

# The Evolution of Mentorship

by John Glick

In past discussions and writings on this subject I have often referred to myself as “wistful” about the fact that I never had an apprenticeship during my own training. That feeling may have persisted for the first twenty years of studio life, but a vague sense of having missed out has lately been replaced with a purposeful and energized spirit in my own thinking and studio practice, centered on the concept of mentorship of another...one to one.

As my thinking has matured, I have evolved from calling the experience an *apprenticeship* (for some twenty-five years) through *assistantship* (perhaps for fifteen years further) to my present term: *artist-in-residence*.

To illustrate how very different things are today, it might be useful to review some practices that I explored during those early studio years. Back then, I occasionally integrated the throwing skills of an apprentice into some aspect of studio production – perhaps making mugs. Even so, I made the handles and decorated and glazed the pots. Another year, trimming dinnerware may have been the way I utilized the apprentice’s skills. The apprentice always had a block of time to pursue his or her own work on a daily basis. What I recall most clearly about these arrangements was that, while useful

in contributing to the flow of work, they were vaguely unsatisfying. Gradually I lost interest in doing them. I suspect I was starting to believe that it might be better if the apprentices had more time to develop their own ideas.

That was the beginning of wanting the assistants (now the name changes as well) to find their own, perhaps parallel, path within the studio life I was leading. This meant that their direct involvement with me shifted to the predictable shared tasks of work: mixing clay, cleaning, building kilns. (Notice I have said “shared”; I have never been much inclined to assign the endless down-on-your knees jobs solely to another. Maybe this is why I have worn-out knees on my jeans?)

It also meant that, increasingly, assistants were a separate entity in that they had to develop ideas for their work that were independent of mine – not always an easy task. My wife Susie, a potter and ceramics teacher in her own right until the late ‘80s, observes from working around me that it is not easy for a person to find space in my studio for his or her own developing ideas, owing to the impact of my rather diverse approach to shape, surface imagery, glaze, and general productivity. Nonetheless, finding a personal voice is clearly the key to making this experience valid for an assistant.

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pected, you will not find it. 9. Don't get too serious. 10. If you hit the bull's-



BACKGROUND IMAGE ABOVE AND  
OVERLEAF: *Kristen Kieffer*.  
RIGHT AND PAGE 90: *Tom Rohr*

As my working relationships have evolved, it is evident that I am continually being stretched and changed by the young artists who come yearly to share, learn, and discover on their own terms. There has always been talk in the studio. Much of it seems studio-oriented - the inevitable issues of form, surface, function, and internal goals – but it can be as diverse as music, world news, and dreams for the future. This dance of language is how we find out what and who we are, and who we may become on the path forward. For me the words “rehearsal” or “practice” also come to mind: speaking our ideas out loud in order to test them, in the purposefully safe environment we share. I often walk away from these dialogues musing about my own direction, feeling reinvigorated and hopeful that they are having the same effects on the person holding the other cup of cocoa.

In this article, I would like to visit the careers of three former working colleagues here at Plum Tree Pottery whose paths have been very different.

**Tom Rohr: Assistant 1988 - 1989**

During his time here Tom made a modest amount of work that was reminiscent of my own. (This is not that unusual.) For him it was purely a “sampling” process, as he also

made much work generated from reaching out in different directions, and his eventual path was driven by a passion not to replicate my stylistic approaches to surface, glaze color, calligraphy, and complexity. In my dialogues with him over the years he spoke often of his deep commitment to finding an approach to form and surface that did not have “echoes” from his time at the pottery with me.

But what matters most is his journey subsequent to his departure from Michigan. Tom refers to this time as his “journeyman” period. A partial list includes two years at the Bray, three years earning an MFA at Louisiana State, one year as visiting professor at Alberta College of Art, two years as studio potter at Potterie St. Agathe in Winnepeg. Many kilns built, many firings!

When I caught up with Tom during his years in the studio with his wife, Kathryn Finnerty, they were participating in what he referred to as the nomadic life of two married studio potters, which involved a great deal of cross-country travel to selling venues. Tom would be accepted in one event, Kathryn in another. Pressure, time crunches, rushed wood-kiln firings: most would recognize the raggedness of spirit, frayed nerves, and painful lumbar region that come with the territory.

eye every time, the target is too close. WENDELL CASTLE



*Kristen Kieffer. Teapot, wheel-thrown and stamped mid-range porcelain; hand-formed spout, knob and handle; slip, carved and individually stamped decoration, 2007. 9x12x7. Photo by artist.*

Then came a decision to restructure his career path and seek a teaching position at Lane County Community College in Pleasant Hill, Oregon, where he has taught since 2004. I recall feeling disappointed on hearing this, doubtless my own projection of studio potting as the “better” career path for a person of his skills. I had loved seeing his work on the street, making my visits to regional art fairs feel wonderful: there was Tom Rohr!


Soon after, Tom put together a seminar workshop for potters at his school, inviting artists whom he had worked with over his training and travel years. It was during my visit to take part in the event that I came to realize the impact of his years of travel and growth. I saw a dynamic studio environment, with healthy evidence of the diversity of work made by students attracted to his classes. Word spreads; quality and dedication sell. I could feel it in the atmosphere around the students.

Tom recently built an anagama kiln on his property and has become a painter with fire. His career has been formed by the many paths he has chosen to travel. His work is marked with its own rich fire palette – hard-won, eminently worthwhile. In his life and work, he clearly sings his own song.

#### **Kristen Kieffer: Assistant 1996 - 1997**

Kristen came to me from an apprenticeship at historic Greenfield Village in nearby Dearborn, Michigan. I recall that her first few months of working here were not very comfortable for her. Discussions helped somewhat, but it was apparent that her days of production throwing at the historical pottery had ended up making her early pots with me feel rather lifeless. I encouraged her to draw her ideas and suggested that fluidity in the drawings might help her find the gestures she sought in her pot forms, and this helped. The key thing we did was to tack up a sign at eye level at her wheel that said “*This is supposed to be fun!*” Slowly the stiffness in the work dissipated, and by about the third month she was sailing along and smiling more readily. The work began to reflect that happiness, and her forms gained an energy and grace that had previously eluded her.

Kristen was always curious about studio technology and tool use, and she took an early interest in how she might put these to work for her own needs. This is my “hot button” subject – a love of tools that help us make our work with more energy, diversity, and intuitiveness assets that may infuse our pots with our personal vocabulary. Kristen absorbed that concept well. She often al-



cludes now to the technical and attitudinal carryover from her time here, which has helped her break ground in her highly personal explorations of surface and form. Her work does not look like my own. Kristen has honed skills that I admire and use extensively, proving that enabling someone to use technique and innovate brilliantly avoids the discomfort of mimicry.

A colleague whom I admire and trust recently observed, "I know Kristen and her work, and the future of the field is in good hands with her." I am grateful for those words. Kristen has earned them on her own terms, and deserves such recognition and high praise. I enjoy knowing that she is in the world, making her contribution as artist, teacher, and standard-bearer.

**Melissa Greener: Assistant 2003 - 2004**

Melissa came from a strong clay program in Nova Scotia and began work here with great enthusiasm. As I look back on our time together with the advantage of hindsight, I could say the signs of "differentness" permeated her work and her outlook from the outset. Melissa is now practicing in another creative field. She is an extremely talented singer/songwriter working to establish a career in the music field. So what makes her inclusion here meaningful? Isn't this a "failure" in the ongoing clay stories of my work with individuals at the studio? There was a time when I might have concluded that, given the outcome of this particular story. No more!

I am fascinated by the parallels in her approach to career development; they seem remarkably consistent with the ones I know. Did she learn them here? Maybe not. Perhaps she did benefit from being around the dedication to a personal venture requiring soul

and sweat to make things happen. What potter doesn't understand that? Melissa has applied all those things with the results coming out of the speakers in my studio. I feel her success in my bones and heart, and while I cannot see it on a shelf or feel it in my hands, like a Rohr pot or a Kieffer piece, her dedication to forging highly personal ideas is the same.

Melissa has taken her native talent with words and her beautiful voice and created herself as a storyteller of skill and sensitivity. Parallels? I see them when I watch her perform. Different form, but as fluid as a good drawing and as vital as a wonderfully fire-marked pot. Curious? See and hear Melissa at her My Space web address: <http://www.myspace.com/melissagreener>

**CODA:**

Something I read recently, from far outside our field, rang so true for me. In "Just Smart Enough" (*Brown Alumni Magazine*, May/June 2007), Linda Neuman interviewed Craig Mello, 2006 Nobel Prize laureate in Embryonic Patterning and Physiology. Speaking of his interaction with research colleagues, Mello said, "The idea is that you sit around and you discuss something and the people disappear. The only thing that matters is the ideas. It is the interaction between people that leads to new ideas. You enter a room with an idea of your own and someone else enters the room with their idea and you let those ideas interact. They bounce off each other, and you come up with a new idea. Whose idea is it? Is it mine or yours? Ideas emerge from a conversation more than they do from a person."

but the lighting of a fire. -W.B.YEATS