

# ARTIST SPOTLIGHT **Lee Persell**

A moment of awe for Lee Persell, ceramics Artist-Instructor and Ceramics Studio Manager at the Minnetonka Center for the Arts, was when her college professor, Warren McKenzie, took his students deep into the University of Minnesota archives. With a curator, Lee and her classmates were able to touch, hold and study ancient pots thousands of years old.

Lee realized her sensory priorities in grade school when the teacher asked, “If you had to lose one of your senses, which sense would you give up?” Even as a young girl, Lee knew that she could live without her eyes, she could live without hearing, but she couldn’t live without touch.

This defines a fundamental force in Lee’s artwork. Pottery is an extension of the body. It’s held, lifted, touched to our lips. For Lee, the points of transition – in line and form, in functionality and use, and within the creative process – are everything. Ceramics is a physical and tactile experience, continuous and whole, beginning to end.

Lee likens her connection with clay to early experiences with the piano, a percussion instrument that frustrated her because creating music was once removed. She had to be IN it, directly connected. Like her decision to play the harp rather than the piano, Lee found the direct physical interaction with clay much more satisfying than other art forms.

As an instructor, Lee is exceptionally good at breaking down the creative process and helping students find and take what they need. Yet her personal view of the artistic process is continuous and fluid, a series of transitions that are one. Creative decisions are not separate but all part of a whole. For her it begins with the clay body (right now she’s working with four different types of clay) and from the clay, things branch out in the direction of the final product. The clay, the fire, the slip or glaze – one is integral to the other, decisions and factors are interrelated and not separate.

“I’ve learned over the years not to be so rigid in the final idea that I miss the discovery or the act of discovery along the way,” says Lee. “If you’re rigid, then all those little experiences and all those little things that happen along the way, you’d miss it. You can always go back to that rigid thing and repeat it, but the spontaneous things that happen are hard to repeat.”



Being in Lee’s ceramics classes, you’ll recognize that she is keenly aware that everything is about the students and what they need. She watches, listens and gears the instruction to what they need and where they want to go.

“It is their experience, their investment. They could be anywhere else doing lots of other things, yet they choose to be here [in the studio],” says Lee. “To me, it is a real blessing to help someone along on their journey and to be a part of that. Someone is allowing me to be part of their life and that is not a little thing.”

Building community is the culture of the Ceramics Studio. “You’re part of something here. It’s *your* studio,” says Lee. “It’s about providing a safe environment and giving people the tools so they can push the boundaries of their own creativity.” She credits the studio’s team of Artist-Instructors for fostering the open, collaborative spirit. “They are all accomplished artists. They all have a really good sense of self. It’s not about I, it’s about we here.”

Lee handles an incredible volume of work as Ceramics Studio Manager. In addition to teaching, Lee moves more than 30,000 pots through the kilns each year practically on her own, manages the inventories of clay, tools and glazes so students are never without, and keeps all of the equipment running. “It takes an accomplished set of skills and intense personal commitment to keep the studio running,” says Executive Director Roxanne Heaton. “Lee alone makes that happen. I think that’s a huge accomplishment.”

