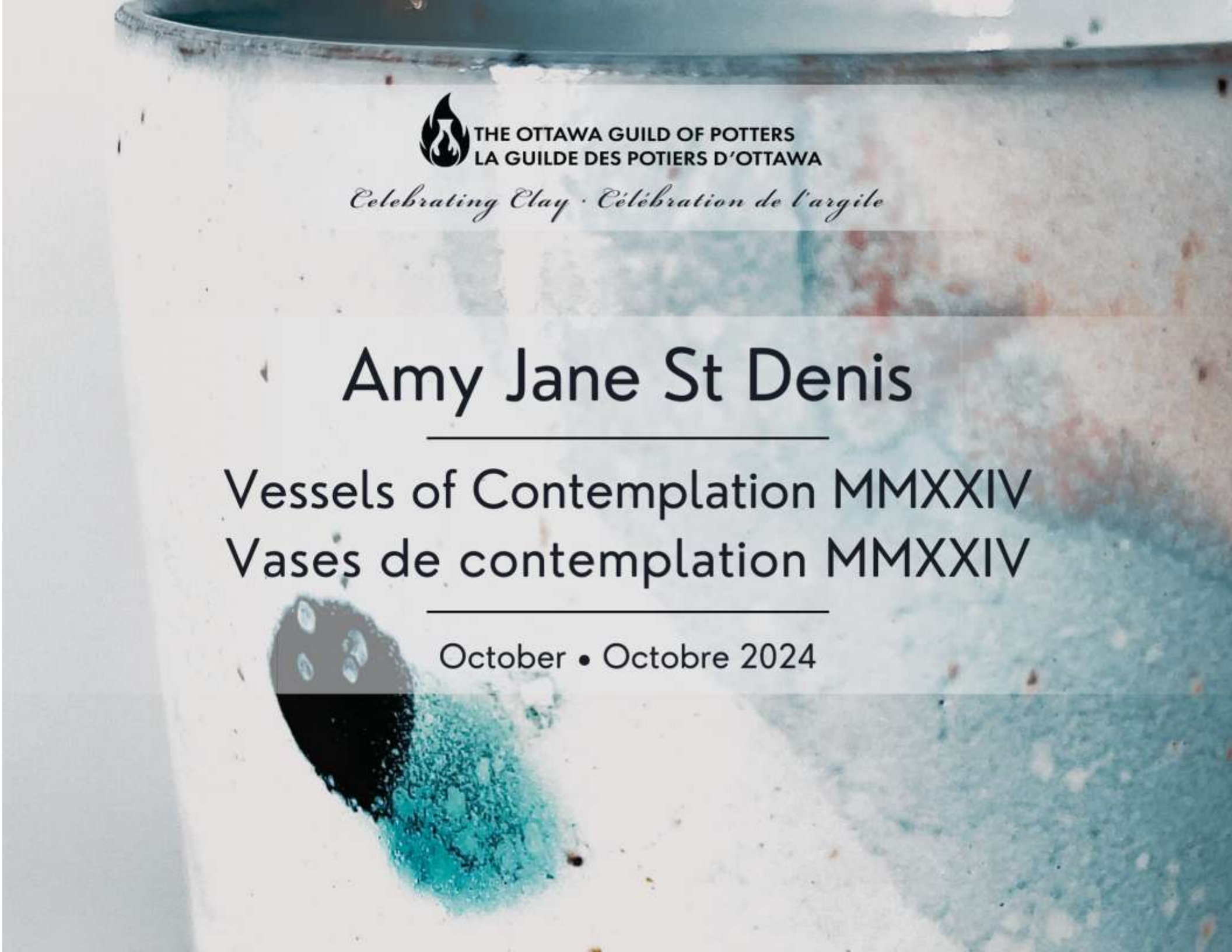


THE OTTAWA GUILD OF POTTERS
LA GUILDE DES POTIERS D'OTTAWA

Celebrating Clay · Célébration de l'argile

Amy Jane St Denis

Vessels of Contemplation MMXXIV
Vases de contemplation MMXXIV

October • Octobre 2024

Amy Jane St Denis was raised on a sixth-generation cattle farm in rural South March, Ottawa. She spent countless hours in nature exploring the land, fascinated by the rich, earthy clay lining the creek beds. Her first rudimentary sun baked clay objects made an indelible mark on her.

Amy pursued a four-year program at the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) in Toronto, where she explored a range of mediums including ceramics. She found solace in the pottery studio, an escape from the city's buzz. Amy was fortunate to complete her co-op placements with Wendy Walgate and the late Jim Thomson, assisting him in running a seminar at Lolaland Studio in Quebec.

Recently she completed three years in the BFA program at the University of Ottawa,

Amy has been a member of Gladstone ClayWorks and the Ottawa Guild of Potters for the past two years, where an exchange of knowledge and support between members has been instrumental in her current work. Her recent work focuses on wheel-thrown vessels and expanding her handbuilt repertoire of birds, chains, flowers and mini Venus statues.

Amy’s artistic philosophy centers on curiosity, exploration, and experimentation. Her approach is rooted in a respect for historical influences while striving for originality in her contemporary fine craft. Her work has been exhibited in New Zealand, Toronto, Arnprior and Ottawa.

All photos by the artist

Vessels of Contemplation MMXXIV

My recent work explores the clay pot as a vessel of contemplation. I investigate how my pots function as a metaphor for individuality and the collective. In the Celebrating Clay Exhibition, I delve into my creative process and reveal the reflective qualities of the act of making and the resulting ceramic pots. As the clay spins on the wheel and the cups form through my hands, I work to create a beautiful vessel, which, for me, entails the delicate balance of form and function. As the clay takes shape, I consider the pot's symbolic weight before choosing which surface design technique I will apply to the piece. My work oscillates between two traditional pottery techniques, Majolica and English slipware. I use these processes as a departure for a modified methodology using a more durable cone six clay body rather than terracotta. These methods lend to spontaneous mark-making, such as sgraffito and stamping to painting with slips, underglazes and glazes.

I make the cups as a family or collection with a unifying objective. Each family comprises 2-20 individuals, however many I can make in one wheel-throwing session.

The resulting cup functions as both a useful object and as a vessel for contemplation, which is evoked by experiencing the cup's physicality and inherently unique characteristics and qualities. I decided to stamp or paint Roman numerals on the pots, allowing for accurate note-taking and identifying each piece before they migrated into the world. These pots have a journey that mirrors our own. From the moment we are formed and given a name, we, too, become part of a series of ever-widening circles—family, community, society, and beyond. As markers of individuality, the Roman numerals distinguish one cup from another while simultaneously linking them to the series as a whole. Each member has an identity as both an individual and as part of a collective. Each pot will eventually be dispersed, just as family members scatter far and wide across the Earth, each carrying a sense of origin and shared history. I hope that the contemplative nature of these vessels will enhance your daily rituals and be a reminder that life itself is a meditation, a constant balance between the individual and the collective, the material and the spiritual, the everyday and the cosmic.

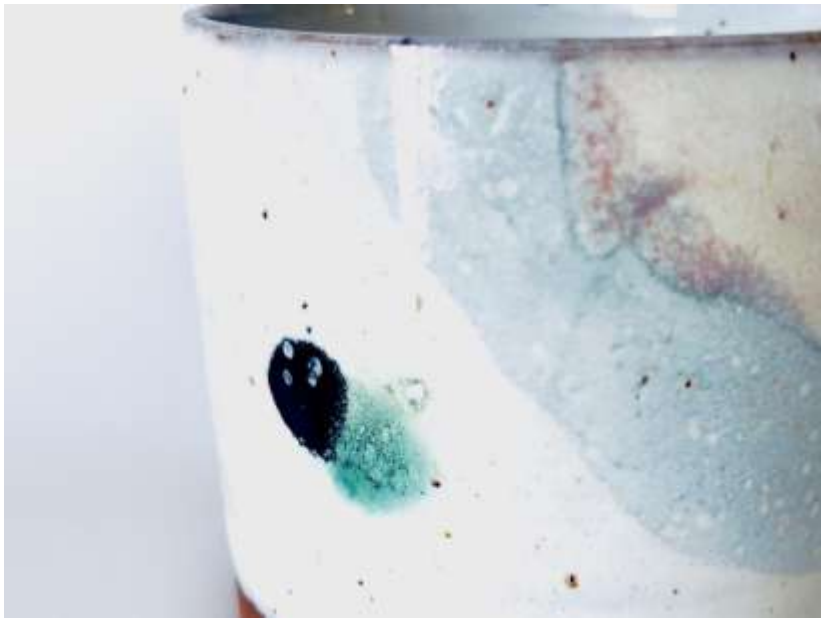
Amy Jane St. Denis

Ambrosia's Garden

Ambrosia's Garden is a collection of five wheel-thrown stoneware vessels that I glazed using a modified majolica technique. Each pot has its unique identity and personality yet shares commonalities within the collective with unifying design elements, such as line, shape, and colour. Rich, inky black dots populate most pots, a recurring theme in my work; these 'Beauty marks' create a contrasted interplay between the more delicate, watery swaths of colour.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend. Underglaze and glaze.
Method: Wheel-thrown, glazed using a majolica technique. Fired to cone 6 in oxidation.
Dimensions: Cups: height 11 cm, width 9 cm

Vessel IV (Ambrosia's Garden)



Vessel IV from the Ambrosia's Garden collection has a quiet, nuanced feeling. For this collection, I left a generous amount of the raw clay body unglazed, which amplifies the contrast between that and the shiny white glaze. I also removed the pots from the wheel head with a wiggle wire, enhancing the cups' tactile and meditative qualities.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend, underglaze and glaze.
Method: Wheel-thrown, glazed using a majolica technique. Fired to cone 6 oxidation.
Dimensions: Height 10 cm, width 9 cm, width at base 9 cm

Dysfunctional Family

This collection, which comprises four individual vessels, highlights a family unit's inherent flaws and beauty. Emotions are illustrated with abstract motifs that conjure stormy weather but also display a calm nurturing of growth and evolution. Each cup is unique yet united and bound by the same processes, materials, and mood. The sweeping white slip contrasts with the finely incised black lines.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend, slip, underglazes and glaze.
Method: Wheel-thrown, glazed using a slipware technique. Fired to cone 6 oxidation.
Dimensions: Cups: height 10 cm, width 8 cm average

Vessel from Dysfunctional Family

This vessel from the Dysfunctional Family collection showcases its own unique identity. The gritty sand-like structure of the clay body contrasts the luxurious white slip that enrobes the form. The cascading white glaze spilling over the rim creates a visual tension between the imposed floral imagery and the randomness of the melting glaze.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend, slip, underglaze, glaze.
Method: Wheel-thrown, slip applied to leather hard clay, sgraffito, glazed. Fired to cone 6 in oxidation.
Dimensions: Height 10 cm, width 9 cm

Watermelon Sugar Jar

The simplicity of the Watermelon Sugar Jar calls for a simple solution—a lid that extends well into the jar to secure it without requiring a gallery. The pot can then function as a drinking cup as well. I am drawn to the rough gestural quality of the black line in concert with the luscious, watery red watermelon. When I paint, I sometimes close my eyes to create opportunities for chance and randomness, striking a balance between control and chaos in my work.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend, underglaze and glaze.
Method: Wheel thrown, glazed and painted with underglazes. Fired to cone 6 in oxidation.
Dimensions: Height 11 cm, width 10 cm, width at base 10 cm

Rhapsody Vessels (7)

A rhapsody is a piece of music that has no formal structure and expresses powerful feelings. It is an impassioned speech or sentiment. This family of vessels is akin to rhapsody in lyrics or words but captured in the material form. Spontaneous painterly gestures evoke nature's splendour and randomness, infusing this collection of vessels with a joie de vivre.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend. Underglazes and glaze.
Method: Wheel-thrown, underglaze and glaze. Fired to cone 6 oxidation.
Dimensions: Cups: height 10 cm, width 8 cm average

Vessel Xll (Rhapsody Collection)

Vessel XII from the Rhapsody Collection represents exuberance and freedom with the loose brushwork. Fresh, immediate star and flower motifs encapsulate the attitude of the entire group and are inspired by the work of Miro for his playful use of symbols.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend, underglazes and glaze.
Method: Wheel-thrown, painted with underglazes over glaze. Fired to cone 6 in oxidation.
Dimensions: Height 9 cm, width 8 cm, width at base 8 cm

Blue and White Vessels

Inspired by the blue and white Chinese and Delftware pottery, I infused these cups with cobalt oxide. A cross-hatch pattern encircles one pot with varied dilutions of cobalt oxide, whereas the other is painted with broad strokes of cobalt and underglazes. The effect reminds me of a nebula with a bubbly coalescing atmosphere—ethereal and mysterious. Cobalt oxide is used in concert with a white glaze to evoke the timelessness of blue and white and celebrate the rich history of this sumptuous colour combination.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend. Cobalt oxide, underglazes and glaze.
Method: Painted with oxide and underglazes over glaze. Fired to cone 6 in oxidation.
Dimensions: Cups: height 10 cm, width 8 cm average

Emerald Haze Vessel

I am moved by the pastures and land around me, and enjoy mornings when a hazy mist hangs over dewy grasses. This pot seems to embody this hauntingly beautiful sentiment. My fingers emphasize a spiral on the inner base of my pots—the evidence of a centrifugal force that keeps the clay centred upon the wheel. The spiral is found everywhere in nature, and I leave this mark as a testament to the mysteries of the universe.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend, underglazes and glaze.
Method: Wheel-thrown, glazed using a majolica technique. Fired to cone 6 oxidation.
Dimensions: Height 9 cm, width 9 cm

Black Flowers Blossom Collection

Free-flowing floral motifs unite eleven vessels. I enjoy infusing character into each cup with an immediacy of brushwork. Graphic black coalesces with the muted greys, caramels and lavender. Some pots are made by adding a unique appendage: a trimmed part of the pot has been reattached to create visual and physical interest.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend, underglaze and glaze.
Method: Wheel-thrown and altered, underglazes painted over glaze. Fired to cone 6 in oxidation.
Dimensions: Cups: height 10 cm, width 9 cm

Stark Raven

I wish to evoke a contemplative mindset with my pottery. A rhythmic turning of the piece slowly reveals its nature, a nod to the Eastern traditional tea ceremonies, where the distinct character of the cup is celebrated. I intended to capture the feeling of wet and inky underglazes and explore the nuances that a brighter white base glaze can create. A stark white canvas allows more impact with the jet black floral motifs.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend, underglaze and glaze.
Method: Wheel-thrown, underglazes painted over glaze. Fired to cone 6 in oxidation.
Dimensions: Cups: height 8 cm, width 8 cm

Wanderlust 8

Much of my current work is open to interpretation, inviting others to engage with the texture and imagery featured in my pottery. I occasionally use concrete references to flora and fauna, as in the Wanderlust 8 family. Paper transfers of botanical scrolls and horses set against wisps of white slip ground the entire collection of cups in an imaginative story.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend. Underglaze, glaze, paper transfers.
Method: Wheel-thown and altered, handbuilt components, slip, sgraffito, underglaze, paper transfers. Fired to cone 6 in oxidation.
Dimensions: Cups: height 10 cm, width 9 cm. Variable

Wanderlust 8 Lidded Edition

Wanderlust 8 Lidded Edition is a family of vessels with wheel-thrown and altered lids. I used a wiggle-wire tool to cut the lids free from the wheel and added handbuilt elements: a ball, a bird, a dog, a loop, and a Venus of Willendorf. The rich gold and inky figures sit atop the lids, adding charm, mystery, and enhanced usage to the Wanderlust Collection.

Material: Reclaim and commercial cone 6 clay blend, slip, paper transfers, underglazes and glaze.
Method: Wheel-thown and altered, handbuilt components, slip, sgraffito, underglaze, paper transfers. Fired to cone 6 in oxidation.
Dimensions: Lidded vessel: height 16 cm, width 9 cm

Perhaps more than any other exhibition in the Celebrating Clay series, *Vessels of Contemplation MMXXIV* represents a philosophical and humanistic approach to the creation of clay vessels. Like human beings occupying their place in their families, each vessel is unique, but has characteristics in common with the others in their group. Reflecting on how each one connects to and stands apart from others is much like contemplating how each of us relates to our family, friends and community, and to the total mass of humanity.

This exhibition would not have come together without the help of our eagle-eyed proofreader, Collin Jang, and our ever-patient webmaster, Dave Drapeau. Our deepest thanks for your help.

We hope you enjoy this contemplation.

The Exhibitions Committee
Elizabeth Davies, Joanna Richardson, Nadine Argo, Alison Welsh, Liz Kunkel, and Krisha Shaw

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