

Adero Willard

Teaching Philosophy

I recently learned how to sew — I had a lot to learn! To be honest I never knew how to use scissors properly: I held them upside down. It was a challenging class, but I wanted to learn, I was determined to learn, so I slowly and obsessively I learned how to hold scissors the way that makes them work better, I learned the importance of the seam ripper, and I learned to sew. From this experience I gained a deeper understanding for encouraging patience and compassion when learning.

When patience and compassion are present in the studio, I see students more willing to ask questions and bring their own nuances to projects.

One of my goals when teaching ceramics is that students leave the class with a deeper appreciation for the world around them and be better able to evaluate the objects in their lives. Like learning how to sew, learning to work with clay can teach about craftsmanship and principles of design — all lessons that help us understand how to evaluate how things work and the aesthetics of the objects in our lives. Teaching from pots is an important part of my teaching philosophy. I love using pots as ways to speak about our relationship to the objects we use in the world the conversations that can arise around pots. As students make pots, look at pots, and handle pots, discussions around the issues in our lives, in the world, and our history can be facilitated. Through pots we can discuss touch, food, community, individuality, cultural diversity, equity of labor, distribution of wealth and of course aesthetics, design, and craftsmanship. Not all students may not continue as ceramic artists, but they will look at the world with more discerning eyes.

Eliciting this personal connection promotes discussion of the factors influencing our lives today and the histories that brought us to this moment. Through ceramics the class can discuss food, community, individuality, human touch, cultural diversity, equity of labor, distribution of wealth, and of course learn about the aesthetics of design and craft. Not all students will continue as ceramic artists, but my hope is that they will bring the sensitivity they learn from my class to the rest of their lives.

In Undergraduate and graduate school as a black woman, I had difficulty finding female mentors of color to talk about the conceptual ideas of gender and racial identity that I wanted to explore in my student work. I still pursued this content, but through metaphor and by subverting the content into abstraction. Today as a teacher I see how I can provide guidance to students of color who are looking for historic content that connects with their history and their identity.

Clay listens. Clay is alluring. Clay is forgiving. We are drawn to its malleability and its response to our touch. It captures moments in time from its ecological presence, immortalizing a fingerprint on a Scandinavian “funnel Beaker” made 5000 years ago. I like to begin a class with something that gets everyone immediately into the material: pinching, coiling, or maybe a simple throwing exercise. In that immediacy, I seek to awaken in students an understanding that their imprint on clay holds the same possibilities. That fingerprint can be theirs that tells a story 5,000 years from now; that the personal can become historical and vice versa.

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Diversity & Inclusion Statement

The following is a description I wrote for an upcoming exhibition I am curating at NCECA 2023. It serves equally well here as the introduction for my Diversity & Inclusion Statement:

"This exhibit is a celebration — like electrical current moving from negative to positive — of the work that has been brought about by the perseverance of the black women, black female identifying women, and black non-binary artists working in clay. These objects tell the stories of our histories, speak to our diverse identities, promote healing and community, and demand real action. What could/does real diversity, equity, and inclusivity in clay institutions, organizations, and curated exhibitions look like?"

The show is titled "Clay Holds Water, Water Holds Memory" and for me it is both a culmination and a beginning. It symbolizes much of where I am in my life around healing, community, and the demand for real change. I am committed to this work and my hope is that I will be able to put down roots and integrate my passion and ideas with an institution that I am an active part of.

I grew up in New York City in the 1970s as an only child. My parents, one Black parent and one white, were married at a time when miscegenation laws were just becoming federally legal. While growing up I received a common question: "What are you?" That was often followed by: "You look [fill in an ethnicity]" or maybe: "You look exotic." My early years were filled with a confused dislocation, literally and figuratively. As a child who could only partly understand the factors at play, I felt unmistakably that I was caught between societal forces rooted in a violence or danger that I could sense just walking down my block.

Being on the outskirts of mainstream society is a difficult path that many groups face, whether because of race, gender, disability, mental health, or sexual orientation. My personal narrative is a tangled and complicated one that at times can become exhausting to navigate especially

in predominantly white institutional spaces, but a role that I have come to embrace. Integral to who I am is finding ways to bring empathy to situations that create opportunities for folks to learn how to become more open, fluid, honest and respectful of each other. The belief that all people are navigating this world as beautiful, fierce, fragile and sensitive entities is integrated in my studio practice, teaching philosophy, and community outreach. I learned to find comfort in making sense out of the chaos around me. I developed a sense of order and beauty within the colors and layers my circumstances surrounded me with.

For eight years I worked at Holyoke Community College (HCC) in Holyoke, whose demographic is 41% minority/BIPOC, as well as encompassing varying age ranges, physical abilities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Because of this, learning from my own life experiences as a woman of color, early on I knew I would always need to work on checking my biases at the door of every class I walked into. From students traumatized by gun violence in their family, students facing homelessness, students battling depression or eating disorders, to students with hearing impairment or other needs for accommodation.

Food insecurity, domestic violence, and homelessness were not uncommon in my students lives at HCC. For five years, together with students and the seniors (people over the age of 60), I organized Empty Bowls fundraisers that all went to Holyoke Community College's food pantry that provided food, diapers, feminine hygiene products, and helped students . The money raised helped fund Holyoke Community College's Food Pantry and raise awareness about food insecurity on campus. Among the different steps involved were open participation events I called "Bowl Throwdowns" which invited students and staff to participate in the making or decorating of bowls regardless of their experience or class enrollment.

I love how pots centers us within complex ideas of ceremony, nourishment, celebration, and identify, but often the lifestyle of a studio potter can be very reclusive: for me when I would show and sell my work I was often the only person of color in the room. Through the years conversations many of us talked about the lack of diversity in certain areas of ceramics. In 2012 five other potters and I to form a 501(c)3 non-profit, Pots On Wheels! (POW!) a small grassroots organization who find a way to share our love of ceramics with people of all ages,

from rural classrooms to city neighborhoods, who may not have otherwise had opportunity to experience working with clay.

One POW! project I worked on in the spring of 2018 was creating multi week programming with a program that connect issues close in my heart, Girls Inc, in Holyoke MA, that has a long established Puerto Rican community. The project centered around the ecology of migration and how that connects us all to the politics of immigration. Teaching based on the forms from Jomon pottery history, the girls created animal migration vessels, while also learning about the fragile balance of systems that support nature and culture. Part of this program provided mentorship for four HCC students to learn about curriculum planning, organization and teaching. This project culminated in a Holyoke community event to celebrate the girls' work, along with curated exhibition featuring artists whose work was relevant to the theme, including Daniel Ricardo Teran and Ahrong Kim from Philadelphia, Salvador Jimenez-Flores and Nora Valdez from Boston, and Cynthia Consentino, based nearby.

As I move forward as an artist and educator, experiences like the POW! programs or Empty Bowls events keep me continually mindful that folks come to clay from all kinds of backgrounds, with all kinds of predispositions. Clay's global traditions offer so many starting points for the diverse perspectives of individual students and I loved helping people find or strengthen those connections. Like wet clay, I strive to be responsive to them all.