

Artists AND Writers

Interviews

by Judy Perry

Squidge Liljeblad Davis is a potter and sculptor living in Monroe, Maine. She is the director and principal teacher of Starflower Farm and Studios where she conducts week-long workshops and private retreats. Her teaching there employs clay, drawing, writing, meditation and movement and is intended to enhance and strengthen personal art practices. She holds a B.A. in Literature and an M.F.A in Sculpture and has taught and shown her work nationally and internationally.

...IN THEIR OWN WORDS



"Coyote and Angel"

I have always had the sense that a relationship to the land, to a home and garden, was going to be important for me. Thoreau said: "I cannot have a spiritual center without a geographical one". When I met Squidge in Graduate school, I remember we talked about my paintings and I was immediately aware of a unique perspective—one that is a result, I think, of her relationship to her land. The following are excerpts from a conversation we had at her kitchen table early one evening in late autumn as we moved toward winter.

Perry: You didn't plan on being an Artist did you?

Davis: No, I didn't. I moved to Maine right at the crest of the Back To The Land Movement and this movement was really combined with a resurgence of Crafts. I moved here to become a potter. I came to pottery as a way to bypass the restrictions and dogma that were put on self expression in visual art that had come to me via a classically trained painter mother. In my childhood visual art had a lot of rules, so I majored in literature in college and didn't start working in clay until after graduation.

Perry: How have you managed to integrate pottery production and sculpture?

Davis: For me, the first thing that came was the relationship with the material, clay. Craft embodies a tradition of respect for materials. From an apprenticeship to the material, clay, a desire to master skills emerged. And with increased skill came the desire to express in a wider dimension. I maintain both the practice of pottery and of sculpture because they balance each other. Throwing bowls (which I see as a pure sculptural form) on the wheel is a meditative practice for me. Whenever I don't know what to do, I can always sit at the wheel and throw bowls.

Perry: Your work goes beyond the studio and extends to this land which you have lived upon for thirty years. Do you make any distinctions between the two?

Davis: Not at all. I make no distinction between art in the studio and art out of the studio. It makes me very relaxed about the work I'm doing.

Perry: And the work you are producing connects with the land?

Davis: I think the work that I am producing is in the oldest tradition of art, which is giving thanks and honor to the land. I think that's what the Paleolithic Ancestors were inspired to do. Expressing relationship and honor, that's really a fundamental driving force for me.

"My relationship to the land has been very faithful, very committed. It supports me, it's definitely my anchor line. And it absolutely has been critical."

Perry: Your relationship to the land became very important?

Davis: It started out being important politically, because everybody felt the culture as it existed was corrupt and the only hope was to get a fresh start and that was to be found on the land – establishing community and living by principles such as sustainability and self-reliance. A relationship to the land happened very much the way my relationship to clay developed. In relationship to the clay, the clay becomes its own voice rather than me just expressing mine through it. And that happened with the land, also. You're on the land for a while and you start to hear it speaking in its own way.

Perry: Does the land give you guidance for a project, or do you have a plan in place when you start?

Davis: It's an interesting thing. I've noticed that whenever I'm working on a sculpture of an animal, that animal begins to appear in my natural environment. I have worked with an image of a river and used the form of snakes to represent the river's current. While I was doing that, it seemed that everywhere I turned, a snake slithered away. There's a mysterious web which means that when I put my attention on something, it also puts its attention on me.

Perry: Do you see the clay as part of the land?

Davis: Well, they are both earth, they are the element of earth. The notion of earth as matter, water as emotion, air as thought, fire as spirit. Earth really is the material realm and that's clay also.

Perry: You mention the Elements—in a way all of your work relates to them?

Davis: Yes. Water softens the clay so it can be malleable, the air dries it so that it can hold the form and meet the fire and the fire matures it. It is a complete cycle like the year is a complete cycle, a day is a complete cycle. It really reenacts those primal rhythms.

Perry: You didn't set out to find those rhythms?

Davis: Not at all; they found me.

Perry: Does the cycle of the earth direct you?

Davis: Absolutely. They are more than directions;

they are imperatives. If we don't rest in the quiet of the winter we can't have a true vision rise up in the spring and we really can't have an authentic voice express itself in summer. If we're just talking from the level of expression rather than the depth of inspiration that comes from winter, then it's pretty trivial. So, we've got the lesson every single day, sunrise and sunset, every year, every lifetime. The teaching is all there.



"Spring/East" polychromed and smoked stoneware, 60"X13"

Perry: Do you feel like you are collaborating on some level?

Davis: Collaborating. Yes, absolutely. Sometimes I feel like I'm just taking instructions. Make a path here, a circle there. Especially with the Earth Works that I have been building on my land. They are conceived as being temples and I am making one to each of the senses and each of the elements. I see them as being in the tradition of the ancient landscape sculptures of the British Isles. They are huge, sometimes involving hundreds of trees. It takes a lot of land to make them.

Perry: You have said that the land is the thing that keeps you doing your work. It's what you draw from and what you pay homage to?

Davis: Yes. We are both nourished by it and nourish it by our observation, participation and especially appreciation.

Perry: That connection is important?

Davis: Vital, it's like the air in your lungs.

For information about Squidge Liljeblad Davis' upcoming workshops or exhibitions: www.starflowerstudios.com or email: squidge@midcoast.com or phone: (207) 525-3593 Her work can be seen at Harbor Square Gallery in Rockland and Clark House Gallery in Bangor.

Judy Perry has worked in galleries and arts organizations for most of her career. She has been consulting for over ten years, providing information and support to artists on framing and storage needs; administrative assistance and special projects. Additionally she has received grants and awards, has exhibited her work and has in recent years been developing and independently producing her own projects, including a book on caring for and preserving your art. She received her M.F.A. in Painting from Vermont College in 1996 and recently started working one-on-one with artists on the notion of "Finding your Subject." For more information, please call Judy at: (207) 785.3149 or send email to: jppaintr@midcoast.com (see also Display Ad next page).