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Posey Bacopoulos Maiolica at Terra Incognito

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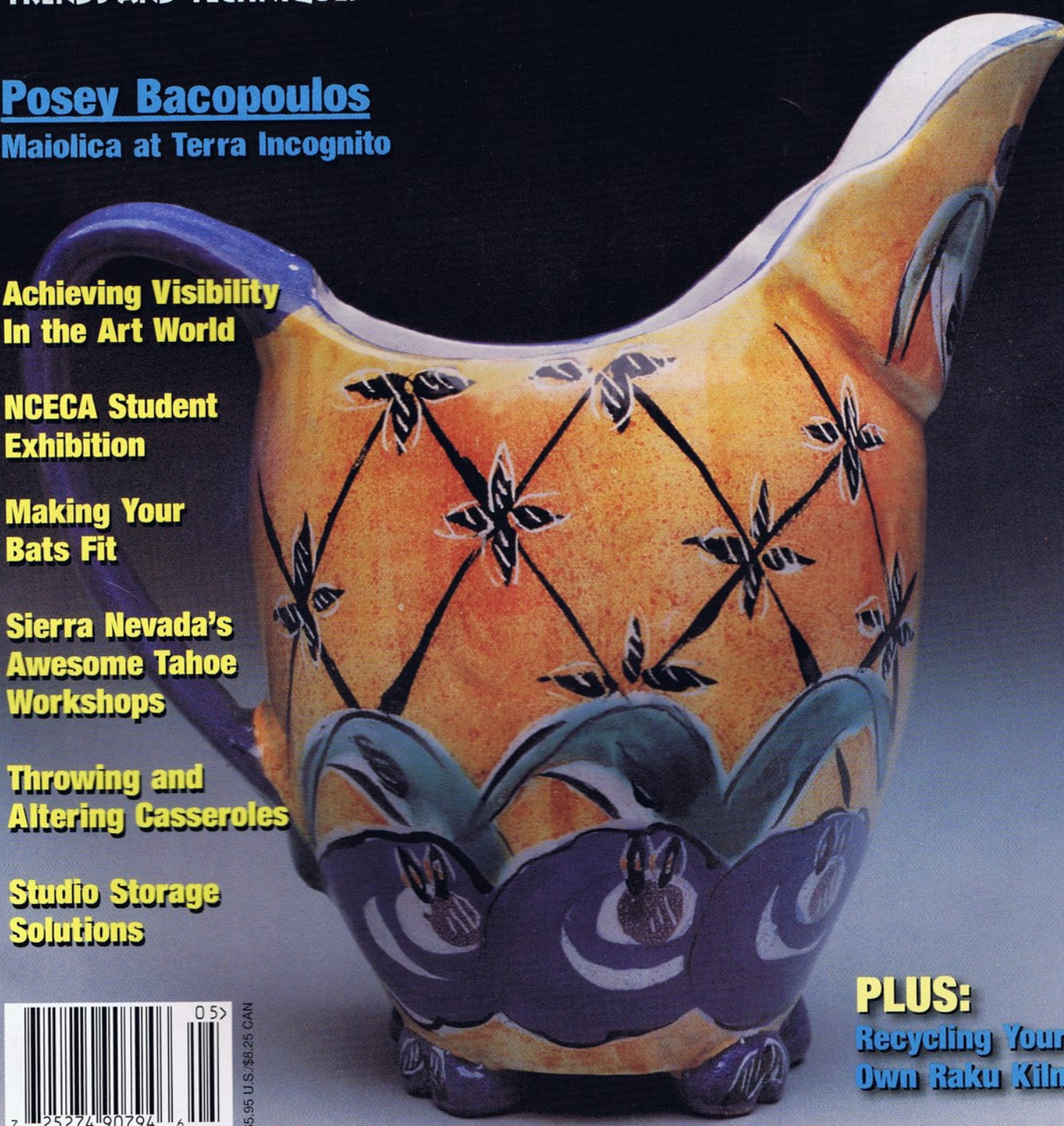
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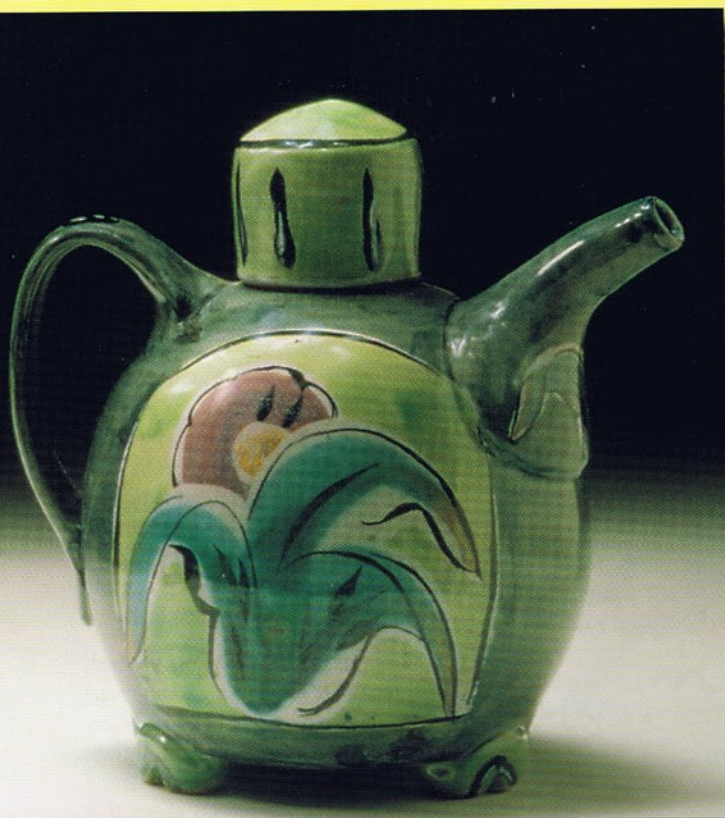
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posey bacopoulos at terra incognito

BY LINDA HILLMAN



Ewer by Posey Bacopoulos. 6" x 7" x 3½". Maiolica on terra cotta.

it was the dead of winter—January 18, 2003, at 0°—yet Dave Toan, proprietor of Terra Incognito studios, was getting geared up for a weekend workshop featuring New York City potter Posey Bacopoulos. Provided there would be no snowstorm preventing Posey's flight and the participants' travel, it would start on Friday evening with a potluck for everyone who had registered. After our meal in the studio, Posey would share her background and pots through slides and then she would spend a couple of hours throwing forms that she would alter and complete on Saturday.

The weather was awful, but as usual, Dave was enthusiastic and ready to make it happen. He is special like that: grounded in a deep understanding of clay and the clay world, gifted with an abundance of energy, and committed to building a community of potters who push the boundaries of their own pots with increasing standards of excellence. He has a mission for Terra Incognito, and Posey Bacopoulos' workshop was one step in creating that reality.

Every community needs people who are actively passionate about fine crafts, but unfortunately not many exist. We are lucky. Dave bought ArtWorks, a pottery shop in Oak Park, Illinois—Hemingway's birthplace and the location of Frank Lloyd Wright's home and studio—in 2000. He christened it "Terra Incognito" and opened it to the public with that name on June 15 that same year. Dave's vision for the pottery was to set up an environment for the promotion and appreciation of the ceramic vessel as an art form. He believed that through good classes, workshops of high quality, a gallery featuring top-notch ceramic artists, and space where clay people could mingle and make work, their work (and his) would grow. He held that if the standards in the studio and the gallery were high, the students, visitors and studio artists would rise to appreciate and benefit from them. In sum, another clay community would be nurtured, this time on the western edge of Chicago.

Dave put his vision into tangible realities. He rearranged and refurbished the space creating a stunning gallery; he rented out studio spaces to more working potters; he redesigned the kiln and glazing room; he built a wood fire kiln; he hired monitors; and he improved on the space for both wheel and handbuilding classes. He added new offerings to the class schedule; set an ambitious schedule for gallery openings and shows by emerging and



Square Box. 6" x 5" x 4". Maiolica on terra cotta.

well-established potters; and contracted for a number of excellent workshops by some of the most varied and interesting potters working today (Bacopoulos, Xiaosheng Bi, Fong Cho, Sam Chung, Malcolm Davis, Rick Hensley, Peter Hessemer, Eric Jenson, Gail Kendall, and Jeff Oestreich, to name a few).

Though the demands of running a business have diminished Dave's own work time in clay—he now works in “fits and starts”—he says that at 48, it was exhilarating to make a complete career change from teaching (which he had been doing for a number of years to make ends meet and receive benefits) to heading up a studio and gallery. Initially, he had dreamed of being a college ceramics teacher or of setting up a gallery-studio in a resort or tourist community, making and selling his own pots. In fact, when ArtWorks became available, he had just been thinking about a communal studio. The timing was right. He bought it, and he's never regretted it.

Like Dave, Posey Bacopoulos, the featured weekend workshop's potter, also changed careers at a crucial time. Her first clay experience was after graduating from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, with a major in history. Like many of us, she took a wheel-throwing class at a small community art center in New York City and loved it. Clay was seductive, but she taught elementary school until 1992, when it became clear that she wanted to become a full-time potter. Study in Cortona, Italy, with Michael Simon through the University of Georgia; classes at



Beaked Pitcher. 5" x 8" x 4". Maiolica on terra cotta.

Greenwich House Pottery with Woody Hughes; summer sessions at Penland School of Crafts with Linda Christianson, Clary Illian, Jeff Oestreich, and Randy Johnston; an Anderson Ranch intensive with Linda Arbuckle and then a semester studying with her at the University of Florida—this collection of seasoned teachers has been her education. These experiences and her own hard work—“I'm a workaholic,” she admits—convinced her to retire from teaching and buckle down to making pots full time. She has been working long hours daily at Tribeca Potters in New York City for the

last eight years. “I work harder there than I ever did teaching,” she says.

Also, like Dave, Bacopoulos thrives on the community. “Clay people are welcoming, sharing, giving people. The community works for you.” Dave says the same thing: “There's this sense of community, of well-being, of welcomeness. We share a belief in the value of handmade things. In the making of our own work, we get in touch

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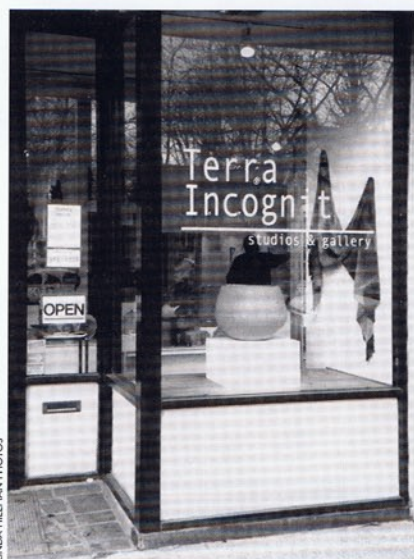


Oval Server. 3½" x 12½" x 5". Maiolica on terra cotta.

KEVIN NOBEL PHOTOS



Bacopoulos brought examples of her claywork at different stages of production for students to examine and learn about first-hand.



Based in Chicago, Terra Incognito offers local potters a community workspace and gallery.

with ourselves. If we're making our own authentic work, something falls into place. Work with integrity isn't an accident." This is why Dave wanted to bring Bacopoulos to Terra Incognito: to demonstrate and talk about her work.

Her work has integrity. "My goal," she has written, "is to integrate form, function, and surface in a way that brings a sense of excitement to my work. I am continually exploring the relationship between form and surface...I strive for lively expression of line, pattern, and color. My hope is that my pots invite use and that my pleasure in mak-

ing them is shared by those who use them."

If we look at Posey's raw forms, we can conclude that her style of working is influenced by the Shoji Hamada-Bernard Leach tradition of pottery-making that informed her teachers. Her forms are strong and could stand on their own, looking complete with just the decorative effects of a wood or soda kiln. Instead, her considered maiolica surface treatment is a bonus—almost a surprise—and provides a firm balance for the forms underneath. The glazing and painting, which reference the Italian (maiolica) and Spanish (Hispano-Moresque) decoration common in Europe between 1400 and 1700, were the result of her trip to Cortona with Michael Simon's course, where the only materials available in the workshop were those for maiolica. She gave it a try, and it became ingrained in her work as a medium for her potter's voice.

Bacopoulos' workshop embodied her goals and teaching expertise, and demonstrated her amazing capacity for producing examples of her work that we participants could witness in all their various stages, from beginning to end. On Saturday, she worked from 10 am to 5 pm almost non-stop on the pieces she had thrown the night before. From the morning opening until we broke for lunch she trimmed, altered, and pulled a handle on one of her cylindrical cups; paddled and put feet on another oval-shaped one; made a draped lid with a slab for a sugar jar; put the feet, handle, and a separate spout on one of her signature pitchers; put feet on a slump-molded serving dish; and put the bottom on an oval baker whose bottomless cylinder shape she had altered into undulating sides.

Throughout the "putting together" stages, Bacopoulos answered questions and gave sage advice. "My design changes are evolutionary. I've been making this pitcher for ten years. The feet have changed, and when I go back to New York I'll play with some more ideas for feet. I also have a house full of pots that I use every day. Maybe changes come from them, too." Bacopoulos says she doesn't have an ideal audience or client in mind when she works, but knows what her signature work is and is very productive and satisfied with it.

When asked about the challenges she faces, she answers: "Getting better. Making better pots. Knowing that things about my work change slowly, for reasons that might surprise me." Bacopoulos also admits that being a potter in New York City is a challenge. "It's expensive—the living expenses, the electric bills, and the cost of space," she says, "but I'm hooked. Working in clay is so engaging.

I always need to be doing something, and it's the challenge of the making process that I love, like thinking about these new feet for my vessels."

We broke for lunch at take-out places nearby and the 15 of us who were in attendance enthusiastically chatted about what we'd learned and how accessible and "can-do" Bacopoulos is. We returned with high expectations for the decoration demos in the afternoon. We sat up front and watched her mark where the design would go, using a soft pencil over a bisqued pitcher that she had wet down, glazed with her white maiolica glaze the night before she left for Chicago. She wets the bisqued piece so that it won't absorb so much glaze, and lets the glazed piece sit overnight to dry. (She had carried the pitcher in this state bundled in her carry-on luggage from New York so that we could witness first-hand this stage of her work, and not just imagine it. That's the experienced teacher in her.)

The pencil markings would also indicate a grid, sections of which she would decorate differently. Her rule when painting is that whatever design feature is in the foreground gets done first, and then it is waxed with Mobilcer A wax. She continued to decorate the pitcher by making dots that would become flower centers by using glaze applied with the tip of her finger, and by applying more color in swatches that she outlines in black underglaze. She demonstrated sgraffito (scratching through the glaze and the painted areas) with her Kemper tool. The decorated pitcher didn't look much different from a fired pitcher sitting next to it at the workshop. It would be fired to cone 04 in an electric kiln.

At 5 pm, with eight beautiful pieces illustrating various stages in her process, Bacopoulos treated us to a second slide show, this time of many wonderful potters in the U.S. and abroad working in the maiolica-decorative style on terra cotta. It was a perfect way to wrap up a workshop on one potter's vessels and how she works with others who have successfully developed their own unique techniques with similar materials and process.

All in all, the workshop attendees agreed that Dave's choice of Posey Bacopoulos, as with all of his workshop leaders, was superb. He had again furthered his mission for Terra Incognito and the Chicagoland potters who look for professional development at special studio-galleries like Terra Incognito. ■

Linda Hillman is a freelance writer and potter studying at Terra Incognito.