Paul S. Briggs

Material Shapes in Clay
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List Gallery, Swarthmore College
Paul Briggs has said that he philosophizes concretely in clay—an idea that might puzzle those who study to associate philosophy with metaphysics or with physical objects. However, those who get elbow-deep in damp earth, experiment with using glazes at different temperatures, and ponder the relationships between forms and their functions, can readily understand how ceramics can embody—or challenge—a worldview. And because Briggs also studied biblical literature, classical and modern philosophy, Eastern Orthodox mystical theology, and Taoist aesthetic movements, sculpting with clay provides him with a way to critique absolutist ideologies and to ground himself in a worldview. With gracefulness and gravitas, his creative practice models intellectual inquiry, compassion, and civic engagement. With gracefulness and gravitas, his creative practice models intellectual inquiry, compassion, and civic engagement.

For decades, Briggs’ art has developed in tandem with his varied training and experiences as an athlete, progressive Baptist minister, community activist, father, and educator. We are fortunate that his PhD in art education, and was establishing his reputation as both an artist and educator, when his father became ill. In response, Briggs moved to Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, to assist part-time in his father’s ministry at New Hope Baptist Church. In 2004, after his father recovered, Briggs became the pastor at Antioch Baptist Church in Bedford Hills, New York. Building upon his previous study of diverse theologies and rabbinical literature, he co-organized numerous interfaith groups, helped establish an organization that sheltered homeless individuals, and pursued varied social justice initiatives, such as teaching a media literacy course at Taconic Women’s Correctional Facility. He notes that providing these services, especially working with prisoners and formerly incarcerated people, laid the foundations for his further artistic change.

The practice of pinch-forming vessels sustained Briggs and allowed him to, as he puts it, “quiet down” for decades, especially in the mid-1980s, inspired by a photograph of an ancient Chinese bowl. Nearly four decades later, he continues to be fascinated by the variations he can achieve by using different clays, glazes, bases, and firing methods. His pinch-forming methods produce a chimeric form with high-relief elements that suggest undulating leaves, petals, or sea creatures.

Their articulated surfaces, rhythmic patterning, and animism may remind some viewers of Chinese jade vessels and Han and Zhou dynasty bronzes. However, while ritual vessels like those are more with metaphysics than with physical objects. However, those who get elbow-deep in damp earth, experiment with using glazes at different temperatures, and ponder the relationships between forms and their functions, can readily understand how ceramics can embody—or challenge—a worldview. And because Briggs also studied biblical literature, classical and modern philosophy, Eastern Orthodox mystical theology, and Taoist aesthetic movements, sculpting with clay provides him with a way to critique absolutist ideologies and to ground himself in a worldview. With gracefulness and gravitas, his creative practice models intellectual inquiry, compassion, and civic engagement.

Although Briggs discovered his affinity for working with clay in high school, he did not immediately realize that art would become central to his life. As the son of a Baptist minister in a small upstate New York town, he often found himself testing the boundaries of authority. After high school, he accepted an athletic scholarship to the University of New Haven—a choice that might seem unrelated to his pursuit of art. But in fact, lessons he learned as an athlete continue to inform his studio practice. Briggs’ track coach advised him: during practice, concentrate on your turns and your form, but “when you get to the meet, you're just going to get out there and run”. Applying this same principle to his art, Briggs rigorously employs and practices techniques in the studio, while also setting aside time to work more intuitively—cultivating a state of flow.

Briggs experiences flow most often when working on his pinch-formed vessels. He discovered his love of pinch-forming in the mid-1980s, inspired by a photograph of an ancient Chinese bowl. Nearly four decades later, he continues to be fascinated by the variations he can achieve by using different clays, glazes, bases, and firing methods. His pinch-forming methods produce a chimeric form with high-relief elements that suggest undulating leaves, petals, or sea creatures.

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Looking closely, one can also notice how Briggs’ petal forms hold the shape of his fingerprints—a welcome reminder of the importance of touch in a technology-driven world. His improvisatory process does not suggest notions of limitless beauty, but instead an aesthetic that embodies individuality and responsiveness to change. The petal pinch-forming vessels sustained Briggs and allowed him to, as he puts it, “quiet down” for decades, especially in the mid-1980s, inspired by a photograph of an ancient Chinese bowl. Nearly four decades later, he continues to be fascinated by the variations he can achieve by using different clays, glazes, bases, and firing methods. His pinch-forming methods produce a chimeric form with high-relief elements that suggest undulating leaves, petals, or sea creatures.

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Just before he began serving as a pastor—almost as if he anticipated that unexpected calling—Briggs began the *Interfaith Object* series as a way of exploring commonalities among different religious traditions. For example, the structure of *Locke Blocks* (2008), at lower right takes inspiration from various forms of ecclesiastical architecture, such as cathedral apses, buttresses, tombs, Egyptian pylons, and obelisks. Although the pieces in the *Interfaith Object* series are relatively small in scale, they convey a sense of monumentality and focused reverence.

While he was creating a related series, titled *Hypostasis*, Briggs sought to integrate the improvisatory aspects of his pinching process with the narrative concepts he was exploring through slab-building. Works such as *Hypostasis IV* (2000), at upper right are smooth, block-like structures that partially open to reveal rows of pinched-formed shapes. Like geodes, their exteriors are unassuming, block-like structures that partially open to reveal rows of pinched-formed shapes. Like geodes, their exteriors are unassuming, but their interiors reveal wonderful shapes. In Christian theology, *hypostasis* refers to an underlying reality that is usually hidden from view. Similarly, in contrast to their massive slab-built walls, Briggs’s delicately-pinched interiors call attention to the importance of hidden worlds—be they creative, natural, or spiritual.

In his next series, *Feeling Tones* (pages 16–17), Briggs continued to explore the relationship between external and interior worlds. As he did in the *Hypostasis* series, Briggs placed organic and naturalistic forms within rigid structures—but each *Feeling Tones* structure is a 12-by-12-inch plywood box lined with industrial felt: they look as if they were designed to store scientific specimens. The sides of some of the boxes are laminated with laser-jet images or paint layers that have been abraded, encouraging viewers to consider the fragility and ephemerality of both nature and knowledge. For example, the title of *Hypostasis IV* refers to an underlying reality that is usually hidden from view. Similarly, in contrast to their massive slab-built walls, Briggs’s delicately-pinched interiors call attention to the importance of hidden worlds—be they creative, natural, or spiritual.

In 2016, Briggs decided to translate his ministry into the language of art. He revitalized his creative practice by enrolling in the MFA program at Massachusetts College of Art. *Play Area (Locke Blocks)* (opposite) is a pivotal work that he completed during this transition, experimenting with wood, rather than clay, and using satire (opposite) is a pivotal work that he completed during this transition, experimenting with wood, rather than clay, and using satire as an iconoclastic strategy, Briggs mimicked the look of a vintage alphabet blocks—the type used to teach letters and simple

words. When visitors to the exhibit who are of a certain age kneel down on the olive-green 1960s-era rug to engage with the blocks, they feel a wave of nostalgia and expect to see familiar associations between letters, words, and images. Instead, they encounter images harvested from popular culture and from Jan Nedervene Pieterse’s book, *White on Black, Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*. In Briggs’s block set, J stands for Jews, Q stands for Queer, P stands for Patriotism, and X stands for Xenophobia. However, Briggs does not confront viewers only with Confederate flags and other images that symbolize racism; he also includes images such as a rainbow flag that have positive cultural associations. The aspect of the project as a playful reference to the philosopher John Locke (1698-1750), who explored the limits of knowledge, favored empiricism, and challenged authoritarianism.

Briggs creates an environment in which viewers can consider the complex and changing roles that images have played in their own lives.

Briggs models this kind of self-reflection in *Cell Personas* (2017), a series of small wall-mounted cubes. He began the series while working in Minnesota, not long after Philando Castille, an African American man, was killed by a police officer during a routine traffic stop on July 6, 2016. As Briggs recalls, when he was creating this series, he was “performing Blackness and code-switching—adapting a defensive persona. Such experiences made him wonder how both stereotypes and aspects of identity are presented spatially through the built environment.” Accordingly, he constructed each cube in the *Cell Persona* series so that its primary facade is penetrated by projecting forms opening—elements that variously recall prison bars, gender symbols, and other cultural constructs. For example, the title of *Cell Persona (Police)* and the cup-like projection at its center—all attention to the way prisoners are constrained and labeled, even after they are released from prison.

Another of Briggs’s important slab-built sculptures from 2017 is *Refused Vessel* (Kylix). Both the title and the elegant silhouette of *Kylix* recall ancient Greek pottery, but its structure is resilient,
According to Briggs, Cell Personae is deeply rooted in his past work with Black men and families who have been impacted by incarceration. He was also influenced by 13th, the documentary film directed by Ava Duvernay, which opens with Barack Obama’s voice-over narration. “So, let’s look at the statistics. The United States is home to 5% of the world’s population, but 25% of the world’s prisoners—think about that.” As Briggs notes, Black Americans represent 13% of the population, but 40% of the nation’s prison population; Blacks are nearly twice as likely as Hispanics and six times as likely as whites to be incarcerated.

Cell Personae was also informed by The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, by Michelle Alexander (published in 2010), and by “How Albert Woodskiles Survived Solitary,” an article by Rachel Aviv (published by The New Yorker in 2017), which Briggs cites as a key influence. After familiarizing himself with research on mass incarceration, Briggs designed the proportions of each of his “cells” to correspond to prison cells in the United States, which measure, on average, six-by-eight feet. He constructed each of the 25 components of the installation with massive walls that impinge upon internal elements made from coiled clay—forms that can variously suggest shackles, knotted ropes, or other constraints. Calling attention to systemic structures and narratives that deserve greater attention, notably, the legacy of slavery, the ongoing trauma of mass incarceration, and the need to ensure equal justice.

With Material Shapes in Clay, Briggs joins an impressive lineage of clay artists who have exhibited at Swarthmore—including Robert Turner, William Daley, and Sana Musassama. Seminal artists like these—all of whom have demonstrated remarkable craft, integrity, and civic engagement—model the Quaker saying, “Let your life speak.”

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Interfaith Object Anubis I, 2000, unglazed stoneware, 15 ½ x 10 ⅜ x 12 ¼ inches

Interfaith Object Altar II, 2000, unglazed stoneware, 13 ⅛ x 11 x 11 ¾ inches
Inveigle I, 2016, industrial felt, plywood, ceramic, unglazed and glazed stoneware, 13 ⅞ x 12 ½ x 8 inches

Inveigle II, 2016, industrial felt, plywood, ceramic, unglazed and glazed stoneware, 16 ⅞ x 13 ⅝ x 8 inches
Installation view: Feeling Ones, 2016

Feeling Ones, 2016, industrial felt, plywood, laser jet transfers, ceramics, 12 x 12 x 5 inches
Above: Block B, plywood and laser jet transfers. Each cube face: 3 ½ inches square.

Installation view: *Persona*, 2017, partially glazed stoneware

From left: *Persona (Cell)*, *Persona (Zealot)*, *Persona (Imploded)*

Opposite: *Persona (Chauvinist)*, 2017, partially glazed stoneware, 6 ¾ x 6 ¾ x 7 inches
Above: Refuted Vessel (Kylix), 2017, glazed stoneware, 6 ¼ x 11 ¼ x 5 inches

Opposite: Refuted Vessel (Kylix) and Refuted Vessel, 2017, glazed stoneware, 12 x 12 x 3 ¼ inches
Installation view: Knot Series, 2021, glazed ceramic

From left: Narrative, Parenthetical

Parenthetical, 2021, glazed ceramic, 18 ⅝ x 15 ¾ x 5 inches
Installation view: Knot Series, 2021, glazed ceramic

From left: Hyperbole, Parse

Hyperbole, 2021, glazed ceramic, 18 ¼ x 13 ¼ x 6 inches
Kalief Browder III, 2021, glazed ceramic stoneware, 8 ¼ x 8 x 5 ½ inches

Opposite: installation view of Cell Personae: The Impact of Incarceration on Black Lives, 2021
Windflower, 2021, high relief leaf pinched vessel, double cuttle, dome foot, unglazed, 11 x 12 x 8 inches

Wildflower, 2021, high relief leaf pinched vessel/dome foot, unglazed, 10 x 10½ x 8 inches
Top: Calyx Krater, 2021, high relief leaf pinched round pedestal bowl, unglazed, 9 ½ x 13 x 13 inches

Opposite: Calyx Bowl, 2021, high relief leaf pinched rounded bowl, unglazed, 9 x 13 x 13 inches
Paul Briggs was born in Beacon, New York, in 1963, and grew up in the Hudson Valley region of New York. He holds a BMed in education and ceramics from the City College of New York (1986); an MA in rabbinic literature from Oral Roberts University (1991); an MSEd in education and ceramics from Alfred University (1992); a PhD in art education and educational theory and policy from Pennsylvania State University (1995); and an MFA in ceramics and 3D design from Massachusetts College of Art and Design (2016).

Currently, he is Associate Professor of Art Education at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. He has also taught art and art education at Penland School of Craft in North Carolina, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine, and the ceramics program at Harvard University, where he was an artist-in-residence (2019-2020). In 2022, he was named the Donald J. Gordon Visiting Artist at Swarthmore College and also honored as a McFaul Fellow in Ceramics at the University of Iowa. In February 2021, he was featured on the cover of Ceramics Monthly. Other honors include an Advancing Artist Grant from the South Eastern Minnesota Arts Council (2018), and an award for outstanding teaching from St. Olaf College (2017).

Briggs’ artwork is held in the collections of Alfred Ceramic Art Museum, Alfred, NY; Fuller Craft Museum, Brockport, MA; Flaten Art Museum, St. Olaf College, Northfield, MN; San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, TX; University of Tennessee, Ewing Gallery, Knoxville, TN; Wellesley College Multifaceted Center, Wellesley MA; and the Paul Briggs Collection of Columbus Museum of Art.

The artist is represented by Lucy Lacoste Gallery, Concord, MA and exhibits with Friedman Benda Gallery, New York, NY.

For more information and images, please visit the artist’s website: psbriggs.com

This catalog was published in conjunction with Paul S. Briggs: Material Shapes in Clay, an exhibition curated by Andrea Packard, List Gallery director, and presented at the List Gallery, Swarthmore College, from January 28 through March 23, 2022.

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The List Gallery wishes to thank Paul Briggs for the opportunity to exhibit his works and for his generous and collaborative spirit.

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Cover image: Heel [detail], 2021 glazed ceramic stoneware, 9 ½ x 7 ½ x 6 inches

Inside front cover: Equal Justice IV [detail], 2021 glazed ceramic stoneware, 8 ¼ x 7 ⅝ x 6 ½ inches

Back cover: Equal Justice IV, 2021 glazed ceramic stoneware, 8 ¼ x 7 ⅝ x 6 ½ inches

Photograph of Paul Briggs by MP Brandt