

This Quiet Dust

by Dubhe Carreño

Dancer, ceramics student, entrepreneur, art dealer, curator, teacher, mom, practicing artist.

Change is the core of growth. Recognizing that every career change, every professional and personal role I have played in my life, has enriched and informed the next path, has allowed me not to fear change, but to embrace it. I observe the fluidity in which clay can be transformed, each of its stages needs to happen in order for the next to work. Like clay, we need to allow change in order

to be transformed into new shapes bringing past experiences and accumulated knowledge with us.

A Passion for Dance and an Introduction to Clay

I will never forget the moment I discovered clay. I was 16 years old, studying ballet and living in Venezuela, and by chance, I ended up getting a ride from someone who was a ceramic artist. She casually showed me her studio and as I entered the room I felt



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I entered a magical space. There were pieces everywhere, some cups and functional work and some sculptures of musicians. I was amazed by the fact that she made these objects; it was fantastic. Although my passion was dance, a seed was planted that day. I immediately bought myself some clay. I had no clue of kilns, firings and glazes, or anything, but wanted to touch this amazing, pliable material. So anytime a friend visited I made them make a two-inch clay head. I ended up with a hilarious collection of characters. Later on my mom analyzed (as only she can) each one, describing the personalities and Freudian psycho-sexual idiosyncrasies of each of my friends. I was a bit surprised how right on target she was, but as a true teenager, I did not admit that to her, of course.

At the advanced age of 18 I felt too old to become a prima ballerina. Ballet was like running a marathon for me, always trying to catch up, since I only started dancing at 13 years old, which is considered too late to begin if you intend to pursue a career in dance. I was not feeling accomplished enough and ballet became a source of unhappiness and frustration for me. However, ballet is the discipline that formed my character and sensibility as an artist. I love the fact that dance is completely transparent. Your dance cannot be made to look better than it is, your hard work and true presence is there in front of the audience, no time for edits or after-



1 *This Quiet Dust Dinnerware Collection*, 13½ in. (34 cm) in diameter, glaze, fired to cone 6 in oxidation. 2 Dubhe Carreño Gallery's first space in Pilsen, Chicago, solo exhibition of works by Dennis Lee Mitchell, "Source," 2006. 3 Dubhe Carreño at Ballet Theater of Boston, 1994. 4 Carreño at her home holding her *Cloud Mug*, 4 in. (10 cm) in height, porcelain, moss glaze, fired to cone 6 in oxidation.



the-fact fixes. This ingrained knowledge was naturally brought in when I started working with clay. I understood the need to dedicate time to build muscle memory by working long hours to tackle this new medium, as I did in dance, but I was not too old!

The Influence of Dance on Ceramic Work

The moment I thought for the first time, "I may not be a dancer after all," that magical thing called clay I discovered that day, the seed that got planted, came to forefront of my mind. I was already in the US continuing my ballet training and I enrolled at Massachusetts College of Art (MassArt). I absolutely loved the program at MassArt and continued on to get my MFA at the School of the

Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). The influence of dance was very important in the body of work that I developed in school; I was making figurative sculpture using the fragmented body to examine gesture and movement.

Learning the Gallery Business and Addressing a Community Need

While getting my MFA at SAIC, I worked at a gallery both part-time and full time, and enjoyed every part of the gallery business, from developing relationships in the Chicago art community to writing press releases and installing exhibitions at the gallery and at shows like SOFA. As a graduate student and ceramic artist, I noticed that there was not much support in Chicago for ceramics. Where would my peers and I show work after we graduated? What opportunities existed for artists working with clay? This quest pushed me to transition from art student to entrepreneur, curator, and art dealer. Having experienced the art business by working at a gallery for five years before I opened mine was essential to prepare me for this new adventure.

My goal was to create a platform dedicated to contemporary ceramics that illustrated the diversity of concepts being explored by many contemporary artists, and to reflect the ongoing development and interdisciplinary participation within the field. Also, I wanted to be in the presence of these outstanding and beautiful works that other established ceramic artists were making. Curating and creating beautiful exhibitions was my creative outlet. Although arduous, the gallery business was very rewarding. My first gallery space was in the Pilsen area of Chicago where I lived in a commercial loft, having my living quarters in the back and top loft and the gallery in the front. I used my living room to show collectors that ceramics and sculpture didn't need a pedestal or a glass case. I lived in the gallery and absolutely loved it. I remember setting up a show by Dennis Lee Mitchell, and sitting down on the floor after just having finished installing at around midnight.

I enjoyed that private moment of contemplation, not needing an audience to witness and feeling exhausted but so inspired and fulfilled to have had the opportunity to create a space filled with such beautiful work.

In 2009, I moved the gallery to the West Loop, a more established gallery area of Chicago. I decided to widen the scope of the gallery to incorporate artists working in other media with the intention of not isolating ceramic artists. I wanted my stable of ceramic artists to be recognized and shown as artists who happen to choose clay because they consider the meaning it brings to their work. Artists like Roxanne Jackson use clay when the works calls for it and metal and leather and paint or found objects when that is what the work needs. I brought in non-ceramic artists like Joan Winter whose work was inspired by the inherent characteristics of materials like wood and resin. Her two-dimensional works were full of sculptural qualities and movement; the overall sensibility of her work resonated with that of the ceramic artists in the gallery.

Shifting to the Studio

Although I loved the gallery business, and feel very proud of the run of the gallery, almost at its 10 year mark I decided to close the space and begin another chapter of my life. I was pregnant with my first son Julian (Micah came two years later), and knew it would not be possible to run this gallery without my full undivided attention. I embraced this change as an opportunity to claim my own studio practice, bringing with me an invaluable set of skills. It took me a few years to reestablish my technique and develop my own aesthetic. It was intimidating to move from the dealer side to the artist side of the field. As an art dealer, I was in the presence of greatness, I knew what good work looked like, but my skills were rusty and I needed time to refine and develop my craftsmanship in the studio.

As I continued to polish my skills and develop as an artist and designer, I formed This Quiet Dust Ceramics—a ceramic



5 Creamer and sugar bowl, 5 in. (13 cm) in width, porcelain, fired at cone 6 in oxidation. 6 Serving platter with dip bowl, *Mineral Collection*, 13½ in. (34 cm) in diameter, 2017. 7 This Quiet Dust Ceramics exhibition at “The Space” Kevin Reilly Showroom, 2015.

studio dedicated to creating functional porcelain tableware. I love the utilitarian nature of my work and strongly believe in being surrounded by beautiful handmade objects that enhance your everyday experience.

As I develop as a studio artist, I reflect on my previous experiences—the strict discipline of dance as well as the precise notion of stillness and motion (body positions and movement); the delicate relationship between anticipation, tension, rhythm, quietness, and movement needed to create a very specific aesthetic; and the way that every line and contour delivers a very precise expression. The same thing is true when I am in the studio making tableware. The minimal change of direction of the contour of a bowl delivers a different expression, every subtle movement in any direction contributes to delivering an expression of an idea.

There is also the understanding that craftsmanship comes from many hours of work, from the familiarity that your hands acquire from the constant contact with the material, knowing its behavior and its habits or tendencies. Your relationship with it becomes one of understanding—when to apply pressure, when to release, when to be forceful or delicate; you only learn that with time and patience. In terms of technique and craftsmanship I think ceramics is similar to dance. You can't hide lack of technique, it is transparent, beauty reveals itself after the roughness is polished. This is not to say it can't be rustic, but only time trains your eye to distinguish the difference between deliberate spontaneity of a skillful touch and heavy-handed roughness.

Process and clay are my main inspiration. I love clay's inherent nature and the way it, (like us) is always changing, even if you are not touching it. My relationship with clay and the way I understand its nature is almost a microcosm of how I relate to my family, people, and the world around me. You need to really know its behavior to begin a fair dialog with it. Clay teaches me to listen, to be patient, to spend time doing a job right, to be present minded and to observe myself, to not judge too quickly, to accept, and to not be attached. I am inspired by process, which is led by clay itself and its natural ability to be altered and transformed by forces ranging from a delicate pinch to a blasting fire. My artistic practice is an extension of my personal growth. The meditative quality of working in the studio brings me closer to present-mindedness and to a place where intention materializes in front of my eyes. Nature and simplicity inspire me. The perfect but often asymmetrical forms in nature are important driving forces in my work. I look to develop glazes that remind me of rocks, bark, moss, and earth and combine them with forms that are not necessarily round. They own their dance and as a group they have movement and harmony.

Chapters of a Rich Life

It has been really important to consider major life and career changes as chapters of a rich life. I questioned myself, whenever a change was upon me, am I quitting? But life has showed me that recognizing that you need to change and move organically to the next adventure is a gift. You carry with you all lessons learned. I am so grateful I danced so I can understand how to know clay better, and I needed to know clay better, in order to become an art dealer, and I needed



to know how to cultivate a business running my gallery to discover my own practice, I needed to develop my own practice to become a better teacher. Any life experience and career brings something important to the table and, more importantly, it brings a unique perspective. Coming from another career path deepens the way you look at things, and that offers benefits to you and your audience.

We have to allow change to be able to grow and be transformed by our experiences. Humans share that transformative nature with clay. That is why I chose the name for my business, it is a poem by Emily Dickinson that talks about what “this quiet dust” used to be. Dickinson wrote:

*“This quiet dust was gentlemen and ladies
And lads and girls;
Was laughter and ability and sighing,
And frocks and curls;
This passive place a summer’s nimble mansion,
Where bloom and bees
Fulfilled their oriental circuit,
Then ceased like these.”*

the author *Dubhe Carreño is originally from Venezuela. She received her MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is now a ceramics instructor at Northeastern Illinois University, and founded This Quiet Dust Ceramics in 2013. Dubhe has her home and studio in Northbrook, Illinois. To see more, check out www.thisquietdustceramics.com.*