

# Ceramics

MONTHLY





Place setting, slip-cast terra cotta, with brushed underglazes and glazes. plate \$80, deep bowl \$60, dessert or salad plate \$45, tumbler \$40 and cup \$60.

## Carol Gouthro

by Nan Krutchkoff

Life for Seattle artist Carol Gouthro is a balancing act. She is constantly balancing the time spent on the three different types of work that she produces (dinnerware, teapots and one-of-a-kind vessels) with the demands of her teaching jobs and home life. Sometimes it is difficult to get it all in.

For her solo show at Foster White Gallery in Kirkland, Washington, Gouthro worked exclusively for three months on just eight pieces. "Some people think I'm crazy, but I use a show as an opportunity to explore new ideas and experiment with new techniques and glazes. It's what keeps me alive."

She had decided to create a series of volumetric vessels combining thrown, slab-built and cast parts. She has always worked primarily in low fire, but had not thrown large forms for ten years.

Soon, she was rediscovering the possibilities of throwing after years of hand-building and mold making.

Constructing these large vessels was a balancing act as well. Gouthro first made all the sections, then arranged and rearranged them to conform with her vision of some type of an abstracted natural form, such as a flower. She started at the bottom with a thrown section on a slab-built or cast base. The middle sections, made of thrown or cast pieces, were inspired by natural forms such as flower calyxes, seed pods, nuts and leaves. She spent hours contemplating the various components and trying different combinations until all of the parts worked well together.

An important element in Gouthro's work is her use of found objects for mold making. She loves combing

through thrift shops, looking for different shapes and figuring out how to incorporate them into her work. Many of her castings come from gelatin molds. She has even made molds from an old-fashioned Christmas-tree stand and various machine parts. The trick is to totally transform the shape so it is not immediately recognizable, which she accomplishes by using only small parts of each or by slicing and reassembling the castings. Her goblets, which are built entirely of found object parts, are a good example of this rearranging.

For surface treatment, she uses combinations of slips, underglazes, terra sigillatas and glazes. Equally important is her use of lusters, which are applied discriminantly so that the luster will not overpower the eye. "Even when I



Terra-cotta vase, 22 inches in height, wheel thrown, cast and handbuilt, brushed with slips, glazes and lusters, low fired, \$1200.

use them on large areas, I make certain there is another area that has just as much visual appeal, so the eye won't just go to the gold."

Most often she uses transparent colored lusters on top of colored glazes to provide luminosity and allow the glaze to still be seen. She especially likes to use them on her carved branches, as they help to bring out the shape.

Occasionally, she applies lusters in conjunction with an etching process.

Following the glaze firing, she paints the entire surface with a glass etch. This is left on for 30 minutes, then hosed off. Refiring with metallic lusters gives a very pleasing stonelike effect.

Gouthro likes contrasts, frequently using bold, heavily saturated colors against black and white. Similarly, she contrasts geometric designs with organic shapes. Stripes and spirals are set against a leaf or bark motif. "I am interested in embellishment and the challenge of

combining complex forms with complicated surfaces," she explains. "I enjoy the sensibility of an undulating line, as in a leaf form, contrasted with a hand-carved, repetitive background or the depth of a rich, glossy transparent glaze placed next to the opaque flatness of an underglaze or slip."

Craftsmanship and attention to detail are cornerstones of Gouthro's work. When she decided to do dinnerware, she had to learn mold making and slip



Carol Gouthro assembling a large vase in her Seattle studio.

casting. It took nearly three years to get the shape, weight, design and glazes perfected. She throws all the originals, then makes multiple molds of each shape. Her slip-cast terra-cotta dinnerware line includes a dinner plate, salad/dessert plate, shallow soup bowl, deep bowl, cup and tumbler. She offers two designs in each shape and 12 color choices, all of which are designed to work well together on the table.

Gouthro believes there should be as much interest on the inside as there is on the outside or even the bottom of her vessels, and spends hours making sure that every detail works. A typical dinner plate will take two hours to underglaze and glaze. To keep the feet from scratching when stacked, she glazes the



Teapot, 9 inches in height, slip-cast and handbuilt terra cotta, with underglazes, glazes and lusters, low fired, \$600.

entire bottom of her plates and fires them on stilts.

Fine-tuning her firing techniques also takes some time. She offers these words of advice for the low-fire potter: Make sure to do a Cone 04 bisque firing. The witness cone should be completely down. This ensures strong bodies and helps keep the glaze from crazing. To prevent pinholing and craters, down-fire the kiln for one-half hour after the cone drops.

Although Gouthro uses a kiln sitter, she never leaves the kiln unattended. She uses a Cone 05 in the sitter, and waits for it to turn the kiln off. She then promptly turns the kiln back on and carefully watches all of the witness cone pads at the top, middle and bottom until all the 05 cones are down. A soak on medium for half an hour helps smooth out the glaze.

For the past seven years, Gouthro has also been teaching classes in low-fire handbuilding at Seward Park Art Studio, a ceramics cooperative in Seattle, and at the Kirkland Arts Center in Kirkland. One of her students actually gave her the idea for a successful marketing plan for her dinnerware. Lacking the money to buy an entire place setting, her student asked if she could purchase a plate every month. The "Plate of the Month Club" started three years ago with an initial mailing to 25 students and long-time customers. It has been self-sustaining since then by word of mouth. "Even people who could afford a complete set of dishes enjoy it, because they get a surprise in the mail every month," Gouthro says.

The plate-of-the-month concept allows her to keep the price of her dinnerware down by dealing directly with customers, as well as maintain a steady work flow and income. She also wholesales dinnerware to a few galleries across the country.

Since graduating from the University of Manitoba School of Art in 1976, Gouthro has known that she wanted to be able to spend as much time as possible on each piece. She has avoided



Goblet, 6 inches in height, slip-cast and handbuilt terra cotta, with underglazes, glazes and lusters, low fired, \$225, by Carol Gouthro, Seattle.

fairs in favor of entering juried competitions and acquiring gallery representation across the United States. For many years, she preferred to work as a house cleaner and furniture finisher to supplement her income, rather than do production pottery.

Now that everything is selling as fast as she can make it, she knows she has to make some more important decisions.

She has to leave time for gardening and teaching, as these are important sources of inspiration for her. She also wants to continue making pots that people can use, as well as the one-of-a-kind pots that require time for development. At this point, she spends about half her time making dinnerware and still has trouble keeping up with the demand. The balancing act continues. ▲