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Three alumni featured in nationally touring art exhibit in HFA Gallery

Summary: The exhibit is on display until October 13.

(September 5, 2011)-Stoked: Five Artists of Fire and Clay, a nationally touring art exhibit, features the work of noted ceramicist Richard Bresnahan and four former apprentices: Stephen Earp and University of Minnesota, Morris (UMM) graduates Kevin Flicker '74, Morris, UMM ceramics instructor Samuel Johnson '96, St. Joseph and Anne Meyer '04, St. Joseph. From August 24 through October 13, 2011, the exhibit may be viewed at UMM where Johnson and Meyer studied with Flicker and discovered their passion for clay.

Curated by Matthew Welsh, deputy director and chief curator at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Stoked celebrates 30 years of the Saint John's University Pottery Studio at which Bresnahan serves as artist-in-residence and has taught his apprentices. In conjunction with the exhibit, Welch has authored a book of the same title that includes chapters on each of the artists and photographs of their work.

In the publication Stoked: Five Artists of Fire and Clay, Welch states that each contributing potter "...is a superb artist individually and has been included here because of a connection to Bresnahan himself and the Saint John's Pottery." He notes Flicker's "quiet industriousness" and "potent inquiry" as inspiration for the students he teaches as a ceramics instructor at Morris. He shares Johnson's story of study in Denmark and "flexibility and receptivity" in an aesthetic response to different mind-sets. Welch tells Meyer's story of merging her interest in drawing with three-dimensional forms, "producing unique and breathtaking figures in unglazed clay."

Bresnahan graduated from Saint John's in 1976 and has operated the Saint John's Pottery since 1980. The formidable knowledge Richard gained from his experience as apprentice to Nakazato Takashi for four years in Japan earned him the title of "master potter." In the Japanese tradition, he produces woodfired pottery from locally excavated clay, some of which bear glazes also formulated from local materials. Richard has trained scores of apprentices in the last 30 years. Throughout his career, he has challenged himself to undertake new firing techniques, to test potential glaze materials, and to devise new and uniquely functional ceramic shapes. The powerful and dynamic pottery that he produces embodies both the nature of his locality and his own distinctive midwestern artistic vision.

Flicker graduated from the University of Minnesota, Morris, in 1974 with degrees in psychology and English. Afterwards, he followed an irrepressible interest in ceramics by enrolling in numerous classes to develop his skill. In 1985, he sought out an apprenticeship with Bresnahan, and in 1987, he returned to UMM as a ceramic instructor, a position he has held ever since. In 2001, he received a Distinguished Teaching Award. He exhibits frequently, and his works have been featured in 26 solo and group shows in the last decade. His primary interest is creating quality functional ceramics using as many locally gathered materials as possible. Although quiet and unassuming, his wares are elegant. Glazes made from wood ash and local clays often adorn his work, as well as deft carving of natural motifs, his love of his native Minnesota and the Midwest prairie.

Johnson graduated with distinction from the University of Minnesota, Morris, and received a master of fine arts from the

University of Iowa in 2005. Johnson apprenticed with Bresnahan from 1996 until 1999—the longest apprenticeship in the studio’s 30-year history. In 2000, he studied Scandinavian ceramic design at Denmark’s Design School in Copenhagen. While in Denmark, he also worked at the International Ceramic Center in Skaelskor. In 2001, Sam traveled to Japan and worked for a time in the studio of renowned potter Koie Ryoji. After completing graduate school, he has worked as assistant professor of art at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University. Sam’s technical mastery and understanding of pottery is formidable, and his work often reflects his ongoing investigations. Recently, he began to produce works with a fine white, porcelaneous slip applied over a dark clay body—reminiscent of Korean Buncheong ware. Shadows of the underlying clay are revealed where the slip pulls thin across the undulating body. The effect is artfully casual, and yet chaste and solemn.

Meyer is the youngest of the five artists featured. She graduated with high distinction from the University of Minnesota, Morris, with a bachelor of arts in studio art. She apprenticed at the Saint John’s Pottery from 2004 until 2006, and later worked as the pottery’s studio manager. In 2006, she traveled to Tokoname, Japan, where she was allowed to work in the studio of the famous potter Koie Ryoji. Meyer’s true passion lies in ceramic sculpture. Unlike traditional wheel-thrown pottery, which Meyer honed through countless hours of practice and repetition, sculpting human-like figures from clay slabs and coils is almost an innate ability for Meyer. Her woodfired figures have a compelling timeless quality about them, seemingly as ancient as the earth and yet in a state of transformation and evolution. Her latest work features three-dimensional portraits embellished with carved and impressed designs inlaid with a contrasting light clay slip. The effect is reminiscent of the popular craze for full-body tattoos, but is actually drawn from the much older tradition in Korea and Japan of scratching or impressing designs in clay and inlaying them with porcelain.

Earp received a bachelor of fine arts in ceramics from the University of Iowa in 1986 before apprenticing under Bresnahan two-and-a-half years beginning in 1987. He joined Potters for Peace, a nonprofit organization whose members assist struggling potters in indigenous populations worldwide to maintain viable livelihoods and to preserve their cultural traditions. He returned to the United States and settled in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. For the last 20 years, he has been producing redware in the traditional mode. Like early settlers, Earp uses clay that he digs locally—in the Berkshires—and formulates his glazes with ash from burned hay and clay he excavates from a pit on the Mohawk Trail. His work, embellished with stylized flowers, birds, and rabbits in thick trails of slip or by carving into the still-damp clay before firing, reflects his artistry and expertise, as well as traditions that stretch back to colonial America and to Europe before that.

Three special events have been planned in conjunction with the exhibit. Tuesday through Thursday, September 6–8, Bresnahan will be on campus to lead a workshop in the ceramics studio. On Thursday, September 8, following the opening reception, Welch will deliver a lecture in the HFA Recital Hall beginning at 7 p.m. From Tuesday through Thursday, September 20–22, Meyer will present a workshop in the ceramic studio.

Gallery hours are Monday through Thursday 9 a.m. until 8 p.m. Friday from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m. and Saturday from 1 until 5 p.m., Saturday.

This activity is funded by the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage fund as appropriated by the people of Minnesota on November 4, 2008.

Photo: Large coiled and paddled jar by Kevin Flicker ’74

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