

Gallery Spotlight

Interview with Matthew Krousey

By Karen McPherson, Gallery Manager



Matthew Krousey, *Crane Plate*, 2012, 9.5" x 10" x 2".

Matthew Krousey has worn many hats at Northern Clay Center over the past 4 years: studio fellowship recipient, teacher, gallery and exhibitions assistant, studio artist, and more. As of January 2013, Matt is a new addition to NCC's sales gallery. Throughout his tenure in these many positions, he has also served steadily in the military. Gallery Manager Karen McPherson sat down with Matt to discuss his experience in the military, how this experience influences his ceramic practice, and affects his current role as a teaching artist with NCC's collaboration with Veterans in the Arts.

Being an Art Student in the National Guard

KM: You grew up in North Central, MN, in Little Falls. When you came to the "big city" to attend the University of Minnesota, were you already in the military?

MK: After my first semester in school, I got the tuition bill and realized I would have substantial debt if I didn't do something. I joined the National Guard in response. They pay full tuition, books, and a living stipend.

KM: Can you clarify—what is the GI Bill and how is being "in the Guard" similar or different?

MK: It is the same thing—the GI Bill was passed after WWII to help men and women, back from overseas, transition from military to civilian life. The GI Bill pays for education; they don't care what the degree is in;

they care that you get decent grades and that you graduate. These days, you can join "the Guard", a part-time military post, and take advantage of the GI Bill.

KM: What role, other than financial, did the GI Bill play in your education?

MK: I went to school thinking I was going to study bio-chemistry. I changed my major to art once I felt the relief of having my bills paid by the GI Bill and knew that I would graduate without debt. I took a ceramics class from University of Minnesota Professor Curt Hoard.

KM: What were your responsibilities to the Guard?

MK: Generally, one weekend a month, and two full weeks a year, usually in summertime. When I joined, I went to Georgia for six months of basic training. I came back to the University of Minnesota for two months before I was deployed to Kuwait and Iraq to support Operation Iraqi Freedom.

KM: After you returned from active duty and began studying again at the University, what, if anything, changed for you?

MK: Well, the GI stipend increased, so I could be in school, in the studio, full-time, and not have a job. Having been to war, my levels of frustration and anger were intense and clay is what saved me; it made me feel whole again. I will never give up clay; I believe in its tactile and healing properties.

The Clay-Military Connection

KM: Is being a vet important to you as an artist?

MK: Being in the military was a super-charged track to maturity. It helped me focus on my goals. Military life is really organized and disciplined. I organize my studio time in a similar way. I feel like the group of clay artists who took advantage of the GI Bill are do-ers: Peter Voulkos, William Daley, Paul Soldner, Warren MacKenzie, and Tom Lane all took advantage of the GI Bill. Warren MacKenzie is a great example: he wakes up, he goes to his studio every day, and he breaks for lunch at noon. He is disciplined.

KM: As a kid, did you have other role models in the military?

MK: My dad was an active guard reservist at Camp Ripley between Little Falls and Brainerd. A small part of Camp Ripley is used as the base and training grounds. The rest is essentially a huge wildlife sanctuary: the wolf was re-introduced to Minnesota in this sanctuary and they have the largest predatory bird population in the Midwest. So, I grew up fishing there on the weekends with my dad. Ironically, my work is not about the military; it's about a childhood spent on a military reservation. And actually, now that I think back, part of my reason for joining the military at 18 was so I could still go fishing on military land.

KM: Your imagery of cranes, waves of water, wind-blown snow, and the barbed wire of rural fencing obviously pays homage to your childhood experience in North Central Minnesota. But, it sounds like you are just now connecting the subject matter of your ceramics specifically to your experience on this vast expanse of military land. What other connections are you now making between the military and your role as naturalist and artist?

MK: Growing up the way I did, I always felt a close connection to the land. It wasn't until my experience protecting our country that I realized these creatures and habitats needed protecting too. I wanted to bring attention to our natural environment and preserve it visually in a material that would endure. Just so happens that the ceramic medium is extremely durable, a way for me to draw attention to and visually preserve the vanishing landscape and natural habitats. Functional pots are a great way to get artwork into people's hands on a daily basis. The imagery I use is meant to evoke memories and protect, in my own way, our natural habitats. I still go out into the woods and onto the prairie looking for new and better ways to represent the landscapes I love.

Gallery Spotlight continued on page 02.

Gallery Spotlight continued from page 01.

KM: And professionally?

MK: My status as a vet has put my name into the ring for various public art projects. Sometimes this is a federal government building project—the government and other public service organizations like to support veteran artists. I’ve had the opportunity to create a mural for the new wing at the VA hospital, platters for a heart clinic in Edina, and I am currently working with a group of veterans to make a mural for a homeless veterans drop-in center in Minneapolis.

Being an Art Educator for Veterans

KM: When did you start teaching clay to veterans?

MK: In 2010, I started working with Veterans in the Arts, a local non-profit whose mission is to introduce veterans to the arts (www.veteransinthearts.org). This organization approached NCC’s education department with the hopes of an ongoing collaboration. The Center assisted with the initial grant application, while I worked with Veterans in the Arts as a sort of consultant. We’ve all been working collaboratively since the program’s inception and NCC continues to manage the administrative pieces of the clay partnership.

KM: Does Veterans in the Arts have other opportunities for artists and veterans around the Twin Cities?

MK: FOCI Glass Studio, Highpoint Center for Printmaking, Minnesota Center for Book Arts, and the Playwrights Center are all partners with VIA, providing programs of a similar nature.

KM: Why is your work as a teacher to veterans important to you?

MK: My work with the vets is really meaningful to me and to the vets. Art can be daunting and intimidating to people who are new to exploring it and to using their creativity. To work with someone who has had similar experiences, who understands what is going on in their minds is crucial to the process... I feel *protective* of the veterans. I wouldn’t want them to have a teacher, or be in a learning environment, that wasn’t positive. I was distraught when I got back from my deployment, and immersing myself in the studio was critical; it was relieving. Clay is a very physical art medium; it is relaxing.

KM: How can the clay community help grow the participation of veterans in the arts?

MK: Encourage any veterans you know to take an art class. Locals should contact Veterans in the Arts. Arts organizations should seek funding (available through private and government programs) and create partnerships with local organizations already serving veterans. ■



Matthew Krousey during deployment in 2004.



NORTHERN CLAY CENTER

2424 Franklin Avenue East | Minneapolis, Minnesota 55406
612.339.8007 | www.northernclaycenter.org