

### **A stroll through a gallery by Joyce Michaud**

Imagine the subdued shades of color along a creek running through a canyon under the azure Arizona sky. Picture the layers of soft clay, water flowing over stones worn smooth by millennia of erosion, and toadstools that cling to the moisture of a decaying log. These scenes flood the minds' of many who visit a Joyce Michaud exhibit. At a typical exhibit, the room is lined with ceramic vessels swirled with earthy green, brown, auburn, and light blue hues. At first glance, the vessels appear to be simple, with their shapes reflecting the subtle curves found in nature. Upon further inspection, one can imagine the amount of work that went into creating each piece; one can picture the artist slowly molding, sculpting, and shaping each vessel with gentle but purposeful movements of her hands. The color scheme of the vessels is reminiscent of the earthen clays from which each piece was made. Standing among the pieces, absorbing the shapes, swirls, colors, and forms, one can easily be whisked away into a secluded forest along a babbling brook with steep earthen banks or into the depths of a scoured red-rock gorge.

At the Lycoming Gallery, ceramic plates line the walls, while various pinch pots, vases, and sculptures are scattered about the gallery floor. The gentle curves and subtle hues can instantly relax any individual that steps into the door. Some pieces are thick and bulky, while others appear so delicate that they would appear to break upon the gentlest touch. Michaud emphasizes the role of natural processes in the creation of her ceramics, from the selection of the clay she uses to the firing of the clay in the kiln. Selection of clay types strongly influences the color of the final product. A display of small pinch pots tucked away in the back corner of the exhibit is a testimony to the vast array of colors resulting from the different chemical makeup of various clays. Each porcelain pot was created from clays from different countries across Europe. Prior to entering the kiln, each clay pot was fairly uniform, dressed in a drab cream or tan color. After emerging from the roaring fires of the kiln, each pot was robed subtle shades of oranges, yellows, pinks, or blues. Clays from each nation contained slightly different chemical compounds that respond differently to the exceptional heat of the kiln's flames. Michaud notes that one can hypothesize about the color of the final product, but ultimately the kiln affects each piece uniquely, resulting in a distinctive color scheme for each piece.

Another display of pinch pots, titled "Mother's Pearls," illustrates the unpredictability of the kilning process. After her mother's death, Michaud began working on a series of pinch pots to honor her mom's memory. She created a set of small pots, each representing one of her siblings, her mother, or her father. She had clay shipped from the Rockies just for this special project. The pots entered the kiln plain and uniform in color and texture. After being soaked in the flames of the kiln for several days, the pieces were removed. Most of pieces were a sparkling cream color. Yet one piece was quite different; the flames created a large patch of her mother's favorite color, orange, on the side of the pot. The outer glaze on each pot differed slightly as well, which is only another testament to the variety produced by the kilning process.

While the display is composed of vessels varying in colors, shapes and sizes, the entire exhibit acts as a cohesive whole that speaks of both natural beauty and the artist's personal emotions and experiences. Michaud emphasizes that each piece in the gallery expresses personal emotion, and many pieces relate directly to her life experiences. Her more fragile pieces are of exceptional importance to her. While a child, Michaud spent much time creating egg noodles with her grandmother. Her grandmother taught her to work the noodles into thin, delicate sheets. The rhythmic motion she learned as a child from countless hours in her grandmother's kitchen has helped her to create beautiful ceramic works of art. Other pieces are uniquely a product of Michaud's emotions and feelings about life. Many of the plates and pitchers scattered about the

Cory Trego

room are graced by swirling finger marks, which Michaud says represents the up and downs of her life and the lives of others.

By observing the gallery from afar, one cannot help but notice the harmony of the layout. While each piece is distinctly different from its neighbor, all the pieces exude aspects of beauty of the natural world. A parallel can be drawn between the cohesion of the individual pieces of art and the cohesion of the ceramic. Each of the pieces began as lumps of wet, unassuming clay. Clay is simply a conglomeration of millions of miniscule individual particles. When dried, it is exceptionally fragile. But when introduced to high temperatures, these particles undergo a transformation and reform into a cohesive glass with exceptional strength. The cohesion that results from the fire is just like the cohesion of the exhibit: individual pieces that have been transformed and arranged by the artist to become a unified display that radiates the glory of the natural world.