arts & ENTERTAINMENT

Squidge Davis' pottery expresses interior motives

By Tracy Lord

Squidge Davis is a potter in search of balance. Balance between form and function, between the visual and the written, between teaching and silence. And in her work they all meet, mingle and depart, leaving their marks in the clay.

Here, in the second story of a chicken coop cum studio in Monroe, Davis sits at her wheel, watching the clouds and throwing pots and pitchers, jugs and mugs. They are stoneware, strong and practical, yet graceful and pleasing to the eye. "I think pottery first attracted me because it was so accessible and functional, that I didn't have to worry about aesthetics," she says, running her finger around and around the rim of a mug.

But it wasn't until long after college and work as a New York child welfare officer that she started "listening to the clay" full-time. It was probably the sessions at Haystack, a summer art school in Skowhegan, studying with wonderful teachers yet being old enough not to be impressionable, that enabled her to take what they offered and interpret it for herself.

There's also the experience of her mother, a traditionally trained painter. "You know, the kind where the work was slashed if not up to par. The paintings were based on composition, not self-expression," which played and still plays into Davis' own work. In response, her pieces, especially the porcelain, are very decorative.

The "gallery", directly over husband Mark Tenny's forge, houses vases consisting of peeling lavender layers and mirrors where the glass is difficult to focus on given the ornate bordering of free-form petals and shells. Pieces of crochet and lace imprinted on baskets of blue. Bronze raku teapots shining like brook trout. Decorative yes, but functional, too. And very feminine.

Femininity and feminism have always been a part of Davis' life. Since before "I knew there was a name for it," she says, her voice rising over the din below. A cover from "Woman of Power", a magazine of spirituality, power and politics, is tacked on the wall next to some drawings of runes. Judy Chicago's "Dinner Party" poster hangs on the wall next to Sarah, a master angel maker for the next few weeks. Deftly she wraps a robe of clay, fastening it with a braided clay belt. The angel's hair is the texture of lace and she adds a tiny butterfly and a madonna's smile. The angels, Davis hopes, will be big sellers at an upcoming crafts fair.

"Most of my shows have themes, and having been a literature major, the written word is very important to me. It comes back and forth a lot in my thoughts," Davis says heading down the stairs. One of her recent shows was based on the writings of Virginia Woolf and Davis's raku masks, which now grace these same stairs, escort visitors down to the firing room where five kilns await their ceramic fodder.

Squidge Davis

Surprised at the number? This is no one-kiln operation. For all of Davis's calm and demeanor, she works hard, dividing her time "pretty equally" between fine art, production work and teaching. Dopey-eyed and doe-brown (actually moose-brown) moose banks stand everywhere. Eventually they will end up at L.L. Bean's. Davis is working on a special order of mugs for Bangor's Federal Express office. And a bird bath, complete with runes, is being created in exchange for an herb garden next spring. Along with the angels are moon-faced stars for windchimes and fluted napkin rings for those less whimsical.

She does no advertising, though. "Every now and then I think about having a production manager and then I realize that I hate people telling me what to do and that puts an end to that," she laughs. Things seem to be taking care of themselves.

Davis is now at a point where more study attracts her as well as doing architectural work. A new law requires a certain percentage of monies to be spent in art for public buildings, some of which she'd like to be hers. A moss green arch covered with faces, at first taken for large leaves, stands against the wall waiting for an entrance. It is intricate, and delicate for its size. Davis' work takes time to grasp. It's time well spent.

Her outgoing nature belies one in need of much solitude. Davis spends most of her time (save the two-week stints of teaching residencies) alone. Passing clouds and passing thoughts are her companions. So important is the silence it has become a part of her teaching. She teaches in silence, letting the clay and the inner-selves do the talking, with music filling in the spaces.

"Even kindergarten classes are taught this way. Sometimes I have to ask the teacher to leave the room because they can't believe there won't be a noise problem. But I've taught hundreds of children and never once had a discipline problem. College students tend to be more resistant, so I have to blindfold them; you know, it shuts off the left side of the brain. Afterwards they tell me how much they loved it."

And for children to see a tangible work of their own hands is a great affirmation. "To be able to give them that pot, well, it becomes a power object for them. Clay does wonderful things," says one who is so gifted in building confidence that she's been asked to teach teachers at a New York Symposium on Clay in the Schools.

During the summer, adults come to the studio for workshops, and sometimes fall in love with the pace of the country. By the time fall arrives, Davis is ready to go back into production work and teaching kids. They feed each other nicely, an evolution of many years, ten of which Davis has been celebrating with an annual "Christmas Craft Celebration".

"Right now this looks like a chicken coop, but by the 11th, it will be a fantasy land," she says. Combining theatre and gourmet dining, craftspeople and their crafts, from lessons in potting and puppet shows, the celebration is something to celebrate. "All the craftspeople who show bring their vacuum cleaners and this room (now filled with an assortment of worn furniture, drawings and tired dried flowers), becomes the restaurant and theatre. It's a testimony to how real things are easier than concepts. In June I always wonder how I did it, but then December comes around and it happens."

Yet anybody who has been part of something that "just happens", knows that it's planning and not chance that makes it work. Perhaps the difference lies within Davis's brand of planning. Of someone who knows enough to listen to the quiet, to watch the clouds, and let a voice other than one's own do the talking while the hands create.