

The Sum of All Parts



Jennifer Graff profiles the work of artist Kate Tremel

IN A CULTURE THAT CAN PRODUCE AN ABUNDANCE of creative one-liners and objects that are preoccupied with a specific style, artist Kate Tremel provides a welcome reprieve with her simple paddled pots that have achieved a sense of timelessness. One can look at her porcelain nesting bowls and imagine any person from past or present, appreciating the beauty of the pieces and using them for serving food. The pots are visually simple, but the simplicity is rooted in the artist's complex process of creating both sculptures and utilitarian pots. A lifetime of working within two distinct disciplines has revealed aesthetic and conceptual commonalities that centre around the idea of the vessel as a metaphor

for the human body. It is the sum of the artists' travels, personal experiences and creative processes that have coalesced into her current artistic identity.

Tremel has a long history with clay that extends back to her days as a Montessori school student. Her interests in ceramics remained strong as she developed through childhood, but it was only after a variety of experiences as a young adult that she realised her future as a career ceramist. While working on a double major of Anthropology and Spanish at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont, US she stayed connected with clay by making pots at a local community art centre with potter Bob Green. Unsure of her path at the college, Tremel took a brief respite from her studies and travelled to Mexico and the Southwest. She even had a stint as a construction worker.

She returned to Middlebury College to seize a study abroad opportunity in Peru where she studied indigenous pottery through the Catholic University of Peru in Lima. Tremel's long-term immersion into the culture connected her to Jose Luis Yamunaqué, a potter from Chulucanas, with whom she apprenticed and learned the technique of paddling. The process of forming vessels with a wooden paddle and rounded stone is a skill Tremel has used throughout her career. The experiences and techniques Tremel took from her time in Peru have always influenced her ceramic work.

Tremel returned from Peru and finished her degree at Middlebury College. A few years later, she moved to Bloomfield Hills, Michigan where she entered graduated school at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. Having no experience as an art student; no critique time and not even an art history class to her name, Tremel hit the ground running with the help of her mentor and teacher Tony Hepburn. Graduate school was a period of discovery for the artist where interests in feminism could unite with ideas of the vessel. The artist valued her experience at Cranbrook because she was not only supported, but encouraged to make pots as well as sculptures. Tremel emphasised that it was Hepburn's philosophy that students should have a strong foundation in the history of their medium while simultaneously being afforded the opportunity to experiment. For Tremel, Hepburn's most memorable lesson was to be mindful of creating 'one-liners' or trendy objects.

The graduate work and subsequent sculptures conveyed the notion of vessel as metaphor for the body. The artist paired bodily forms with pre-industrial tools to create symbolic objects that expressed ideas of the feminine. Take for instance, the piece titled *Plow (Plough)* where a clay pelvis has been fashioned to a wooden handle. The ceramic bones have been slightly altered and sharpened to insinuate the shape of a



Facing page: Tremel paddling in her lap. Photo by Carolyn McCarthy.
Above: *Plow (Plough) Detail*. 1995.
Cone 02 ceramic terra sigillata and cryolite matt glaze, metal, wood, leather.
10 x 3 x 2 ft.

KATE TREMEL ON HER METHODS:
"In 1988–1989 I participated in an exchange program at the Pontificia Universidad Católica in Lima, Peru. I was able to integrate my Anthropology and Spanish majors with my newfound love of clay in an internship with the Peruvian ceramist José Luis Yamunaqué. Yamunaqué was raised in Chulucanas, Piura in a family of potters who made wares for all the different stages of *chicha* production, a traditional fermented corn beer. As a young man Yamunaqué and many of his generation were encouraged to pursue an artistic path."



Barrow. 2000. Cone 02 clay with stain and glaze, wood, found steel wheel, metal, leather, steel and epoxy. 3 x 5 x 2.5 ft. Photo by Walker Montgomery.

pre-industrial plough, but the vacuous shape between the pelvic spheres undeniably alludes to the female womb. The wooden component doubles as both a tool handle and a spine. The piece suggests that the work of the womb is to bear children, just as the plough is to prepare the land to bear crops. Another mixed-media piece titled *Barrow* is a clay wheelbarrow made from a cast of a friend's pregnant torso. The barrow is made functional with a weathered metal wheel and hand-carved wooden handles. In the collar bone of the piece, there was a large crack in the clay surface that had been mended. The artist embraces process imperfections for another layer of metaphor relating to the structural limitations of both clay and body. Certainly the idea of vessel is infused into this sculpture; once as a gardening cart and twice as a fetal carriage.

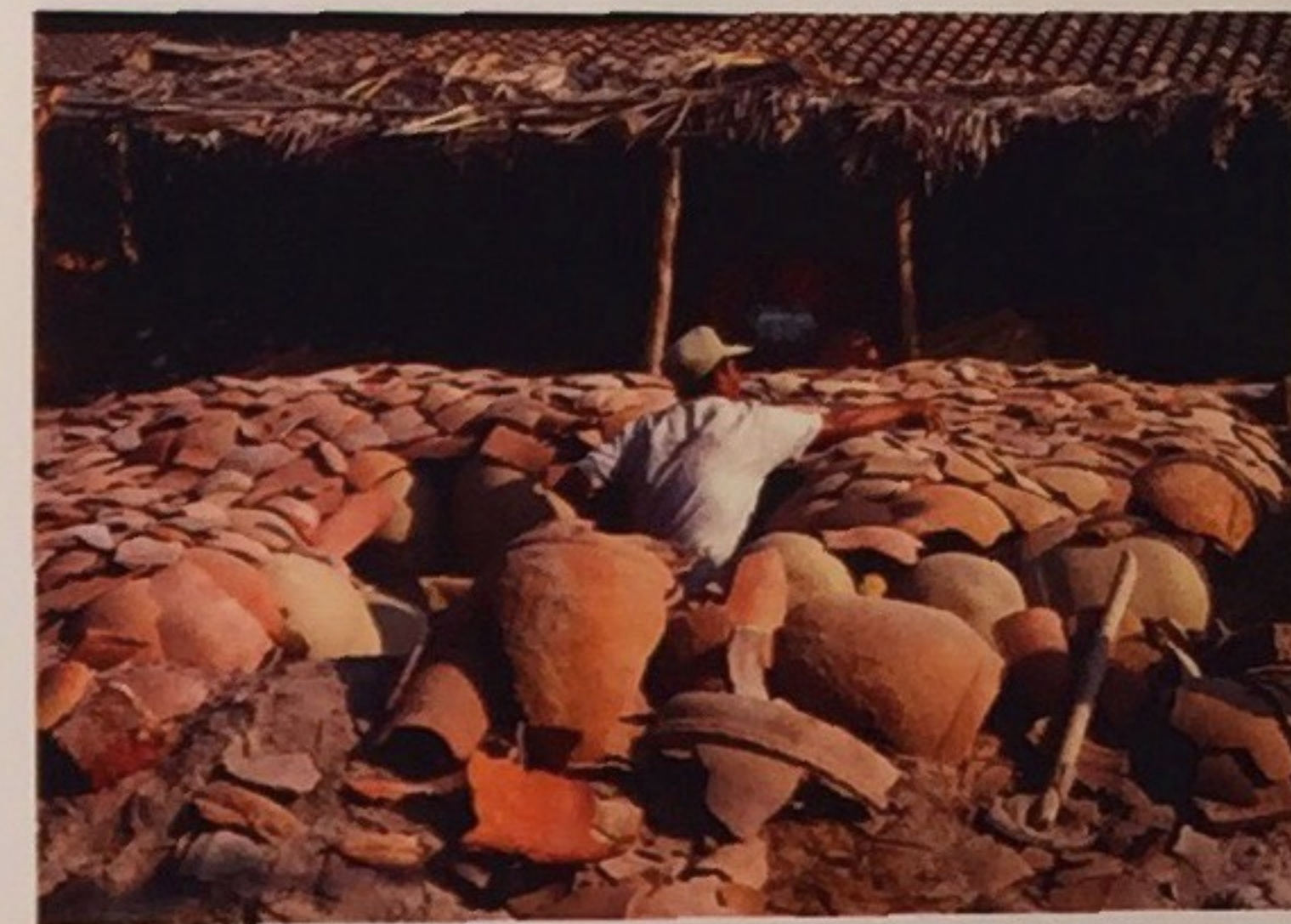
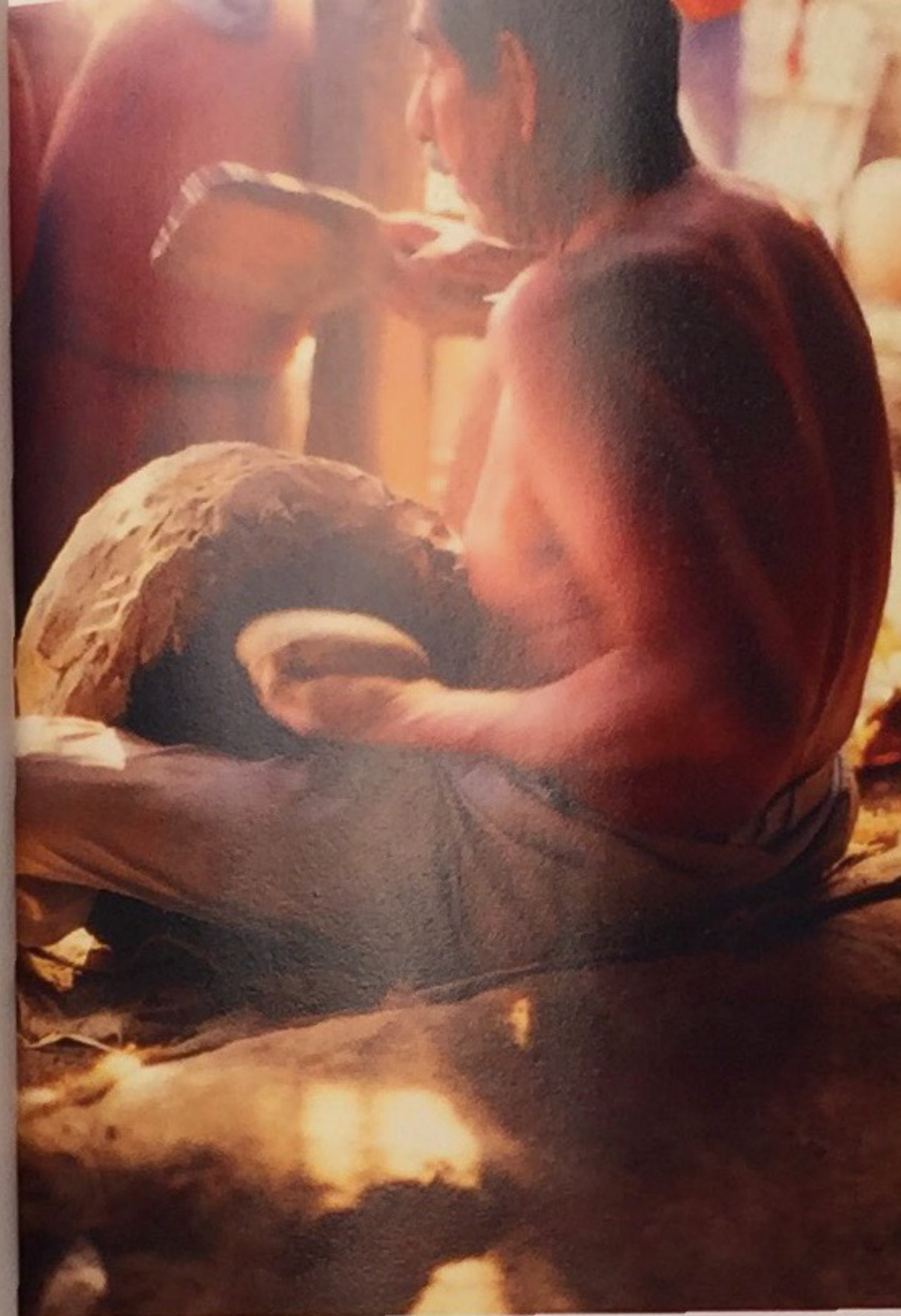
In response to her own first experience with childbirth and nursing, Tremel's sculptural work shifted in a direction more specifically related to motherhood, but maintained the concept of tools as extensions of the body. The item of focus became the watering can, which became the perfect metaphor for the idea of mother as provider of nourishment. The notion of a watering can suggests that the function of the object is for the purpose of watering plants. Here, the artist is suggesting similar ideas of mother as milk producer whose purpose is to feed. The artist

comments, "These sculptures were an attempt to capture something of the experience or physicality of pregnancy and nursing. I felt like a farmer growing and watering my babies." The unglazed roughly textured coil-built cans certainly echo the old watering cans of yesteryear, but expand the idea with a jump in scale and peculiar proportions. The watering cans have womb-like interiors and are filled to the rim with further fertility symbols including elongated spouts that double as phalluses, as well as udders, nipples and actual casts of the artist's lactating breasts.

After a successful second pregnancy, Tremel felt that the experience of raising her son and daughter caused her to make a transition back to the functional pot. A life as a mother made her feel more settled and domesticated. The artist states, "I didn't really want to make work filled with angst. I was more interested in beauty, simplicity and the intimacy of domestic interaction. I also like to cook and serve food."

Tremel's current body of functional work consists primarily of paddled forms. Drawing from her Peruvian training, she strikes the porcelain with a wooden paddle while holding a stone anvil on the inside of the pot until the clay wall is so thin it is virtually weightless. The pots have just enough of a flattened bottom to rest safely, but the silhouette of each piece appears to just graze the surface it sits upon. The range of forms includes nesting sets, single serving bowls, vases and pitchers. A white semi-matte egg shell glaze and a glossy electric

"After formal studies in Argentina and Italy, Yamunaqué set up a studio in Lima and began teaching a handful of students 'Peruvian Ceramics'. Instruction included the *paleteado* (paddle and anvil) technique of his childhood and his own revival of fine particle coloured engobes, which he developed into a palette of more than 50 colours. The desire for an authentic cultural expression was a politically significant quest for Peruvian artists at that moment. There was little formal ceramics instruction at any of the universities or fine arts schools and just a handful of contemporary artists working in clay. Yet, sadly, it was Peru's ceramics history that the rest of the world recognised as one of its most significant achievements.



Top left: *Chulucanas: El Paleteado* (paddling). 1989. Chulucanas, Piura, Peru.
 Top right: *Chicha Stove*. 1989. An adobe stove built around the cantaros (pots) for boiling chicha.
 Above right: *Chulucanas Kiln Loading*. 1989. Stacking the pit kiln with pots, wood and shards.
 Left: *Chulucanas: Beginning forms* drying for paddling.

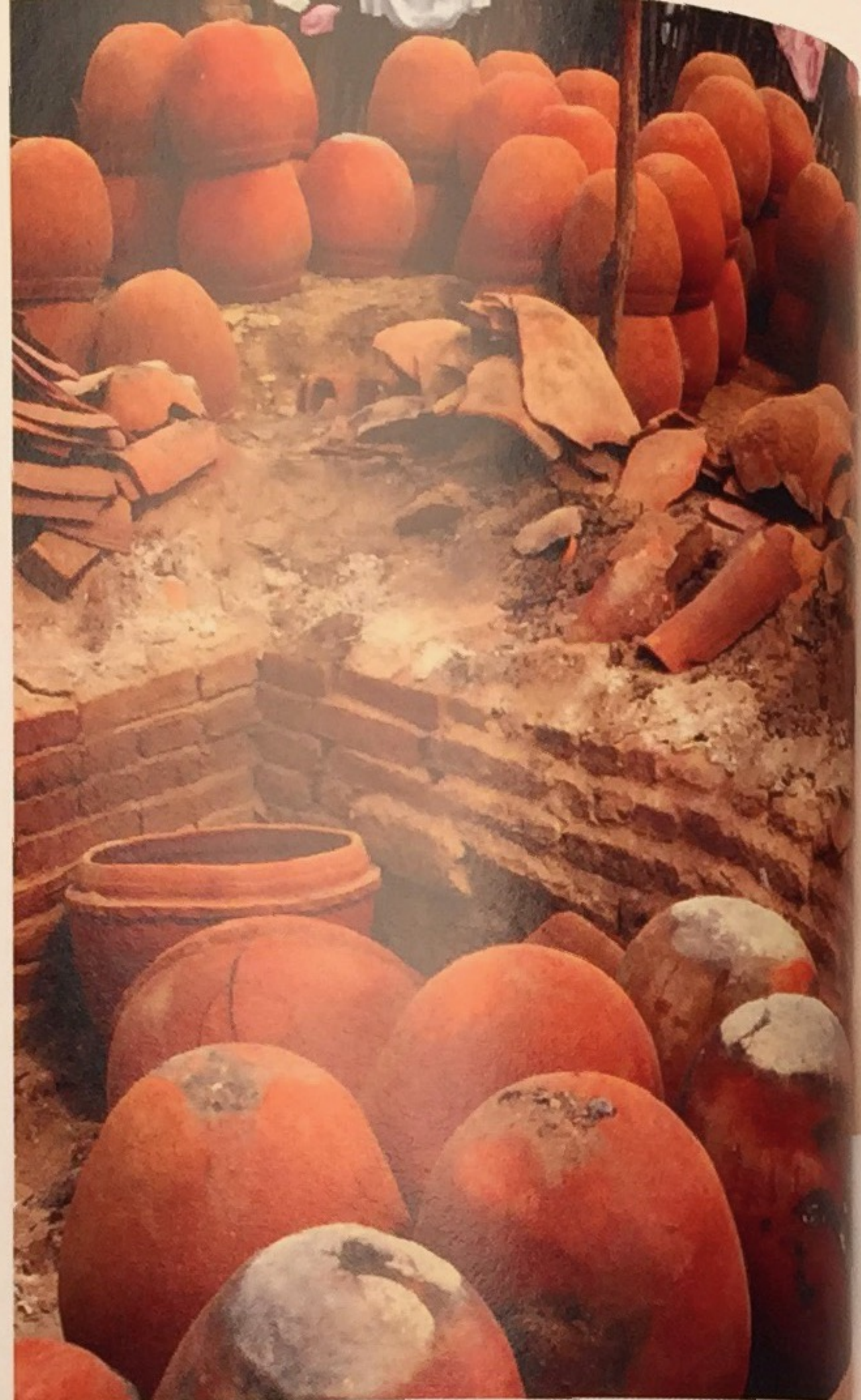


"In Yamunaqué's studio there was a sense that the use of any kind of clay and, in particular, the pre-Colombian *paleteado* technique and terra sigillatas, was a kind of revindication of Peruvian history and identity. I think that I struggled with what the use of the *paleteado* meant for me personally.

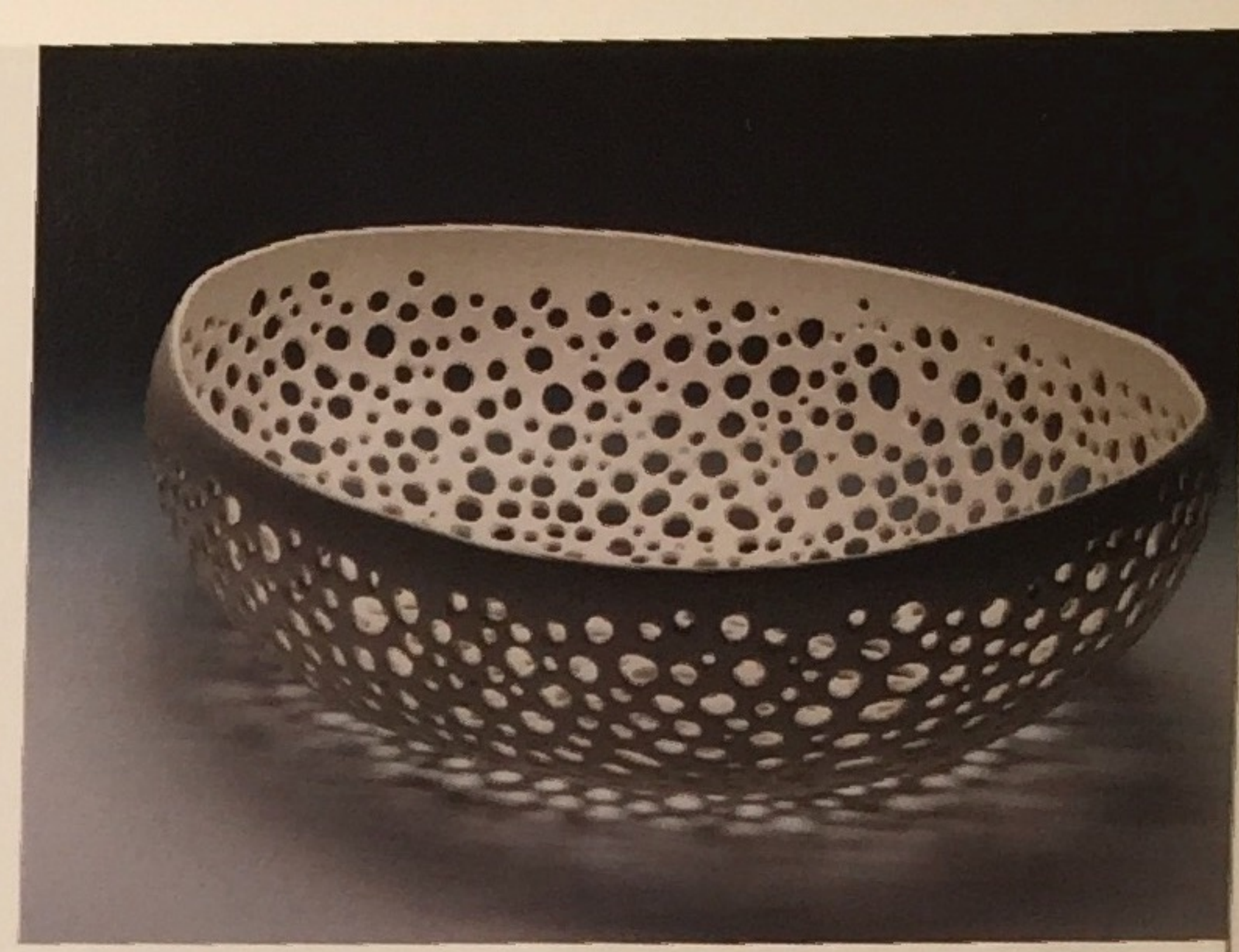
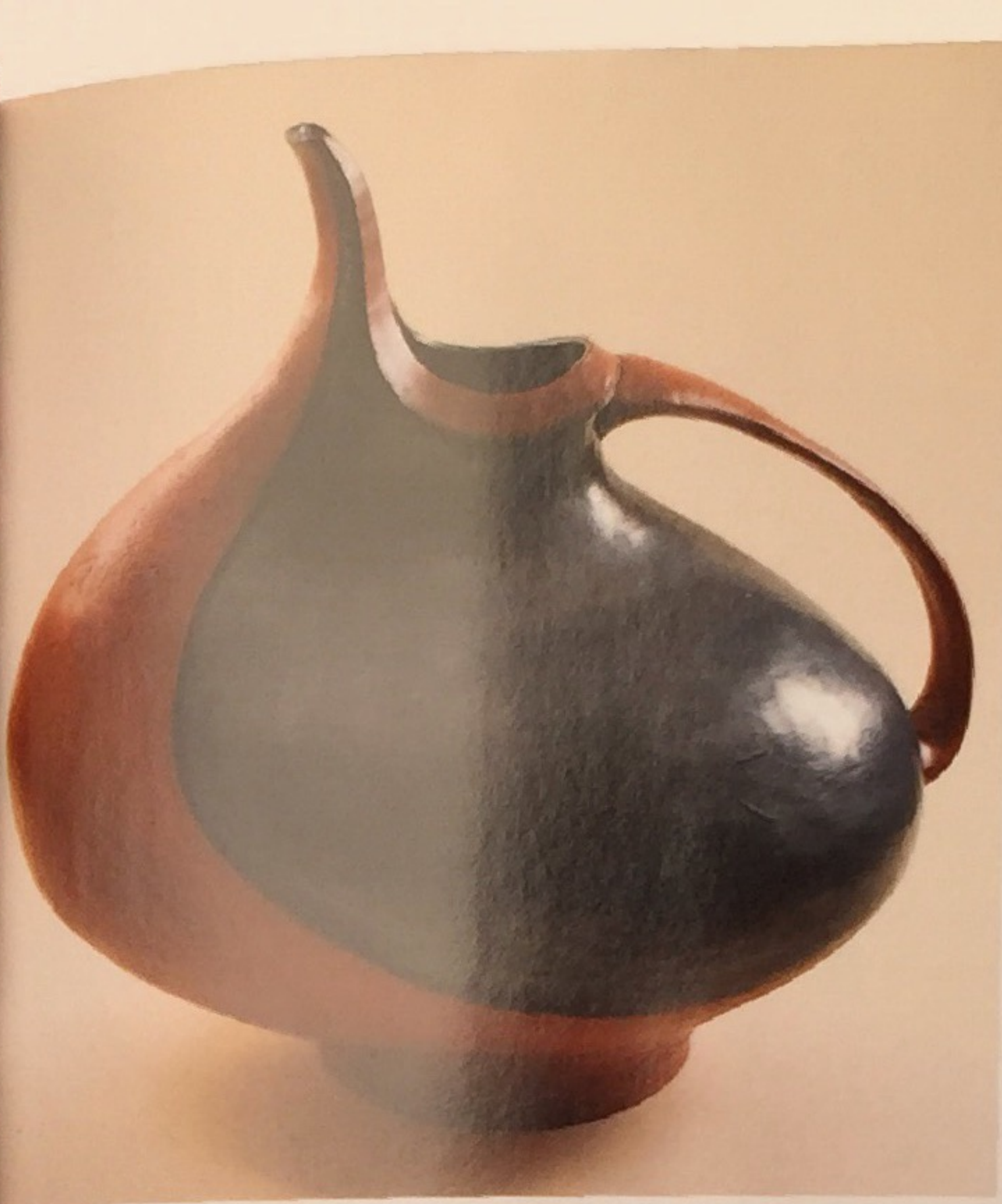
"At Cranbrook, I began my search for a personal voice and a fundamental sculptural education. I stepped back to examine the meaning inherent in a choice of materials and processes, experimenting with solid clay forms, paper clay, clay as armature, clay as the residual structure after a fibre burnout and so forth.



Above left: *Watering Can 1*. 2000. Cone 02 clay, with terra sigillata, ink, wooden base. 40 x 26 x 20 in. Photo by Walker Montgomery.



Above right: *Finished Kiln*. 1989. Chulucanas, Piura, Peru.



"I was interested in the interstices of materials and tried combining the clay with wood, steel, fibre, leather, lead sheet, gut, wax, hair and found objects. My return to the paddle and the rock coincided with a period of domesticity and the raising of a family. I was attracted to the sensuality and repetition of the process of cradling the piece in my lap, but also making pieces for daily living. While many of the forms are inspired by the simplest of unglazed historic pottery, there is a subtle subversion in the choice of porcelain. The high degree of manipulation causes a great deal of warping. I have tried to harness a sense of beauty out of this simplicity and the failures. I feel it is important not to be afraid to revise the traditional process. I often incorporate the wheel, slabs, moulds and slipcasting. I feel that my practice has a firm footing in the ceramics history of makers and I am somehow grounded by that connection, yet I hope that the work will continue to be fresh and interesting for its modern audience."

cobalt blue glaze are preferred choices for the surfaces. For contrast of colour, terracotta clay is alternately used and incorporates a black glaze and terra sigillata for the surface treatment. Tremel also creates bowl forms that are perforated. These pieces push the limitations of clay as the artist races against time to complete the perforations before the pot completely dries. All of the work is fired in oxidation to cone 7 temperatures in an electric kiln.

Just as the sculptures refer metaphorically to the vessel as body, so do the paddled pots. The forms of the bowls echo human shape as they swell and sensually undulate like any bodily curve unique to a woman. The translucent walls are reminiscent of skin and bone. Conceptually, the pots also become tools with their utilitarian ability to contain and serve. They express ideas of the feminine as they cradle and nourish.

Tremel currently resides in Ann Arbor, Michigan where she lives with her husband and two children. She spends the majority of her time in her studio making work for exhibitions, studio sales and professional craft fairs. She is a lecturer at the Penny W Stamps School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan and is associated with the Ann Arbor Potter's Guild.

Whether it is a paddled bowl or a symbolic sculpture, Kate Tremel creates beautiful and relevant works in clay that communicate on a level that everyone can understand and appreciate. Her work is invaluable to the strength and growth of our creative culture because it demonstrates that art is not merely born out of presupposed talent, but rather developed gradually through a life well-lived and a lot of hard work. Tremel leads a creative life driven by personal experiences and dares to discover herself in both sculptural works and functional pots.

Though the work is inspired by the artist's life, it rises above the self-referential object to achieve a universal appeal and a timeless quality. The famous Mythologist Joseph Campbell reminds us, "What each must seek in his life never was on land or sea. It is something out of his own unique potentiality for experience, something that never has been and never could have been experienced by anyone else."

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Top left: *Pitcher Mama*. 2008. Glazed terracotta with terra sigillata, thrown, Coiled and paddled with wooden paddle and stone anvil, fired to cone 02. 26 x 27 x 20 in. Photo by Patrick Young.

Top right: *Pierced Bowl*. 2010. Glazed cone 7 porcelain, formed with a wooden paddle and stone anvil, pierced. 7 x 19 x 15 in.

Above centre: *Nesting White Bowls*. 2012. Glazed cone 7 porcelain, formed with a wooden paddle and stone anvil. Largest piece is 6 x 16 x 15 in. Photo by Hervé Ternisien.

Above: *Tremel at work in the studio*. Left: *Tremel's signature on a pot*.