unaffiliated with a

faith tradition. All along, though, Briggs nurtured his other passion—clay. “As far as ministry was concerned, clay was the other woman. I was getting invited to exhibitions, pursuing opportunities as a serious artist, and I was living this double life. When people at church would hear about it, they would say, ‘Oh, so clay is your hobby?’ and I would say, ‘No, I’m an artist.’ Psychologically, working as a minister was very challenging. It was draining me. I needed more downtime than the work was giving me. So, after 10 years, I finally left so I could pursue my art and get back to teaching clay.”



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A Nurtured Passion

Briggs soon found himself back on a college campus, teaching ceramics and devoting his time to making art. He might have left the church, but the church did not leave him. “Once a pastor, always a pastor. But I’m spiritual, not religious. I have a devotion to my inner life. In awe of nature and life, I have an inner space and I find it when I am in my studio.”

Learning a bit about Briggs’ inner life was like a light bulb going off when contemplating the dichotomy of his two bodies of work. For Briggs, pinching clay is a form of prayer; more than just something to do to keep him focused while slabs are drying. It is how he connects to his inner self. “My studio is where my spiritual practice lives. It is for the same reason that artmaking is at the forefront of political movements. The *Pussy Hat* is an artifact, for example—an aesthetic expression of the heart. Art making is a spiritual practice and for me making pinch pots is my daily meditation.”

Unattainable Perfection

While he has been pinching clay since 1982, Briggs didn’t really take his pinch pots that seriously until several years later when he didn’t have as much time to make his more time-consuming slab-built work. Briggs shares his thoughts about pinch forming on one of his Instagram posts. It features a video clip titled “no additions, no subtractions,” showing Briggs pinching a vessel from one ball of clay, accompanied by the following text: “Pinching reminds me that the perfection wished for me by traditions, guardians, the deluded, and subsequently longed for by myself, is not attainable. I find completeness and beauty is in the commitment to and acceptance of the process, the journey, the growth.” In these pots, he seeks transcendence, that “unmistakable divine moment of transformation,” and the results are fantastic.

In a very intuitive process, Briggs starts his pinch pots from a ball of clay, forming a simple bowl. Then, pinching on the outside of the thick walls, he forms what look like rows of coils. From these coils, he pinches rows of knobs, which he then forms into leaf-like appendages that twist and turn, sometimes in the same direction, sometimes not. Because they are formed from the original ball of clay and not attached, they take on a lifelike quality, as if they grew there. For these works, “only the process matters,” Briggs states. “What comes out looks like nature, so I looked at nature. It is the transitions in the pinched work that are important. Like the transitions on a cuttle fish—the stripes dissipate and become dots and the transition is seamless. I look to nature to inform these transitions because nature leaves no area unconsidered.” Recently, Briggs also looked at Jomon vessels to inspire form and took inspiration from the Golden Mean philosophy to inform structure and balance, which resulted in the *Wildflower* and *Wild Style* series. A what-if approach makes every pinched form a new challenge, and in this meditative state, he enjoys the flow and the result.

Finding Inspiration and Compassion

While the pinched work is Briggs’ meditative practice, the contemplative slab work represents his compassion. “I consider myself a slab builder. The slab work is what I am philosophizing about, the things I think about.” In 2017, Briggs watched *13th*, an incredibly compelling documentary that gives an in-depth look at the prison system in the US and how it reveals the nation’s historical racial judicial inequality. Then he read Michelle Alexander’s book *The New Jim Crow*, and then the article in *The New Yorker*, “Angola Prison and the Shadow of Slavery.” Briggs remarked, “It lit a fire in me. It had been building since 2014, when I went back for my MFA at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement.”

Soon, Briggs’ series *Cell Personae* emerged, consisting of 25 small 6x8-inch slab-built pieces. “People who are incarcerated don’t get to perform a persona.

They have a cell persona. When I was a pastor, I saw it firsthand. A young man made a foolish mistake that got himself in trouble. He's a good family man. He ended up on probation for 10 years. Once you're touched by that system, you are never free from it." Using a language of bars, walls, blackness, and a dialectic between inside and outside, the small shadowboxes tell a narrative of strife and pain, a life tied up in knots. Briggs chose to make 25 in the series because the US has 4% of the world's population, but 25% of the world's prisoners. Briggs states, "Michelle Alexander's book pulls the cover off of everything. She didn't clean it up for liberals or conservatives. So, these pieces are a combination of loose and tight. I am purposefully not cleaning up my edges, not hiding anything."

Briggs' subsequent series, *Pain*, is an extension of the *Cell Personae* work and is about Black pain. Half-cylinder vessels with flat backs, they are slab-built and embellished with coils that puncture and push in through the vessels, and tie in knots. The coils violate the pristine slabs and change them forever. "There is less of an emphasis on the inside, and more on the forces of the outside; how the world is impacting the inside. Because we only look like we are not hurting. These vessels are pierced by pain. But they are still strong structures—the knots are holding them together. We all have knots." What's going on the world is personal to Briggs. COVID-19 took his father, aunt, cousin, and sister-in-law. "With COVID, the Black Lives Matter uprising, the political climate—watching the world wake up from history, I can't just pinch pots, even though I'd like to. I am looking for a fluency with the material. But being in pain, making work about pain is painful, and it's not sustainable for me."

Briggs' two bodies of work are separate, but together they are what creates a delicate balance in his life. One does not exist without the other. "Which came first?" I asked Briggs. His answer: "It's the egg of the contemplative practice or the chicken of compassion. I'm more intuitive than measured and planned, but I can't not do this work. It matters. But the question I'm asking myself is how long I can do this work." Whether or not a tipping point is ahead is hard to say. In a world with so much uncertainty in front of us, balance is something we are all trying to achieve or maintain in our lives. Whether we are speaking up and out or not, we can all take a cue from Paul Briggs and just start pinching.

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. Visit her website at www.leightaylor-mickelson.com to learn more.*



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5 *Mercutio (Pain Series)*, 15 in. (38 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, 2019. 6 *Untitled*, 9 in. (23 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, 2020. 7 *Industrial Complex*, 9 in. (23 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, 2020. 8 *Calyx Krater*, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, 2015. 9 *Double Cuttle*, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, 2011. 10 *Wildflower (Jomon Style)*, 9½ in. (24 cm) in height, stoneware, glaze, 2020.

Pedestal-Foot Vase by Paul Briggs

I begin by making a sphere, but then flatten one side to create a mound, as if I was preparing to center it on the wheel (1). The primary difference in my approach to pinch forming is the start; I pinch into the center of a circle not a sphere. In the images, I am using a little less than 2 pounds of clay. For beginners of this process, I recommend 1 pound or even ½ pound.

To begin opening the pot, pinch into the center of the circle, pinching to the bottom, and stopping short about ¼ inch from the bottom. Then, begin pinching/pulling the clay upward (2). I have found hand turning the clay while pinching upward, overlapping every pinch, and forming a spiral pattern to be a great pinching method (3, 4).

Periodically moisten the lip and compress it onto a flat surface (5). Continue to move the clay toward the lip by pinching and hand turning. **Note:** The form is not set on the bottom (trimmed) until nearly pulled and pinched up. Although it is not necessary and can add another challenge, when preparing the bottom to pinch a foot, I leave ½ inch of clay to pinch from this end as well.

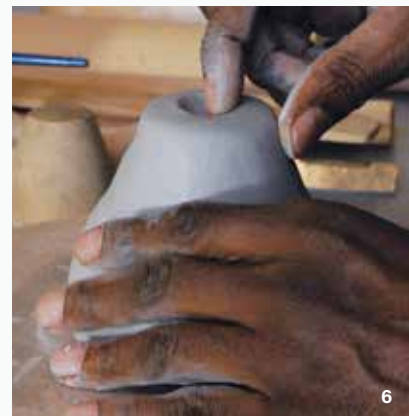
If forming a foot, pinch down into the ½ inch of clay left at the bottom at the beginning of the process (6).

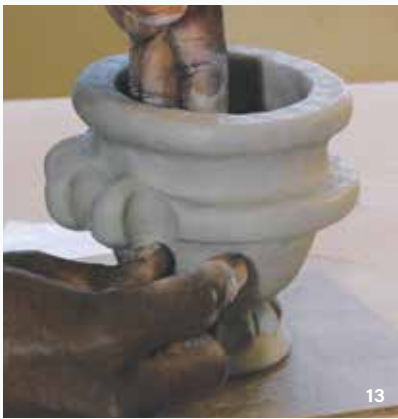
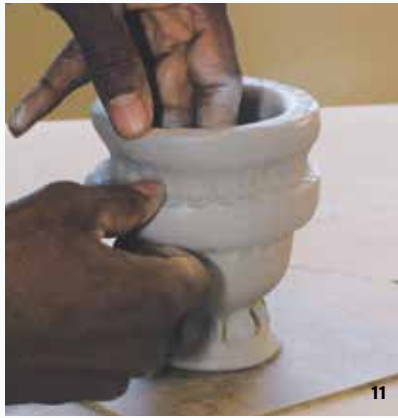
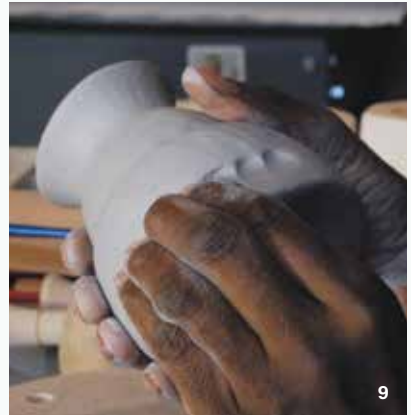
Start the foot by slowly pinching out from the center (7). Pinch down about ¼ inch, forming the foot to the desired silhouette (8). After forming the foot, continue to thin/pinch the walls, moving clay toward the lip (9).

On the way up, skip over a thick section of clay, leaving a ring of clay and continue pinching toward the lip. On a large form, several rings can be created (10). Compress the lip and moisten the ring of clay.

Use a hair dryer or heat gun to stiffen the foot enough to finally flip the piece right side up. With the heat gun, this takes about 1–2 minutes while turning the piece. Once the piece is flipped, I often stiffen it a bit more on the inside with the heat gun for about two minutes and re-moisten the lip with a brush.

Expand the ring around the pot, thinning the walls between the rings (11). Make sure to expand and compress the lip (12). Apply moisture one last time to all sides of the clay ring. Pinch knobs into the ring using the side of the fingers supporting the clay from the inside (13). Pinch the knobs into a desired form (14). Continue pinching any additional rings or the lip into knobs, which can be shaped in a variety of ways (15, 16). When complete, allow the piece to slowly dry.





17 Blossom with Pedestal Foot, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, pinch-formed mid-range PSH #519 stoneware, Vari-egated Green (Varigreen) glaze.