

Place, Pockets, and Possibilities

The Work of Meredith Brickell

by Katey Schultz



As a beginning potter, Meredith Brickell focused on the most direct function of ceramics, making a variety of wares for preparing and presenting food. But after she finished the Penland Core Fellowship Program in 2002, and completed her MFA at University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 2005, her subject matter evolved drastically. "At Penland, I was living in a rural landscape for the first time in 10 years. That kind of place has always been a powerful influence and it began to affect how and why I was making work," Brickell says. Later, living in an industrial, working-class neighborhood in Raleigh, North Carolina, she felt likewise struck by her surroundings. She wondered: In what ways does place influence human behavior? How can that be captured visually? Tangibly?

Double Catch (2007) is a large, two-basin vessel that hints at the changes that were to come for Brickell. Using her signature

palette of orange-hued pinks, soft ivories, grays, yellows, and blues, the surface design of this piece abstractly suggests land and water forms. The gentle color scheme implies a mood of comfort and cheerfulness, while the form itself appears ready to hold and balance something precious. Around the time Brickell made this series of vessels including *Double Catch*, she attended several lectures by art historian Terry Smith at the National Humanities Center in Durham, North Carolina. "He was talking about artists who were working in ways that were very interconnected with various segments of society, which confirmed my already shifting views about how I wanted to approach my work," Brickell says. "I felt like this new approach would allow me [to] take more risks with my work, try new forms, and engage more people and places."

1 *Poultice*, 8 in. (20 cm) in width, apple, milkweed, clover, mulberry, cherry, bentonite clay, 2012. Poultices are commonly made with herbs and clay and used for treating overworked legs of horses to reduce pain and swelling. The transformation of ordinary plant materials into something unrecognizable (poultice) and then into a new, recognizable form (tools), speaks to the way places, and our relationship to them, are constantly in flux.

In order to do this, Brickell would have to break through the molds of her solo studio practice and pay attention to new influences. This meant she had to willingly challenge her own best practices. As it turns out, this process of connecting to the familiar, then disconnecting from it, remains a key element in Brickell's evolution as an artist.

Over the next three years, she participated in residencies or collaborations at Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts in Newcastle, Maine, the International Ceramic Research Center in Guldagergaard, Denmark, and Threewalls in Chicago, Illinois. Determined to make more accessible work that engaged a diversity of people and places, Brickell discovered that a research-based approach helped her think outside the box. "Working with other artists and the general public can add layers to the work that I would otherwise miss due to the limitations of my own perspective," Brickell says. One project that achieved this perspective was a collaboration Brickell completed in 2010 with artist Ann Bartges at Threewalls. *Free Samples* (2010) looked at the city of Chicago's relationship to water. "We chose a topic that we were interested in, but that neither of us was personally connected to and we decided to make work without the tools and materials we were most familiar with," Brickell says. Using water, plastic bags, pegboard, and hooks to reference a store display, the collaboration portrayed four bodies of water as free samples for viewers to choose from: Lake Michigan, the Chicago River, the Sanitary and Ship Canal, and the public utility tap water supply contained in pipes throughout the city.



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2 *Double Catch*, 29 in. (74 cm) in length, earthenware, 2007.

3 *Dig*, 5 ft 3 in. (1.6 m) in height, earthenware clay, terra sigillata, patina, 2012. *Photo: Michelle Pemberton*. This representation of a shovel refers to the disruption of the landscape that occurred when Brickell removed dirt from the pasture where the barn at her childhood home once stood. *Dig* also becomes an object of the earth itself, as if it were made of the same soil that was excavated from the site. And as an artifact, it speaks to our desire to reveal and interpret the past through the unearthing and "reading" of objects.

4–5 *Palimpsest*, 4 ft. 8 in. (1.4 m) in height, plaster, soil, and paint, 2012. *Photo: Michelle Pemberton*. Each member of Brickell's immediate family is represented by his or her hands—one hand holds soil that has been dug from the site of the barn fire, the other reveals a stain from soil previously held in the hand. This juxtaposition represents what was lost in the fire, as well as the literal and metaphorical residue that remains.

But why bother visiting archives, touring water treatment facilities, and interviewing city residents? For Brickell, it's not necessarily the medium being used but the approach to that medium—whether it means working with plastic bags or earthenware, people or porcelain. “I like that clay can be approached in a very spontaneous way, allowing the malleable material to respond directly to touch. In that early stage, ceramics allows me to be impulsive and intuitive,” Brickell says. “Then, I have to deal with the many stages of drying, refining, firing, surface treatment, etc. and most of those steps are not usually very spontaneous.” Working with clay provided Brickell with a foundation that “cultivates a balance of play (brainstorming, sketching, and making maquettes) and work (testing materials, refinement, and execution).” In the case of the *Free Samples* collaboration, Brickell deepened her understanding of place and influence by observing which water samples residents chose to take, and which they left behind.

Brickell calls her most recent explorations “place portraits.” Like *Free Samples*, these works also rely on research, combined with the artist's imaginative interpretation of each space. *Stack* (2012)—which was on view during the 2013 conference for the National Council on

Education for the Ceramic Arts Council (NCECA), held in Houston, Texas—uses local clay, palettes, and milk paint to look at issues of impermanence. From afar, the piece looks like a solid formation of bricks on location at the former site of a brick factory at Watershed Center for Ceramic Arts. But up close, it's easy to see that each “brick” is hollow.

Likewise, *Poultice* (2012) is part of a themed series titled *12201 Howard Lodge Drive*, named for Brickell's childhood home in rural Maryland. Using apples, milkweed, clover, mulberries, and cherries from the land, the artist mixed a poultice with bentonite clay. The environment and its plant life bear special significance to Brickell, who, at age thirteen, witnessed a devastating barn fire that killed all of her family's horses and, as she describes, “dramatically changed my relationship to this farm and to landscape in general. Watching the scars on the ground fade over time from this emotionally charged landscape has informed my interest in place, in particular, its relationship to history, memory, and the visible and invisible effects of time.” She wanted to capture the sense of loss, history, memory, and life associated with a single place and chose to form the poultice—a medium also commonly used for treating overworked legs of horses—into simple tools. The result is a brightly colored arrangement of spoons, bowls, and pestles that look at once like artifacts, objects to admire, and tools for everyday use. Their texture and color are jarring compared to archetypal, factory-made, porcelain tools of the same shape and style, making it impossible not to wonder about the story within each of Brickell's unique objects.

It's easy to see Brickell has found her life's passion, but what's not so immediate is in what form her new work will appear. As a full-time assistant professor at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, she is constantly balancing her studio practice with her commitment to her students. Her department supports its faculty members as they create new work—in the studio, in the surrounding community, and in the broader arts world. Brickell has already started a collaboration with the public called *Pocket Project*, which involves trading porcelain castings of clothing pockets for drawings of the things people at a local flea market carry in their pockets. A pocket can be a very private environment that we carry with us in public at all times, Brickell



6–8 *Pocket Project*, pockets cast with porcelain clay (sizes variable) and drawings on paper, 2012 (ongoing).

9–10 Chicago tap water, Sanitary and Ship Canal water, Lake Michigan water, plastic bags, pegboard, pegboard hooks, 2010.



11 *Stack*, 30 in. (76 cm) in length, Watershed clay, palette, milk paint, 2012. *Photo: Michelle Pemberton.* *Stack* employs the language of bricks—heavy, obtusely functional objects that are indistinct and designed to operate in large quantities—as a way to address issues of im/permanence. These “drawings” of bricks create an illusion of structure; the stack appears solid from the side, but as the viewer approaches, the interior’s negative space is revealed. This piece was made at Watershed Center for Ceramic Arts in response to the history of “The Factory,” the building that is currently used as the artists’ studio for the residency program. Originally constructed as chicken barn in the 1940s, the building was cut in half and relocated to another area of the property to serve as a brick factory before eventually becoming the ceramics studio in the 1980s. This reassignment of function, and even the relocation of the building, is not uncommon—places are constantly changing. These bricks were temporarily installed on the concrete foundation where the building originally stood—just past the pigpen on Straw’s farm—as a way to establish a link between the original and current site of the building and its various functions over time.

12 *Construct*, 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (12 cm) in length, bentonite clay mixed with mulberry, purple cone flower, yellow ox-eyed daisy, chicory, buckhorn plantain, wild strawberry, purple clover, dandelion silk, red lily, bindweed or rose petal, 2013.

explains in a statement about the work. It’s the ultimate intersection of boundaries, with deeply rooted behavioral and cultural expectations upheld by a simple veil of fabric. Pockets carry secrets, identities, objects, and remnants. They are accessible and in plain view, yet their greatest work is done by containing and hiding.

While Brickell insists she is still in the exploratory stage with her work, closer consideration of the *Pocket Project* suggests she is once again moving away from what has become familiar, and opening up to the next, new influence. Where Brickell once wondered about the influence of place on human behavior, *Pocket Project* considers the flip side. What does our use of these individual, customized environments say about what we are willing to risk sharing? What does it leave unanswered? Eventually, the amassed drawings of people’s

pockets from the flea market will be displayed with a series of cast pockets. The final arrangement and response should be quite telling.

Meredith Brickell holds a Bachelor of Art and Design from North Carolina State University and an MFA from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She exhibits her work internationally. Her work can be seen from December 6 through February 3, 2014, in “Double Vision”, a group exhibition at the Indianapolis Art Center. Learn more at mbrickell.com.

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