

## **An Interview with MARK CHATTERLEY**

Interviewed by Brigitte Micmacker, Co-Owner of Sculpturesite Gallery



Brigitte Micmacker: Mark, you have been making life-size figurative works in clay for close to thirty years now. What was the impetus for moving in this direction?

**Mark Chatterley:** I didn't realize it has been so long, it seems like I am just starting working on the figure. I started out my career by making vessels, but they soon got boring, everything was round or distorted round. I came to think of the pots as human forms. The names you use to describe a vessel are human: lip, foot, belly, neck, shoulder. So I decided to go right to the figure and take the functional quality out of the work. The ancient Greeks postulated that Man is the measure of all things. So I set out to understand the human condition. Proportions, relationships, survival.

BM: You built your own walk-in kiln, which you fill with many works and fire every three months. Did you adapt your work method to this huge kiln, or did you build the kiln to match your natural work rhythms?

**MC:** My kiln is 700 cubic feet, 8 feet high by 9 feet wide by 10 feet long. I like that I can walk right into the kiln to load the work. The reason I built such a big kiln was that I wanted to work big but did not want to fire the works in parts. I found the seams to be visually distracting. I thought I would never build anything bigger than this kiln. The second time I fired it, I had to dig the floor out to get the work in. I fire a body of work around every 3 months. I build non stop 6-7 days a week to fill the kiln. Then I bisque fire, next the work comes out and I glaze for 2 weeks, and re-fire.

BM: So do you build your clay sculptures using slabs or wide coils?

**MC: I use slabs, 5/8 inches thick by 8 inches wide. I have a slab roller that can roll 50 pounds of clay flat at a time.**

BM: How do they hold up while they are drying?

**MC: I work 8 inches a day on each sculpture, with as many as 12 sculptures going on at one time. I let the clay stiffen up each day so it will support the clay of the next layer. The one problem working this way is I can't go back and work on the bottom once I reach the top, for it will be dry on the bottom and wet on top. On skinny, tall work I use cement blocks on the outside to support the work as I build. I do drawings for each piece before I start so I know where I am going with the sculpture as I am working.**

BM: I understand that you have developed your own clay body that is mixed especially for you. Are you after a certain workability, or strength for the finished sculptures when you determine the properties you want in a clay body?

**MC: Clay is such a great material to work with. You can make anything with it. But one problem is in green ware the pieces are fragile, so I add materials to the clay body to give it strength at that stage of work. Another problem is when you fire the work to vitrification, there is a lot of shrinkage. So I add material to help with that. The work still shrinks 10%. Some materials are Kyanite, mullite, grog, different clays from around the country.**

BM: About how much clay do you go through in a year?

**MC: 18,000 pounds.**

BM: You mentioned in an interview in Ceramics Monthly that your favorite part of what you do is the building of the figures, and that the glazing is not as exciting to you. As a gallerist who has sold quite a number of your works, I would say that your unique use of glazes is actually a very important part of the appeal for your work. How did you come about your particular "recipe" for what you call the "lava glazes" with the distinctive craters and flowing details?

**MC: I realized early on that I didn't want to use a typical shiny glaze on the work. The Netsler's were a husband and wife potter team in the 50s that used an interesting texture glaze. So I set out to see if I could get an interesting texture of my own. It took several years with lots of experimenting to where I am today. Now I am playing with the bubble size with different chemicals – bone ash and silicon carbide, to name a few. But it is not an exact science. Atmosphere in the kiln, weather outside, how thick I apply the glaze, all affect the results. It is always exciting for me to open the kiln after the glaze fire to see what is in there. The one nice thing that I discovered by working this way is I can load the kiln so the pieces touch each other, Supporting each other so they don't melt down. When I open the kiln I take a hammer and chisel and separate them. Giving them another added texture. This is something that was told to me not to do when I went to school. Maybe that is why I work this way. Maybe the one reason I don't like glazing as much as building the sculptures is when I apply the glaze all the**

**different colors look the same, a dull gray. I have to imagine what it will look like after it is fired.**

BM: Your sculptures have a primordial presence that transcends time and geography. Viewers sense a deep connection to mythology and philosophical anthropology in your work. Have you studied or developed a personal interest in either field of study?

**MC: I have an interest in past cultures and how my work will be viewed 100 years from now. I am also interested in world religions, past and present, and how artwork conveys these belief systems. I am currently thinking of art as instinct and how it affects our everyday lives and how it was used for survival and passed down through the generations.**

BM: Your large groupings are extraordinary! Some evoke circus feats, while others seem to have sexual overtones. There are often recognizable yoga positions. How do you get the inspiration for these compositions?

**MC: I do a little yoga and try to keep somewhat fit, understanding how my body works so I can translate it into clay. I do a lot of drawing to get an idea of where I want to go with group figures, what I want to say. Sometime this includes sexual overtones or psychological situations. On the stacked groupings, I start with one figure on the bottom, then I build on top using the figure underneath to support the upper figures. I have to build them so they can come apart as individual figures and I can move them to the kiln. For the glaze firing, I fire them in the group. That way they shrink and warp as one piece.**

BM: What other sculptors' works do you admire most?

**MC: I like looking at Anthony Gormley, Robert Brady, Isamu Noguchi, Louise Bourgeois, Martin Puryear, Lee Bontecou, but I also like looking at two-dimensional artists' work like Robert Parke Harrison and Paul Wunderlich.**

BM: You have taught many workshops and classes. What is your favorite aspect of teaching?

**MC: It keeps me on my toes mentally. I have to figure out why I do things so I can teach it to students. It also forces me to learn something new. I have been teaching an advanced ceramic course for years, and there is a core group of students who have been taking the class from me year after year. I thought that I had told them everything that I knew the first year, so coming up with something new is a challenge. And I like to think that I take the same challenge of always coming up with something new with my work.**

BM: Thank you, Mark.