SIGHTS & CERAMICS

MINNEAPOLIS

PRESENTED BY

PotteryMaking Illustrated ceramics MONTHLY

Emily Nickel

Influences
As a graduate student, I was getting frustrated with frequent cracks appearing in my sculptural work. I went to my professor Chris Boger, a beloved mentor and figurative artist. I said, "Chris, am I terrible at clay? Am I the only person who has this problem?" And she said, "Heck no, all of us figure people repair stuff. We've all come up with our own different strategies for it over the years." When TJ Erdahl showed up later that semester as a visiting artist, I asked him the same question. He agreed that yes, many figurative sculptors have invented ways of mending, but it's become a strange, universal secret that isn't discussed. At that moment, this demo was born out of a desire to get this topic out in the open, where we can better share the knowledge and techniques many artists have developed on their own.

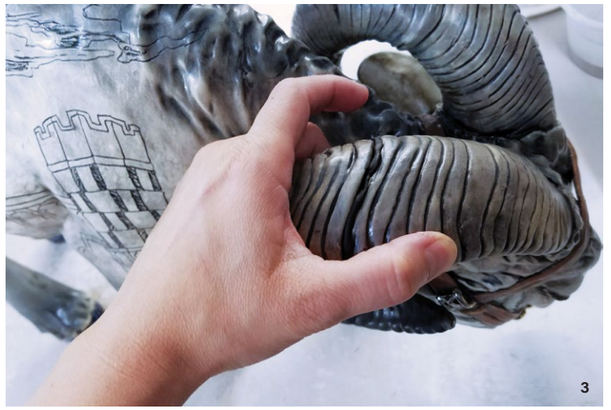
Favorite Part of the Process
My favorite repair techniques are to use Bray Patch (www.archiebrayclay.com/bray-patch) slip for a pre-firing fix (bisque, glaze, or refiring), and various epoxies for a post-firing fix. The Bray Patch slip is amazing because it can be used on bone-dry, bisqued, and even glaze-fired pieces if you glaze over and re-fire it. Apoxie Sculpt (www.avesstudio.com/shop/apoxie-sculpt) is one of my favorite materials for post-firing fixes. It can be color matched easily, and can be molded and shaped similarly to clay.

Techniques
I do a lot of sgraffito illustration and other complicated surface work with underglazes on my pieces at the leather-hard stage. Because of that, matching a mend to the existing complex surface presents a challenge. I always try to get a perfect mend in at the earliest possible stage. Starting a repair early gives me second and third chances in case the mend doesn't go perfectly the first time. Stage 1 is to use Bray Patch to repair a break at the green or bisque stage, reapply underglaze over the mend and fire as I would normally. Stage 2 is to carefully color match Apoxie Sculpt with the fired surface. And stage 3, if those methods are not sufficient, is to disguise the mend with encaustic (hot wax) paint, which has a gorgeous translucent semi-matte surface that I find perfect for figure work. Sometimes I use encaustic for a surface even if I haven't mended anything.

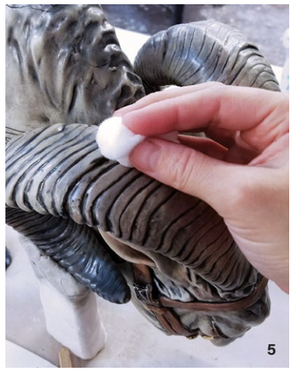
Mentors
I have to put Chris Boger first on this list. Primarily because she was the person who first handed me a jar of Bray Patch and reassured me, with her trademark frankness, that I wasn't alone in my struggles with figure sculpting. Chris passed away this summer and the entire ceramics community from Indiana University (IU) and beyond has felt her loss deeply. She was a beloved mentor who changed my life and I will cherish her forever. Tim Mather and Malcolm Mobutu Smith are my other IU faculty, for whom I am also sincerely grateful. Wynne Wilbur was my professor in undergraduate school, who started me on this clay journey. Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention Arthur Gonzalez, who first introduced me to the very concept of repairing ceramic sculpture at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in 2012, in a truly mind-expanding workshop.


1

2


3


4


5


6

1 Emily Nickel working in the studio. **2** The breakage on the horn of this piece is repaired with a material called Apoxie Sculpt. Apoxie Sculpt is a two-part epoxy putty that comes in many colors and can be easily molded and formed like clay. In this case, color matching is crucial because I will not be painting over the Apoxie Sculpt once I have reattached the horn. I chose black Apoxie Sculpt for this piece to seamlessly match the black lines in the horns. **3** I form the Apoxie Sculpt into a thin coil, and firmly press the two sides together. **4** I use a plastic molding tool to scrape off the largest bits of extra epoxy, and to thoroughly push the Apoxie Sculpt into the broken area. **5** I have found that to blend the Apoxie Sculpt smoothly into the surrounding area, a little bit of rubbing alcohol on a cotton ball will smooth the surface down and eliminate any extra residue. Using a small amount like this for cleanup does not interfere with the curing, strength, or longevity of the epoxy. **6** The Apoxie Sculpt needs 24 hours for a full cure, so I set the piece up on a clay prop and allow it to cure. **7** *Undoing*, 36 in. (91 cm) in length, porcelain, slip, underglaze, luster, 2018.


7

TJ Erdahl

Influences
For a long time, I had a bias against repaired ceramics. I grew up learning about ceramics in a world of potters and I suppose I adopted their feelings about cracks and breakage. When something breaks, such as a ceramic mug, it becomes a second or it becomes garbage. It took some time to accept the reality that ceramic sculpture and functional ceramics should not be judged by the same guidelines. It finally sunk in when I was an artist-in-residence at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts. During that year, 50% of what I made either blew up in the kiln or broke during shipping. After that experience, I decided to accept epoxy as another material and process for my artmaking. I also accepted the fact that sculptors working in different media use repair methods on a regular basis.

Favorite Part of the Process
I use a combination of accelerated cyanoacrylate glue (super glue), two-part liquid epoxy, and epoxy putty for most of my post-fired cold welds. I started using the cyanoacrylate glue in combination with two-part liquid epoxy because I needed the instant set time of the super glue to chemically clamp or hold the broken area of the piece together while the epoxy, which has good shear strength and filling properties, properly cured. If I am fixing work pre-glaze firing, I use any number of products. Marx Lo-Fire Ceramic Magic Mender (www.sheffield-pottery.com/MARX-MAGIC-MENDER-LO-FIRE-p/mamml.htm) is one that is readily available in my area and very reliable. I've also used Bray Patch (www.archiebrayclay.com/bray-patch) and AptII Ceramic Enhancer (www.apt2products.com/ceramic.htm), both with great results.

Techniques
My ceramic surfaces, by design, are intended to have an aged, antiqued, and weathered allure to them. I often find that the repairs I make easily camouflage within my work, both aesthetically and conceptually. Sometimes trying to hide and disguise the repair takes away from the authenticity. On the occasion where I need to seamlessly blend the repair, I use a number of different techniques. I often tint my epoxies with NUPA pastels to match the color of the surface. I also use low-temperature, polychromatic surfaces such as encaustic paint and wood wax to help create a layer of color or atmosphere on the sculpture that hides the repaired area.

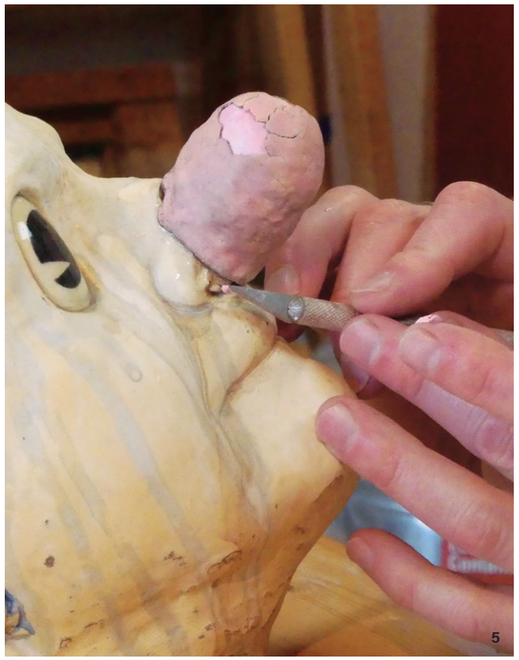
Mentors
I feel truly lucky to have an extremely supportive family. From my earliest inclinations of wanting to pursue a career in the arts, my family has always been there to encourage me. I have been mentored by some incredible people over the years. At the University of Northern Iowa, JoAnne Schnable inadvertently gave me permission to learn what I wanted to by doing. She pointed me in the direction of the University of Florida, where I met Nan Smith and Linda Arbuckle. They both challenged me to take my own path and trust in my intuition. They encouraged me to apply for a scholarship at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, where I met Tom Bartel. I not only learned the ropes of putting on a fast-paced, hands-on workshop from Tom, but I also became aware of Arrowmont's artist-in-residence program. At Arrowmont, I met the most incredible artists and patrons, and grew professionally as an artist. I also met Bill Griffith, Arrowmont's Program Director at the time, who, in many ways, has been a mentor and friend ever since.

1


2


3


4


5


6

1 Repair products and tools. **2** Before mixing my epoxy to reattach the nose of this piece, I clean the connection points with denatured alcohol and a small paintbrush to remove any dust and/or oil from the surface. **3** Using an old plastic lid as a mixing tray, I mix equal parts of the JB Weld epoxy resin and epoxy hardener. One thing I like about this epoxy is the built-in syringe system. This epoxy resin has great shear strength at 4400 PSI, plus it doesn't yellow much over time. It has a 5-minute set time, so once it is mixed I move quickly to attach the two pieces. I use an X-Acto knife to apply the epoxy to both sides of the break, and press the nose on. Then I quickly dab on small drops of the ZAP-A-GAP CA adhesive to a few spots without epoxy and spray with the ZIP KICKER CA Accelerator. It sets instantly and the nose is held in place. Before the JB Weld ClearWeld epoxy sets, I used a Q-Tip dipped in denatured alcohol to clean up any epoxy that may have inadvertently squeezed out from the seam. **4** There was a small section missing from the bottom of the nose, creating a gap. I mix equal parts of the two-part Bray-Poxy putty and tint it with a small amount of Golden Fluid Acrylic Red paint to match the nose. **5** Using an X-Acto knife, I push the tinted Bray-Poxy into the gap. **6** Finished piece, from the series *Tourist Debris*, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, earthenware, slip, engobe, underglaze, 2018.