

# Artist Statement: Vessel

So what about this coffin?

Themes that run through my career are present in this show.

The bulk of my work is in the area I call “Vessel as Symbol” — vessels inspired by language and wordplay, vessels explored for their distinctive names and iconic shapes.

Another, more occasional theme involves installations or constructs about professional artistic processes. “Shipping Ceramics” is the tiniest of such constructs. A small box is filled with the porcelain version of styrofoam shipping peanuts. Surely nothing will break in this situation!

The coffin is in this vein of installations. When the idea first came to me, I was hell-bent to pursue it. I remain so, even as my interpretations morph and morph again.

My initial intentions were expressed to Stan Hain when I asked him to build the pine casket for me:

“I’m planning on stuffing a lot of ceramics into a toe-pincher coffin. It’s a reference to all the ceramics found in grave sites — but more to the point for my life: it’s a *momento mori* and a “Note-to-self and Advice to Young Artists: *Market now... you can’t take it with you... There’s no room in the coffin.*” Many artists, like me, get to a certain age with way too much of their own work crammed into their house. It’s a problem: what to do with it all. This is something that is usually unacknowledged. This seems like the truest thing I can say about my art/life right now.”

Later, I wondered: does advice make any difference in the face of personal proclivities? Would I take my own advice? I have exhibited my work. The work has been published. I put little effort into marketing and, truth be told, I’ve been happy to hang on to my work.

So did I really mean the advice I was giving? If I don’t, why do I still feel compelled by the coffin idea? Perhaps there’s a deeper source for my desire to make this image. Perhaps the grave site packed with treasure has become an archetype and has all the pull of such. The coffin is a vessel of sorts - packed with my most precious creations, vessels. Perhaps “there’s no room in the coffin” means there’s no room in the coffin for *me*— that continued creativity or generativity staves off death.

Funny, but my ideas about the coffin are like a Mobius strip: they smoothly morph into their opposites. For me, the coffin packed with treasure remains compelling, even as the interpretations are varied and fluid.

*All high fire porcelain in this show “Vessel” fired by Pat Colyar at Kirkland Arts Center.*

## Gallery Guide for **Vessel**

The work displayed around the coffin is my twenty year exploration of *Vessel as Symbol*.

When I returned to ceramics in my forties, I was told about a college on the east coast, where a ceramic student could choose to focus on one of four categories: sculpture, functional pottery, tile-making, or *vessel as symbol*. When I heard that phrase, *Vessel as Symbol*, I said “Oh, that’s for me!” The concept became the context from which I work. It gave me the freedom to freight my vessels with meaning.

In a separate but related decision, I decided to link my vessels to words whenever I could. I decided my niche in the ceramic world would be language.

### **The pink tables**

Here are my word-intense pieces. They are all about communication or miscommunication.

How does one link one’s vessels to language? I started by simply labeling: “clay cup,” “actual size,” or just a number. I aimed my literalness at absurdity and humor. (see **Tableware**)

The plate with the blue floral pattern is a copy of dishes used in my childhood. While researching something else, I discovered that those plates were copied from a plate in the Ming dynasty —only the Ming plate was dark blue with a white floral pattern. So I copied the American version, but I made one change: I inserted the map of China into the floral pattern. I call it **Find China**, because I always wanted to make “fine china.”

The most recent of the language related pieces are the crockery jugs. We have all been living the backstory of these pieces this past year. They are the **Commemorative Vessels of 2019: Redacted**. They represent communication withheld.

The real breakthrough in language related work was the piece with the tall violet vessel. Here’s the back story: Lark books was publishing survey books of artists’ work in ceramics called 500 Cups, 500 Plates. I told my friends I was going to try to get into the up-coming 500 Pitchers. They didn’t know about the Lark series and they thought I meant **500 Pictures**. When I got wind of this misunderstanding, I thought “That’s the piece!” So here’s the violet double spouted pitcher. And here’s the picture of the pitcher on the little white vessel — along with the phonetic spelling of *picture* and *pitcher*. The title is **The Enunciation**. Some people will see *The Enunciation* as a play on *The Annunciation*. I felt happy about this piece because it had word play in the vessels and in the title.

**Exam** is based on a found object: a seventh grade Sex-Ed test where the student got confused and labeled the male organs with the female names. When I found this, I thought “This is Gold!” I saved it for ten years. I finally used it when was medically misdiagnosed. For me, this is about cognitive dissonance... when word and image don’t line up. Most people miss the meaning here, because they either look at the image or read the words, but not both. They don’t examine.

**Riddle** refers to the viewer’s dilemma of how to “read” this piece. At first glance, this is a support structure (labeled “tray.”) with the cheerful advice “Be All.” Is there another way to “read” the situation? Hint: I made this during the General Petraeus scandal.

“Betrayal” is the alternative reading of the tray emblazoned with “Be All.” The piece refers to the surprise of “betrayal” — reality is not what we thought it was.

The second vessel of **Riddle** is the balm to the cognitive dissonance of the first vessel: the phonetic spelling of interpretation. “Betrayal” is our label on reality. It’s an interpretation we can choose or not choose. **Riddle** is about how to read a situation and how to take responsibility for that reading.

There is one word-intense piece not on the pink tables. **Internet Research** is on a central pedestal between the pink tables. It was made when we were just beginning to realize the amount of baloney on the internet. The vessels here were created to illustrate the text of a ceramic history site that had no pictures. The site claimed that the court of the Song dynasty used nose-drinking cups, because drinking through the nose was thought to be delightful. A later entry on the site said: There is no evidence that nose-drinking ever occurred. There’s been a mis-translation. The Chinese call the part of the vessel where the spout comes out: the “nose” of the vessel. “Nose-drinking cups” were probably Kendis — personal drinking vessels where one drank from the spout. **Internet Research** is about embellished miscommunication through mistranslation.

#### **Using the Good China** (central pedestal)

After an 18 month break from ceramics due to illness, I returned with a new attitude and made porcelain structures that displayed inherited china. The tree-of-life like structures were meant to honor my Grandmother, whom I adored and who showed me lots of china in my childhood. After I had finished the series, I chanced upon Carl Jung’s drawing of a Tree of Life that struck me as uncannily similar to my porcelain structures. There were the same curves and circles. I thought: perhaps I tapped an archetype. I do not think I would make this claim for my work if I had not had the experience of the chance encounter with Jung’s drawing. For me, this was a new mental model for *vessel as symbol*.

#### **Red Vessels** (flanking both sides of entry way to gallery)

These red vessels illustrate an idea I call **The Vessel Alphabet**. The concept came to me as an idea for a group ceramic exhibit for NCECA (a yearly national ceramic convention.) The idea was to let artists each choose a letter of the alphabet and create a vessel to represent it, as in “A is for Amphora.” Then we would display the work in a library.

I never put together the group exhibit, but I decided to start exploring **The Vessel Alphabet** myself. I started with **E is for Ewer**. After riffing on the ewer form, I moved on to Ginger Jars, then did **A is for Amphora**, and **V is for Vessel**.

With regard to *Vessel as Symbol*, the take-home message of **The Vessel Alphabet** is the recognition that different vessel names are associated with iconic forms. The vessel shapes themselves are symbols. They can be exalted in their classic-ness or stretched into innovative contemporary forms. This is what is available to vessel makers and why it is such a fabulous playground.

So to recap, the arc of my experience with *Vessel as Symbol* has been:  
first, the tight word emphasis,  
followed by the possibility of archetypical imagery,  
followed by the recognition of the iconic nature of types of vessels.