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‘Stillness and Occurrence’

Beckelman art exhibition on view during pandemic.

By Diana Nollen, The Gazette
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“If you want to pare phenomena down, all there would be are stillness and occurrence: space, and that which is continually born out of space, and returns into space — stillness and occurrence.” From “The Wisdom of No Escape,” by Pema Chodron.

Clay is his medium, but the world at large is John Beckelman’s visual and visceral playground.

And when he retired in 2015, after 37 years of teaching art at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, he suddenly had more time to focus on his own experimentations combining clay with metals, wood, glass, Plexiglass, paint, pigment and concrete.

A collection of his recent works is on view through June 13 at the Gilded Pear Gallery in downtown Cedar Rapids. But with the COVID-19 pandemic, viewing it is by appointment or by virtual tour at Gildedpeargallery.com.

Titled “Stillness and Occurrence,” it features a mix of non-traditional clay sculptures, from stand-alone vessels to 3D works that hang on a wall, merging nature’s elements.

On the gallery’s exhibition page, he explains: “All of the work attempts to gently entice the viewer into the inner landscapes and interior spaces of our imagination and memory. There is for me a curious intersection between the seemingly enduring and timeless character of earth (clay) and the fleeting, yet wonderful, impermanence of phenomena in the world in which we live. “While I often use a number of different materials in my work, clay is the material that most informs the things that I make. Having worked with clay, in a variety of forms and formats — and in all its varied physical states — for over forty years now, I find the elemental character and expressive potential of clay endlessly intriguing.”

PERSONAL PATH

Born in Orange, N.J., in 1949, Beckelman’s fascination with clay began with Play-Doh, and its companion “pumpers” that, when packed with the colorful childhood modeling compound, would churn out various shapes. It would be a couple more decades before he would mold that 3D sculpting interest into a profession.

Beckelman, now 71, said he always loved working with his hands, and took a couple of drawing and painting classes in high school. “But at home, I worked on my own for fun in the basement, working with three-dimensional materials, building things,” he said.

He followed an entirely different path at Hobart College in Geneva, N.Y., graduating in 1972.

“I came from a family who thought it was important to develop skills for a respectable career,” he said with a laugh. He did take a couple of art classes in college, “but they were just perfunctory,” he added, to fulfill some requirements. Instead, he majored in English and minored in philosophy — two academic areas that resonated with him.

“In the end, those two things have served me well in my artwork,” he said. “I have no regrets about that.

“To complete the circle, after I graduated, there was a period of time when I did some traveling with a young woman who would become my wife, Marsha. We both came to the conclusion that we would like to get involved in the arts.”

He was interested in ceramics, and she wanted to pursue weaving and fabric arts, but with no undergraduate experience in either field, they sought out apprenticeships at a small arts and crafts school.

In 1974, they found their niche at the Thousand Islands Museum Craft School on the St. Lawrence River in upstate New York. As an apprentice in the ceramics studio, Beckelman was introduced to clay processes and materials, as well as sweeping the floors, mixing the clay, firing the kilns and, eventually, teaching children’s classes. To support themselves, the couple worked at a restaurant just down the street.

“It was a wonderful time — we both loved it,” he said. “We had great friends there and great experiences.”

At night, he read ceramics textbooks, and soon realized he would need to go to graduate school to further his pursuits.

He studied ceramics at Illinois State University in Normal, Ill., earning a master’s degree in 1977 and an MFA in 1978. That same year, he joined the faculty at Coe College, where he would spend his teaching career, also chairing the art department from 1982 to 2004.

“I originally went into teaching with the idea that it would provide an opportunity to continue with my artwork,” he said. “But oddly and not so oddly, I really found I enjoyed the process of teaching, and I enjoyed working with the students and being in the presence of something else. I found it stimulating for me personally, and for my artwork, itself.”

During those years, he didn’t have a dedicated studio of his own at Coe or in his Cedar Rapids home. Now that he’s retired, he rents his own space from the Iowa Ceramics Center and Glass Studio in the Cherry Building in southeast Cedar Rapids. He’s served on the board there since the center opened in 2009, and values that strong relationship, as well as the freedom of having his own workspace.

“It’s wonderful, since I stopped teaching, being able to establish a regular studio practice where I can go in on a daily basis, leave stuff out and come back to it the next day,” he said. “It’s been terrific — I haven’t skipped a beat in terms of making work.”

Or in showing his work.

EXHIBITS

Just looking back 20 years, Beckelman’s art has been earning accolades and awards in museum and gallery exhibitions around the Midwest, coast to coast and even in France. But his current exhibition at the local Gilded Pear Gallery marks the first time he’s had a solo show online.

It went on view April 17, in the midst of the COVID-19 lockdown.

“We debated whether to go ahead with the show,” he said. “I think the gallery has come to terms with having to work in this environment, and has done a really good job with trying to create a robust online presence.

“The whole thing is kind of an experiment, and we’ll see how it goes,” he added.

Even the artist’s reception this past Friday was online, with Beckelman joined by gallery owner Suzy McGrane-Hop and gallery director Lauren Tucci walking through the gallery, fielding questions and discussing the pieces.

“I have mixed feelings, to be honest,” he said of this manner of presentation. “The work is in many ways so physical in nature that I think it’s best understood and appreciated if you can really see it and walk around and even touch it,” he explained. “I’m somewhat sorry that can’t happen at an opening where there might be 45 or 50 people, and people can walk around and we can all talk. We have to make do with the situation.”

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John Beckelman



C.R. artist Virtual exhibit

“Stillness and Occurrence,” a solo exhibition by ceramics artist John Beckelman of Cedar Rapids, is on view by appointment or online through June 13 at the Gilded Pear Gallery in downtown Cedar Rapids. The collection features stand-alone vessels and wall-mounted pieces based in clay, but mixed with elements from metal and wood to glass and pigments. His vision explores “a space between two other spaces. It’s a place where advance formations take place,” he said. “I think of that space as very energetic. A lot is happening when the forces come together from the sky and the land — at the same time, very tranquil. They seem to coexist in an interesting visual dynamic — an emotional dynamic.” (Gilded Pear Gallery)

