



CALENDARS



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THROWING

CLAY

By Tracy Nicholson | Photos by J. Alan Paul Photography and Brad Bachmeier

After 23 years of throwing pottery, Brad Bachmeier wouldn't change a thing. He's combined his 15 years of teaching in public schools and at Minnesota state university Moorhead to create a thriving career as a local potter. Inspired by pottery's link to ancient civilizations, Bachmeier is always a student and never stops learning about history, geology and honing his craft.



BRAD BACHMEIER



"This is the beautiful thing for me, that clay is at least 500,000 years old, and as soon as you pinch it or put your fingerprint on it and you run it through some heat, whether it's a bonfire or a kiln, you've changed that piece of earth forever."



Arriving at the home and studio of Brad Bachmeier, we knew we'd made it to the right place simply based on the flower bed filled with broken pottery. As we stared down at the remnants in awe, Bachmeier laughed, "That's the pottery graveyard. It's all the mistakes from the past 30 years."

DISCOVERING CLAY

A Milnor, N.D., native, Bachmeier entered college with no formal art training and having never touched a piece of clay. "As a junior, I didn't even know what 'Intro to Ceramics' was and I took the class because I needed another intro class. It was the only one that fit in my schedule," said Bachmeier. "It turned out that when I touched it and made something with it for the first time, I knew that was sort of my thing. Before that, I had always thought I was going to be a painter. That was kind of a life-changing moment. There's something pretty magical about clay. People touch it and just love it and want to do it the rest of their life once they've experienced it."

SPINNING THE WHEEL

Starting with a cylinder, Bachmeier can turn a simple piece of clay into almost anything. "That first step, the centering, is actually the hardest. It takes nine hours just to learn how to center a piece of clay. So the first time you're teaching it to college students, that's the part that's so frustrating," said Bachmeier. "When you're younger, when you're learning the skills, you have to be a perfectionist to get everything right. As you get older, you get to loosen up because you have the skills and everything looks more casual and easy."

"It's kind of fun to watch, and most people don't make plates like this. This is a really elegant, sort of daring plate. I don't want to sound arrogant, but you have to have some skill to drop something this thin down into a large plate without it flopping over."

Having studied Islamic writing, Bachmeier finishes this piece using the beautiful language as art, giving the piece a sense of age and history.

If you're wondering how Bachmeier creates his large-scale pieces, often four to five feet tall, it begins with a much bigger bat and a lot more muscle. "I start with a real big piece of clay, fighting it and trying to get it centered and then starting to pull it into a form.

Then I start adding huge coils on, smooth it together and keep building,” said Bachmeier. “To stiffen it up a bit, I’ll literally take a weed blower and blow flames or start a fire on the inside of it to stiffen it up and keep building. That piece was so big I think two or three of us lifted it and carried it. At one point to take it out, we had to get a forklift to move it. Some of the larger-scale ones are actually made in three pieces and fired separately and then reassembled.”





When Bachmeier does Raku firing, he fires the kilns up to 2,000 degrees. Donning a fire jacket, he opens them up, using his tongs to pull out the glowing red pieces and puts them outside in cans to smoke them.

ANCESTRAL EXPERIENCE

Well known for his authentic techniques and antiquated-looking pottery, Bachmeier did not gain the experience to create these pieces overnight. “I’ve spent a lot of time the last few years doing artist-in-residencies and seeing how clay has been used all over the globe by different people. I’ve been investigating a lot of prairie- firing techniques, how people used to do it a thousand years ago,” said Bachmeier.

“This is the beautiful thing for me, that clay is at least 500,000 years old and as soon as you pinch it or put your fingerprint on it and you run it through some heat, whether it’s a bonfire or a kiln, you’ve changed that piece of earth forever. You can go throw it in a lake or bury it, and it’s going to be there a million years later with your fingerprint on it. That’s what’s so interesting about studying clay around the globe. You’ve got this record of mankind for 20,000 years or so. It’s like changing the earth and putting your mark on it.”

DIGGING FOR CLAY

For Bachmeier, Finding clay is as simple as exploring the bank of a river or a farmer’s field. “If you’ve ever heard a farmer say their tractor got stuck in gumbo, it’s like that. It’s a slippery porcelain. Minnesota has more clay than any state in the nation, so it’s everywhere,” said Bachmeier.

EXPLORING INSPIRATION

Not bending his career toward trends or other artist’s work, Bachmeier does what he loves, even moving his wheel outside in the

summer to be closer to his inspiration. “I love the outdoors and as a kid, I had a ton of freedom. My greatest joy with my family is traveling, hiking and exploring,” said Bachmeier. “I did an artist-in-residency at the National Petrified Forest in Arizona. Then, all of a sudden, I had back-door access that no one else has to their permanent collections of Southwest pottery. They’ll let you collect rocks and things in the park. I learned how to polish rocks and make them into lids. So lately I’ve been doing a lot more that’s informed by geology. At school, I happen to be on the same floor as the anthropologists, so it’s a perfect fit. It’s getting to explore how people have used pottery for 20,000 years and how that earth turns into clay.”

BRICK SCULPTURES

Gaining fame for his vessels, most don’t realize the large-scale, site-specific installation work he’s now taken on. Working with local companies, Bachmeier just installed one piece at Bell State Bank and one at Concordia College. This type of intricate work makes Bachmeier one of only a couple dozen brick sculptors in the country.



Art commissioned by Bell State Bank for their corporate board room

Board room of the Offutt Center for Business at Concordia College

AFFORDING ART

After 23 years of creating, Bachmeier learned the business of being an artist, paying close attention to price points. “If I go to an outdoor art fair, I don’t want just rich people to be able to afford my work. I’ve even fought with galleries to keep the prices down because I’m a teacher. I’d like my friends to be able to afford them,” said Bachmeier. With an array of pieces from \$75 to \$3,000, Bachmeier keeps his work accessible, which he considers vital in encouraging people to become art collectors.

“One of the questions people ask all the time is if I’m selling a vessel for \$500. They’ll say, ‘How long did that take?’ The bottom line is that on the wheel it might only take an hour, but then it’s drying, it’s firing, it’s glazing, firing again, finishing all of that,” said Bachmeier. “A friend of mine that’s an artist said the answer he always gives when someone asks how long that takes. He says, ‘Well, about 25 years and two hours.’”

RARE ROCKS

With his biggest inspiration being the outdoors, Bachmeier showed us his collection, pointing out sea glass, dessert rose, marble and a colorful array of unique stones. “I’ve got bins and bins of rocks and then I’ll start to polish them and work on them,” said Bachmeier. “Every one of these gives me an idea for a piece. In these bins is inspiration for the next 10 years. You know what’s so humbling about this? For every one I pick up, I can say, ‘This is more beautiful than anything I could ever make.’”

THE POWER OF THE ARTS

One of Bachmeier's main career goals has been to work on improving the atmosphere for the arts and artists in the community. Having a firm belief in the power of the arts to create more vibrant and attractive communities, as well as creating a more well-rounded education for all children helps Bachmeier get involved. Here are just a few of the areas he's touched: non-profit art and culture boards (FMVA founding board member, Center for Creativity at the Plains Art Museum founding board member, Rourke Art Museum board and later president, The Arts Partnership board and later president, North Dakota Council on the Arts governor-appointed current board member.)

UPCOMING PROJECTS

Keep your eye out for Bachmeier's two upcoming large-scale projects. One is for Sanford in Sioux Falls and in Fargo and the other is a Fargo public art project, a brick sculpture for a playground.

FIND BACHMEIER'S WORK

You can find pieces by Bachmeier at the Underbrush Gallery in Fargo and, on occasion, at the Rourke Art Museum and Rehfeld's Art & Framing in Sioux Falls.

CONTACT THE ARTIST

Bachmeier Pottery & Sculpture

[*Website*](#)