

Evolving through tactile expression and technical experimentation, the memory and reflection at the heart of this exhibition are launch points for this pure state of discovery and invention.

Joshua Green is the Executive Director of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA)

4 Nisenson, Eric. Ascension: John Coltrane And His Quest. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, Incorporated, 2009). p. 187

ABOUT

James C. Watkins is a ceramic artist who has worked with clay for over 40 years. His work is held in 23 permanent collections, including the White House Collection of American Crafts at the Clinton Library in Little Rock, Arkansas; the Shigaraki Institute of Ceramic Studies in Shigaraki, Japan; the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC; the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York; the Tweed Museum in Duluth, Minnesota; the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, Indiana; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas. Watkins’ work has been widely exhibited in 42 solo exhibitions and 165 group exhibitions.

Watkins is a Texas Tech University, Horn Distinguished Professor Emeritus. The Horn Professorship is the highest honor Texas Tech University may bestow on members of its faculty. Horn Professorships are granted to professors in recognition of national and international distinction for outstanding research or other creative scholarly achievements.

His awards include the Texas Tech University President’s Excellence in Teaching Award and the third recipient of the Art on the Llano Estacada Legacy Award, presented by Texas Tech University Museum Association. He was a 2005 Senior Fulbright Scholar, teaching in Vietnam at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Architecture. Watkins is the 2019 recipient of the HCCC Texas Master Award present by the Houston Center of Contemporary Craft in Houston, Texas.

Watkins is the author of the self-published book, *Reflections Made of Memories*. He is also the co-author of three books, *Alternative Kilns & Firing Techniques* published by Sterling Publishing, *Niedrigbrand* published by Hanusch/Verlag Publications—the German translation of *Alternative Kilns & Firing Techniques*, both books co-authored with Paul Andrew Wandless, and *Architectural Delineation: Presentation Techniques and Projects* published by Kendall Hunt Publishing, co-authored with James T. Davis. His work is the subject of a book entitled *A Meditation of Fire: The Art of James C. Watkins* by Kippra D. Hopper published by Texas Tech University Press. He received his BFA from the Kansas City Art Institute and MFA from Indiana University.



Portrait of James C. Watkins by Bonni Oakes. Image courtesy of the artist.

Website: www.jewclayworks.com

Cover Image: James C. Watkins, *Double-Walled Caldron*, “Fragility Series”, saggar-fired. Image courtesy of the artist.



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James C. Watkins: Reflections Made of Memories is generously funded, in part, by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Texas Commission on the Arts, the Wesley W. Washburn, M.D. and Lulu L. Smith, M.D. Endowment Fund, the C. Homer and Edith Fuller Chambers Charitable Foundation, the City of Beaumont, and the members of the Art Museum of Southeast Texas. Additional funding provided by: Mr. & Mrs. James E. Payne.
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JAMES C. WATKINS

Reflections Made of Memories

Art Museum of Southeast Texas | January 7 — March 19, 2023



Form Follows Breath: The Art of James C. Watkins

Joshua Green

We have to sleep with our eyes open, have to dream with our hands,
dream active dreams of rivers seeking their channels, dreams
of a sun dreaming its worlds ... ¹

The exhibition *James C. Watkins: Reflections Made of Memories* fuses personal history with innovative research to expand on the ceramic vessel’s enduring legacies. The retrospective includes vessels, tiles, and drawings, interconnected to twelve stories authored by the artist. The convergence of text, material, and process reflects back in time and outward through the imagination to become realized through material, process, and form. Threaded through the stories are influences of childhood, travel, human relationships (particularly involving students), and explorations of the Southwest landscape—the spatial expansiveness of canyons, sightings of migrating sandhill cranes and Canada geese, digging clay and minerals to formulate glazes, meditating in the presence of 4000-year-old pictographs.



James C. Watkins, *Bottle Form*, stoneware wrapped in bailing wire, gold luster, fumed with stannous chloride, and etched with glass etching solution. Image courtesy of the artist.

The natural environment is a taproot that nurtures the work’s creation and evolution. During summer months in southwest Texas, winds from storms known as haboobs arise from forces of dying thunderstorms that push air downward, gyrating fine particle clay dusts into the atmosphere over the desert close to where Watkins lives and works. Although potentially destructive, the storms yield inspiration and generate source materials that Watkins gathers to formulate terra sigillata and glazes applied to his works’ surfaces. The largest vessels are constructed through a thrown and coiled method involving row upon row of hand-rolled ropes of clay. The forms are expanded and refined as the potter’s body works in concert with the rotating clay and the centrifugal force of the wheel. The massive double walled forms that Watkins calls caldrons bear roughened and carbon-blackened surfaces, referencing well-used cooking vessels. Other works have iridescent surfaces developed through the use of soluble metallic salts in closed-chambered saggar firings. Earthy and ethereal, these color shifting surfaces result from interactions of heat, time, and atmospheric change on material. They also bear uncanny resemblance to images from celestial phenomena that lead us closer to the universe’s creation.

Transformative and transformed, the caldrons are inspired by childhood memories of the artist’s mother and grandmother working together for hours making souse, crackling or chicharrones. Watkins recalls “tending and feeding the fire for hours as the women seasoned and stirred.” The caldrons approach mythical or dream-like realms as avian forms emerge from their massive rims, some evolving as gracefully arcing handles. Physical and archetypal, the double-walled construction of the caldrons embodies rich metaphorical

meanings. When we observe their exteriors from a distance, as we might a painting or sculpture, we sense that their interiors are corresponding voids. From the proximity of direct physical contact, we realize that although the void is present, an inaccessible volume differentiates the inner and outer surfaces. Our memories of experiences are continually negotiated through reflection on those same experiences. What remains significant and lasting through intervening spans of time is uniquely personal; gaps and inaccessible spaces are forever present.

Arnold Rubin defined content “as one dimension of the affective power and complex of multiple meanings embodied in a work of art. It originates in the orchestration of materials and techniques, and transcends both purely formal qualities on the one hand and comparatively explicit iconographical or symbolic associations on the other.”² In Watkins’ work, materiality, making, and meaning are contingent upon one another. At once grounded and transformative, formal and experimental, methodological and expressive, Watkins’ formal inspirations range from farm implements, to everyday and ceremonial objects, free jazz, and dream journals. Reflection is the raw material of memory—a state of meditative being. Like discoveries made while digging into the outermost surface of the earth, the experience of reflection is filled with rich deposits of potential—veins of plasticity wherein the imagination and daydreams determine the invention of forms. Working in tandem, memory is a capacity that enables us to draw on experience and information to construct knowledge and deepen skills over time. Whether it resides in the body and mind, a dogeared notepad, an expansive archival cabinet of wonders, or a sleek solid state hard drive, memory is an accumulation of stored information that builds recall and connection.

Our tactile experience is equally important to our visual experience when considering ceramic wares. As transmitters of memory and reflection, the stories and works collected in this exhibition emanate from childhood experiences growing up in the rural South during the 1950s and 1960s. As the work and stories evolve, universal themes of freedom, struggle, and transcendence are connected through relationship with the earth, community, and mentorship. Watkins shares that he was first drawn to working with clay during his undergraduate studies at the Kansas City Art Institute because of the sense of shared labor, learning, and energy that emanated from the ceramics program. Although his skills quickly became fluent enough to create impressively scaled works, the critiques he experienced nonetheless felt harsh. At one point he was instructed to recycle massive works in progress during a course meeting. Retreating in defeat to his living space, he revived himself listening to the live 1964 recording of John Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme”. Also formative at this time were frequent visits to the subterranean collection vaults of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art where Professors Víctor Babu and Ken Ferguson took their course meetings to handle and discuss centuries old ceramic works. Reflecting on these encounters, Watkins notes that centuries after these objects were made and first used, their presence remained vividly alive when held in one’s hands.

Transformation of material is essential to ceramic art’s creation. Traces of place, time, and material culture endure in the ware’s fire-hardened state. Octavio Paz wrote, “Made by hand, the craft object bears the fingerprints, real or metaphorical, of the person who fashioned it. These fingerprints are not the equivalent of the artist’s signature, for they are not a name. Nor are they a mark or a brand. They are a sign: the almost invisible scar commemorating our original brotherhood or sisterhood.”³ An archaeologist of meaning, James C. Watkins relays this nearly invisible scar by drawing from and transforming experience through story, form, and surface. Alluding to a Buddhist sutra in one of his final interviews, John Coltrane said, “There is never any end... There are always new sounds to imagine; new feelings to get at. And always, there is the need to keep purifying these feelings and sounds so that we can really see what we’ve discovered in its pure state.”⁴

¹ Paz, Octavio. The Broken Pot. Trans. Reynolds. Source: Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics, Winter, 1969, Vol. 8, No. 4, Translation Issue (Winter, 1969), pp. 559-563. Published by: Trustees of Boston University through its publication Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics

² Rubin, Arnold. “Accumulation: Power and Display in African Sculpture.” Art Forum, May 1975, pp. 35-47
³ Paz, Octavio. “Seeing and Using: Art and Craftsmanship,” Convergences: Essays on Art and Literature, Harcourt Brace, 1987

