

‘The Sound of Earth’

BCC exhibition explores the work of ceramic instrument artists

By Jaime Ferris — January 26, 2006

It seems only natural for music to possess dual aesthetic appeals. Acoustically, a string-led symphony can carry the listener away, the tones of clarinets and oboes offering a woody counterpoint, while the brass section adds a dominant refrain. Visually, instruments can be just as stunning, crafted from wood, metal and hide in forms that range from the sinuous curves of violins to the elongated bodies of flutes and piccolos.

Wood and metal are classic materials for musical instruments, but musicians and non-musicians alike may change their tune about what materials can be used to make them when viewing "The Sound of Earth: Ceramic Musical Instruments," an exhibition opening Feb. 4 in the Lynn Tandler Bignell Gallery at the Brookfield Craft Center.



The Burnt Earth Ensemble, consisting of, from left to right, Barry Hall, Richard Smith and Beth Hall. Mr. Hall, who is the author of "From Mud to Music: Making and Enjoying Ceramic Musical Instruments," is the guest curator for and an exhibiting artist in "The Sound of Earth: Ceramic Musical Instruments," an exhibition opening Feb. 4 in the Lynn Tender Bignell Gallery at the Brookfield Craft Center.

"Open your eyes, your ears and your imagination to the fascinating, fantastic sounds of earth," says exhibition curator Barry Hall, author of the recently released book, "From Mud to Music." The exhibition highlights handmade, ceramic musical instruments from each of the instrument families-wind, string and percussion-made by 14 artists who represent "the vanguard of creative contemporary ceramic instrument builders."

The show opens Feb. 4 with a reception from 2 to 4 p.m. and a special curator's talk at 3 p.m. The exhibition features works by artists Don Bendel, Frank Giorgini, Ward Hartenstein, Rod Kendall, Rob Mangum, Brian Ransom, Susan Rawcliffe, Sharon Rowell, Steve Smeed, Lori Twardowski-Raper, Troy Raper, Sandi and Richard Schmidt and Mr. Hall. It will be accompanied by a soundtrack of music performed on ceramic musical instruments by artists from across the globe.

"The process of turning clay into a musical instrument involves a magical combination of what the ancient Greeks determined were the four basic elements: earth, water, air and fire," Mr. Hall said in his curator's statement for the exhibition. "Clay is formed over millions of years, as rain slowly dissolves the Earth's mountains. Other organic materials mix with the tiny stone particles, which give it the proper consistency to be molded into almost any shape-water jars and cooking pots, or flutes, drums and horns. When this fragile earth-water mixture is combined with fire and air, a remarkable structural change occurs. The clay molecules rearrange into a 'crystal lattice' that is extremely strong and acoustically resonant. This is what endows clay musical instruments with their unique tone-the sound of earth itself."

Mr. Hall said clay was historically a material used by ancient civilizations, and that Pre-Columbian inhabitants of America created some of the most complex and acoustically advanced clay wind instruments known to this day.

"For centuries, [various] cultures have used clay to create [functional and decorative items]," he explained from his Boston home. "Once clay is fired, it doesn't decompose, but what truly baffled archaeologists and acousticians was that these instruments contained multiple chambers. It is technology that is just now being rediscovered by modern-day ceramic artists ... who apply [this technology] to modern techniques and materials."

These instruments, while appearing primitive at first glance, provide "... a scientific appreciation of relevant acoustical principles," he said.

Mr. Hall said many of the artists exhibiting in "The Sound of Earth" are borrowing traditions from ancient civilizations, but then expand on them creatively: "For example, the side-hole 'udu' drum, perfected by generations of Nigerian artists and expanded to new creative realms by Frank Giorgini, could not be made from any material but clay. Brian Ransom's alien-like vapor-fired whistling water vessels, Ørgen Karlsen's intricately carved Saami drums, and Sharon Rowell's sensuously organic 'huacas' all owe their fantastic shapes, textures and sounds to the earthy material from which they are made."

Mr. Hall's discovery of clay instrument-making was serendipitous. Growing up in a musically inclined family, his childhood exposure to music melded in adulthood with an interest in pottery.

"While everyone else was making teapots, I was making drums and didgeridos," he said, noting that he builds instruments based on traditional designs. "I was obsessed with making musical instruments in clay. When you think about building a flute or drum, the mind automatically jumps to wood or metal, so I started to experiment to see how I could make it work [in clay]."

Over the years, Mr. Hall created countless musical instruments based on traditional designs, such as flutes, pot drums and goblet drums, but he also began to adapt the ancient medium to create ceramic

versions of instruments typically made from other materials. He also created experimental designs and hybrids of several instruments and later founded a performing group known as The Burnt Earth Ensemble, the members "explor[ing] the myriad of sounds produced by ceramic musical instruments."

He noticed, however, that there was an absence in literature pertaining to the creation of clay instruments and to performances on them. That is when he began research for his book, "From Mud to Music: Making and Enjoying Ceramic Musical Instruments."

"Although musical instruments can be built from almost any material, clay provides an artist with an unparalleled degree of flexibility in shape and form," Mr. Hall said. As versatile as the medium is, it also presents the artist with a challenge, as some instruments are better suited for the medium than others.

"Clay is moldable, but you need to remember that while utilizing these properties, once you fire a piece, it is much more fragile and heavier. Clay also shrinks [after firing], so that needs to be taken into account when creating an instrument that can perform perfect pitch."

While researching his book, which includes all instrument families, "I was amazed by some of the instruments people were making with clay-things I had considered but dismissed entirely," he said. "I found people who created string instruments in clay, from little violins to double basses. I even found a woman in France who made bagpipes out of clay-the pipes and the chanters were clay and adorned by dragons. They were quite beautiful.

"My approach is focused more on the acoustic aspects of the instrument rather than the visual aspects," Mr. Hall added. "When creating instruments, attention must be paid to the shape of the inside of the instrument [for proper resonance]. You work from the inside out. The very nature of an instrument is to make sound ... so the visual aspect is secondary. But there are some truly beautiful examples-acoustically and visually."

Wind and percussion instruments are often seen in ceramics, but offer challenges in properly shaping chambers, tubes and, in the case of drums, achieving resonance while providing the stability needed to accept a good beating. Still, it is the string family of instruments that pose the biggest challenge.

"It is really a matter of adapting to the form of the instrument and understanding how it resonates," he said.

Despite these challenges, the clay artist and musician insists that, "Clay is up to the task, with its wide variety of densities, strengths and acoustic properties available through different clay body formulations, firing temperature and glazes."

Even the choice in glaze can affect the resonance of the instrument, Mr. Hall reported. "So many things can alter the sound-even something as subtle as the glaze can impact the sound of the instrument. ... Think about how glaze reflects light; likewise, it can reflect or diffuse sound, depending on the instrument."

Important, too, is the choice of clay, which can produce different densities, from earthenware, to stoneware and even porcelain, the most delicate and least forgiving form. Porcelain produces what Mr. Hall referred to as "ring tones."

For his work, which is executed freehand without a wheel, Mr. Hall said he prefers using stoneware for its versatility.

"I think what I found most fascinating in my research was that many of the instruments go back centuries to ancient civilizations," Mr. Hall said, noting their advanced technology. "Equally fascinating is taking something directly from the earth, the idea of creating something from nothing that will produce the most beautiful, soothing sounds."

Brookfield Craft Center education coordinator and potter Kristin Muller agreed, noting, "Ceramic instruments create a beautiful resonance, but to hear it and to actually feel it are two very different experiences. When you play a clay drum, for example, you can actually feel the vibration go through your body; you feel the resonance, which is such an amazing feeling."

"Most musicians are fascinated by the sounds of these instruments; it's a very unique sound of crystalline tones ... that are fully fleshed out with other sonic ranges," Mr. Hall said of The Burnt Earth Ensemble. "Traveling can be a real pain-you need to be sure that everything gets there in one piece."

For "The Sound of Earth," Mr. Hall said he chose the best, most innovative ceramic artists "... who are connected by a passion to see, touch and hear unusual instruments with extraordinary sounds."

As he said in his artist statement, "I learned that the unpredictability inherent in the ceramic process-and hence the variability of our results-is a common factor that draws us to this art form. The fabulous creations you see in this exhibit each have their own unique voice-a voice that would be difficult, if not impossible, to re-create in another instrument."

"The Sound of Earth: Ceramic Musical Instruments" will open Feb. 4 with an opening reception from 2 to 4 p.m. and a curator's talk by exhibition curator Barry Hall at 3 p.m. at the Lynn Tandler Bignell Gallery at the Brookfield Craft Center, located at 286 Whisconier Road in Brookfield. It will remain on display through March 18. The center is open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. It can be reached by calling 203-775-4526, or by visiting its Web site at www.brookfieldcraftcenter.org.

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