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INTERVIEWS WITH



PAPER CLAY
ARTISTS

I INTERVIEWED these three artists because they are all early innovators in paper clay as an artistic medium, independently incorporated it in their studio practices, and are teachers who are willing to share their knowledge. I did the interviews between May and October 2018 as individual phone calls, then edited them for *Studio Potter*.

BY LORIE NELSON

LORIE NELSON: What references, cultural or otherwise, led you to use paper clay in your work?

ROSETTE GAULT: My story begins when I was a student [at the University of Colorado Boulder] in 1971 studying with [Professor] Betty Woodman at the Firehouse Studio. I was learning the rudiments of clay and glaze chemistry, how to mix clay bodies from raw materials, and the rationale behind the differences between a potter's clay body recipe and a sculptor's clay body recipe. Sculptors' clay bodies at that time were using grog. So I started working with the grogged clay, and I wasn't happy with it at all. I thought, *There's got to be a better clay body.* And, *Why can't you work with it wet and dry?* And, *Why do I have to baby everything so much at every stage in the process?* I yearned for expressive freedom most of all.

But of course, during those years, everyone said, "Oh, there's no other option to the traditional rules, unless you want to use nylon as a fiber in your clay. And don't use

paper pulp or anything like that, because it'll just stink to high heaven, and then your clay can't be aged." They gave all kinds of reasons like these.

As a full-time studio potter and teacher of pottery and sculpture after grad school, I chose to use a couple of traditional porcelain and china-clay bodies consistently for tableware, as well as a terra-cotta; and also some jet-black bodies once in a while, depending on the kiln or firing process. I did that up until 1990, when, on a residency, I decided, "Oh, I'm gonna scale up and see how big I can build." There happened to be a papermaking studio next door, with a Hollander mixer-beater for making pulp. I ended up borrowing some pulp to mix into the clay body, and then I ended up mixing my own pulp. In retrospect, there was a synchronicity during the next few days of work, as my work habits with traditional clay proved to be almost useless and working wet to dry with paper clay provided the right balance.

What led me was frustration and a whole lot of tests that didn't work, trying all these

concoctions of casting slip and all these mixtures and adaptations and little recipes here and there, to see if I could get regular clay to do wet-on-dry. And lo and behold, the magic ingredient had been there all along, which was the one that was off the radar, that was so close and so far.

REBECCA HUTCHINSON: What led me was an environmental connection. I was never taught to use paper clay, and I did not read any historical texts that were written about paper clay. In the late eighties and early nineties, it was my observation on an environmental level—looking at how birds created structure and noticing that they were taking paper and other refuse in their immediate area, as well as fibrous materials, and combining it with clay, and making structures.

I started thinking about my expertise as a trained papermaker—I had apprenticed with a papermaker for two years while I was in graduate school—as well as my having a traditional ceramics background,

IN THESE TIMES, MIXED MEDIA AND MIXED MATERIALS SHOULD NOT BE THREATENING TO PEOPLE.

undergraduate and graduate. I was reflecting on my expertise, and I was, like, “Oh, my gosh—I know cellulose, I know fibers, I know the construction of paper.” I started realizing that this is my expertise, and it connects to my conceptual research and looking at how other species construct form and seeing the density and hardness and the success with the combination of materials.

So it was relying on my expertise; I dared myself to combine the materials and not see them as isolated from each other. I really gave myself permission, then, to combine my materials as I was seeing within my research. And the research was truly an environmental observation.

JERRY BENNETT: In thinking back, there was a residency that was in Banff, Canada, around 1995. A variety of artists in different disciplines got together to think about how they could increase the amount of intersection between the disciplines of art. One of the things that they were talking about is how artists might influence the overall direction of a discipline—like, can a jeweler influence ceramics? And as a general rule, I would say no to that, but in this particular case, some of the things that came out of that discussion had an influence on me.

At that time, I was an associate at The Clay Studio in Philadelphia. One of the international artists who was at the Banff event came to The Clay Studio for a residency. She just made a very casual comment to me, like, “Oh, I just went to this really interesting event. One of the things we talked about was incorporating paper fibers into clay and what kind of impact it would have.” After that discussion, I took some toilet paper, put it in some wet clay and experimented with it, and found that it answered a lot of problems I was having at the time. I’ve been using it for the past twenty years and still find aspects of the technique that excite me.

LN: What misconceptions about paper clay have you encountered in the past?

RH: Well, the main one is kind of a knee-jerk reaction from very strong traditionalists about the harm it does to kiln elements. “You can’t fire that in a kiln. You can’t do that. You can’t do that.” I hear that all the time, that it’s so harmful to the kiln, but in reality, we know that there’s only harm in trapped carbon. So if there’s an enviro-vent on the kiln, or the kiln lid is cracked open for venting, all the carbon that’s burning out of the cellulose is released from the kiln.

Other misconceptions I hear concern mold, and I always quickly clarify that mold is not good and mold does create respiratory concerns, but mold can be deterred, easily, through Listerine. I use Listerine or bleach, and they completely clean it up.

Traditionalists sometimes find it threatening to not be pure, not to use just clay. There’s so much irony in how, in today’s society, some

people want distinction of materials. In these times, mixed media and mixed materials should not be threatening to people.

JB: In teaching workshops, I’ve run into people who have a very shadowy idea of what paper clay is, and have no practical experience with it. It’s really exciting to see people open up and try new things with paper clay. Most people are very willing to try things, and like my initial experience with paper clay, it either solves problems or it doesn’t. And if it’s not solving problems, you should go back and do exactly what you’ve done before: Use regular clay, and be happy about it. But if you have these problems, for example, with making really, really large pieces, and you want to transport them into a kiln, you can put paper fibers in the clay, and it makes it much stronger and easier to move.

This is hard to explain, but I think that people are confusing *technique* with art. Paper clay is a technique. In other words, it’s a means to an end, it’s not the end itself. The end—art—is a conversation of ideas, and paper clay can help you realize that, in the sense that it allows you to do almost anything you want to do with clay.

If using paper clay solves problems for what you want to do as an artist, then it’s a good thing. If it’s not, or if you don’t have anything to say, it’s not going help you make better art.

RG: There are just so many misconceptions, and I wish that I could help everybody that’s struggling with paper clay, because it’s so much darn fun to work with. I always hate when an artist gets a bad batch or one that

is not prepared correctly, and then the artist gets a problem with cracking, or flecks of badly prepared pulp, or something that is only due to bad batch.

And one other thing is an old way of thinking: that there was no advantage to using paper over something like nylon or any manufactured, manmade fiber. Paper in 1970 and earlier was very expensive, and pulp was, too, and we thought that it had to be “virgin” pulp.

LN: What are a few advantages and disadvantages of paper clay, compared to traditional clay?

JB: One of the reasons to use paper clay is that it solves problems. Paper clay won't blow up in a kiln. It's very common for me to fire wet work. It fits into my schedule. I

can fire it without really too much concern about if it's dry or not.

Also, paper clay can be used for repair of things. I want my students to be successful at what they're doing, so one of the things I've developed over time is the ability to take something that's broken and put it back together. Paper clay is really, really good at repairing things. In fact, I've got a student that throws pots on the wheel,

like big bowls, and basically breaks them apart and takes colored paper clay slip and fits the pieces all back together.

You can do wet-on-dry application. Some of the forms I make take two weeks to make. I start at the bottom, work to the top. I never cover it to keep it wet, just let it dry out. I don't worry that it dries fast. I just continue working on it with wet clay. I increase the number of paper fibers, or in this case, cotton fibers in the clay, but I can move forward very easily just by adding wet clay to the already dried clay. You could go build a form, decide you don't like the handle on it, take the handle off, put another handle on. You could go bisque it, bring it out, say, “I still don't like this handle.” You could cut the bisque handle off, put a raw piece of clay onto the bisque, re-bisque it, and you could keep going. Nothing is ever done until it's the final firing, which in my case is a cone 13 porcelain firing.

With paper clay, you can work much larger than you would normally work. I have friends that make life-size sculptures. They make an armature out of paper clay, then put a skin of wet clay over the top of the armature. This way, they can build without worrying about the size at all.

You can use multiple layers of clay. You can do wet-to-wet or wet-to-dry or wet-to-bisque. Paper clay will withstand multiple re-dampenings to make changes in the form. Paper clay will withstand forced drying, and in fact, it's a really good idea to go out and force-dry a pot to see if the seams hold together; and if they open up, you just fix them. Paper clay allows for late-stage additions to works.

The fired results from paper clay are

exactly the same as regular clay, because just think about it, you add fibers to the raw clay, and after you bisque, the fibers are gone, so you're back to the regular clay. So the paper fibers are there when they need to be, but then they're gone, and you're back to the regular clay.

RH: Paper clay offers me a tremendous ease in building, in drying with less cracking, and in losing some weight after it's fired. So, all of a sudden, you have choices that far exceed those of working with traditional clay, and you don't have the boundaries of rigid thinking. You have unlimited choices, because you're not concerned about scoring, you're not concerned about drying evenly, and you're not concerned about putting just wet clay on wet clay. You could put wet clay on dry clay. You can put wet clay on fired clay. You can put wet paper clay on glazed clay. You have this unlimited number of options, and I find that ever-more exhilarating, both as a maker and as a teacher, because I can help an emerging maker navigate through the choices without fear. That's truly the hub of the advantage.

Personally, I take advantage of many extreme choices in form development. I weave with it. I use rammed-earth processes with it. I use it between sheets of paper and cut. I use it with a sewing machine. I knit, I crochet with it. I cast with it in solid masses. I dip other mixed media things with it. There's so many choices, and that is the answer in a nutshell. It's unlimited.

RG: First of all, there's a wall of invisible fear, which I was completely unaware of when I



Matthew Causey sketch
of a Rosette Gault
figurative sculpture.

used traditional clay. But when I switched over to using paper clay, all of a sudden, I didn't have any fear of cracking. All of a sudden, I didn't have to stop and think, "Oh, blow-dry this," or "I have to baby this because it might crack," and "Oh, I have to have even walls," because with paper clay you don't have to have even walls, and you can let it air-dry or force-dry it. And, in fact, paper clay is dynamic. When it shrinks, it's a preview of what's going to happen in the kiln. And when I see there's a stressful place, a little crack, "Oh, I'll just patch it with paper clay." Now the crack is double-strong. And if you need to wet it again, your form gently expands, and shrinks and expands. It's a perfect preview of the sort of stress your wild new form will have to pass through successfully should you fire it.

Paper clay is full of life and DNA due to the cellulose fiber that pulp is made of. It moves, and those movements can be managed when you understand them. This has given me amazing freedom to work—not just with wet-dry, but with all kinds of combinations I wouldn't have ever tried before.

The other thing is, it saved me a lot of time. I have saved weeks and months of drying time and so much firing fuel. I do fast firings because paper clay greenware is absorbent enough to apply glaze, I hardly ever have to do two firings. It eliminated the bisque fire.

LN: What main thought about paper clay would you like to share with the arts community?

RH: I want to share that it's a viable, good material that more and more people are aware of. I think that there's an opportunity for us, as a group, to educate the world about how good the material is. It doesn't do everything everyone needs, but it does offer so many possibilities to explore and avenues for expression.

I want it not to be marginalized. I want the material to always be presented as a great choice for expression and not to be seen as a "crafty" technique or a niche material. I want it to be seen as a viable material that deserves respect.

One of the specific qualities of paper clay that I really want to highlight is scale. I can use this material with such a confidence that I'm now building room-size pieces. I've benefited from the monumentality of my work and the increased scale of my work—and other artists have benefitted similarly from using paper clay.

Nature has used paper clay forever and civilizations have used it to build domestic spaces. It's a material that now makers can teach, and I'm interested in bringing it into its moment and illuminating its possibilities, rather than having it seen as just a narrow or marginalized genre.

JB: Paper clay solves problems. That's the reason why I, at least, am interested in using paper clay. It allows me to approach the clay in a much more aggressive way than I did in the past. And the other advantage is that if you've got young students that are learning about clay, you can take away some of the problems, like cracking and all that kind of stuff, which really makes teaching a lot easier because you're not worrying so much about the technical aspects of the material. My main message to the artist community would be, basically, give it a try, and if it solves problems for you, then I'd recommend you continue to use it; if not, go back to your regular material.

Paper clay in itself is a technique, a method, it's not the art. Paper clay allows more flexibility with the materials to tell your story, make a statement!

RG: Well, let's see. Where do we start? Well, the first thing is, get the facts; don't rely on the Internet one hundred percent. There's plenty of hearsay and error on there. Save yourself some heartbreak by finding someone who knows a little bit about it. Now we have all these people who do know more about it, so there's less chance of perpetuating the misconceptions.

The second thing is, when you try paper clay, it's not going to feel exactly the same as regular clay. If you take the time to get to know it, it extends new freedom to you. You're going to have some unlearning or readjusting to do, especially around the way you use studio time, because you don't need to baby it. If you are new to ceramics and you grew up with nonlinear thinking on digital devices, and you seek out the sort of teacher who understands the medium, paper clay can speed your learning curve. You'll be cruising along with the new methods. You can spend more of your studio time refining the art with your imagination and less time fretting over the tech side of it.

Research is still needed with sustainable paper clay compounds. Imagine how paper clay—prototype pots could be tested later for filtration, incubating helpful microbes, and other medical applications. The public database of research on sustainable paper clay compounds for different purposes needs to be explored at the nanoscale, molecular level. Potters and artists are saving time and money using paper clay; maybe engineers and sustainability experts and environmental scientists could, too? Any artist feeling drawn in that direction, I couldn't encourage you more.

*Illustration by
Matthew Causey*

