

# nceca

**coalescence**

Richmond, Virginia • March 20-23, 2024

JOURNAL  
VOLUME 44



58th ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL ON EDUCATION FOR THE CERAMIC ARTS

Andréa Keys Connell

## A Search

My interest in craft stems from a desire to understand how the objects around us elevate, express, and add to the human experience; and how objects are crafted, held, and treasured in the most joyful and miserable solitudes. So – it is a search, and it is a search we all have in common. We come together at moments like these to report to each other on what we have found, to share discoveries and enthusiasms. We see the imprint of craft in all parts of life – and we begin to understand this imprint – at its best – not as imprint, but as a fingerprint of human creativity and resourcefulness – proof positive that human activity, so often an engine of destruction, can also be immeasurably kind.

Most searches have guides. Family members, neighbors, friends, and partners. But it starts somewhere. My grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, loved to be surrounded by beautiful things. She insisted on beauty all of her life. The objects we have inherited from her are constant reminders of this. In a ghetto in Pécs, Hungary, she and her mother were given a food ration box. The box was made of a cardboard-like material and was small – roughly five by eight inches. She painted the box in a traditional floral Hungarian pattern. Now it sits in my mother's house, preserved under an acrylic display case along with another object from that time – a scarf she made from light blue fabric scraps collected while in Auschwitz. Along the lining, she stitched her mother's name, Lenke, in a peach-colored thread.

This formative encounter has led me to a recurring thought: craft not only communicates identity, craft insists on and celebrates it – it does so in good times, but also in bad times, when we fully possess ourselves, but equally, when we are weak and vulnerable – even when we are reduced to a number, craft might communicate some inner meaning and strength. If this is true, the things we make transcend the noun-category of object. If craft objects can be encountered like fingerprints, they also function like a language, reified in time, seemingly still, but nevertheless mysteriously active, constantly communicating our dignity.

I first understood my grandmother's box and her scarf as an act of defiance. And they were – but they have been more, and I believe they will become more still. To her they may have signified the beautiful things she loved about the world, to the saving joys of small pleasures, as a marker of time, even a simple memento. To us they are something else – they are the beginning of a story we tell about ourselves, about what kind of people we are or might become. They carry her presence, they carry her memory, and they resonate with intimations of experiences that were hers alone – holding a difficult time she endured, and bringing it into a beautiful stillness I like to think we all might share.

These thoughts arose through my own searching, and I hope they resonate with others on their own searches. I have been holding these thoughts close, especially in recent years.

In May of 2019, my family undertook an unexpected adventure. We bought a rundown old general store. For three years, my spouse, Matt, poured his heart and all his energy into restoring The Todd



*Taking headshots in my studio, 2022*

General Store, re-opening it as a community space that hosted music, storytelling, art, workshops, a restaurant, and homemade and local goods. As we planned for our first summer when the business would be 100% operational, our beloved store experienced a catastrophic structural fire. 3000 square feet were reduced to an unnoticeable 250 square foot frame that had been a hidden room tucked beneath the porch. It was all so heartbreaking. So many things that were loved – a literal treasure trove of singular objects – gone in an instant.

Sifting through the debris – literally and metaphorically – I began to reencounter my artwork lost in the fire, often one piece at a time. In their absence, and in their partial recovery, I would feel at first, a rush of discovery. This sensation would often be quickly followed by a re-encountering. I began to find what I value most in my work – and, alternately, what I don't value. I began to clearly see shards of pieces I knew I would miss and then, often, the opposite would follow. I would uncover a piece that felt ok to lose.

We didn't only find broken ceramics. We found whole pieces as well, each transformed, but fully intact. So, what remained intact about the broken pieces? In the least sentimental way, I would insist that these shards literally placed hope into our hands, embodying a resilience we wanted to make our own. We found a friend's ewer, miraculously unbroken. It was exciting for everyone.







My son, Charles, in my studio





Andréa Keys Connell

This discovery helped our family turn towards what hadn't been lost. In this way, we continued our search not only with resolve, but a sort of happiness. By turning toward this humble little search for other things, we turned away for a time, from what felt like unremitting loss, and gave our search meaning.

This experience has had a profound influence on how I now approach my making. The reason I miss many of the pieces I lost in the fire is they marked time in a special way and, at their best, they felt alive to their moment. They were, and remain, things I want to continue to hold. The lesson for me: if the object is lost, the language of care is clarified – and I hope this informs my work. I want to hold the present moment, and to hold the things I have however I am able to.

If my interest in craft began as a search, and if my grandmother's food box and scarf helped light a path for me that led to a career of making, I was also led to a strange, but familiar intersection of the present. At some point, I was no longer the graduate student

most important to me – the ways we care for each other and how that care is transformative.

After the fire and the pandemic, I was fortunate to have earned a sabbatical. My goal was to spend every day in my studio. What I needed was time, space, work, and family. Much of my processing happens in my studio. My practice is crucial to my ability to articulate what I often find challenging to verbalize. But outside the studio mattered in equal measure.

I went for walks, drank coffee, and I made art. I saw the trees stripped of their leaves, the grey sky, the frozen ground filled with snow. I heard my feet crunching as I walked, and the fog of my breath as I picked up the pace. I felt the cold in my lungs and listened to the loud quiet of winter.

I saw the trees gain their buds again, I saw the ice melt, and I felt sad and excited for these changes.

I saw the same animals and people at the same time every day. If they weren't there, I found myself worrying for them. What came



ANDRÉA KEYS CONNELL, *To Sleep, To Return, To Bend, To Lean, To Search, To Snuggle*, Red earthen clay, 38" x 12" x 12", Photo credit: Andrew Caldwell

exploring family history and inter-generational inheritances. I suddenly had my own family. I became a mother of two beautiful children, and my identity as an artist encountered this new identity of motherhood. Neither seemed to care much for the other. Children want – need – you to be attentive to them. They don't care about your latest sculpture. Well before I had children, I was attentive to how motherhood was perceived in academia. It did not seem favorable. From the moment I became pregnant, I felt I had to defend that part of my life. These defenses generally address two points – sometimes said, often unsaid, often inferred or implied: 1. Maternal life will be an imposition and get in the way of my work. 2. Making work about motherhood is a cliché.

It took a new job, a beautiful landscape, some experience, reevaluation, and perhaps tenure, to give me the confidence to say bullshit. When art is about connection, how can one of the most shared life experiences be illegitimate? My experience as a mother has provided me with a deeper language to better express what is

to me on these walks, and in my studio, was simple: we need each other but, despite this need, we can't fully hold each other. At some point our grip loosens. And in that letting go, what might feel like a cataclysmic absence or loss, can be transformed into a presence, a fingerprint, a language that is kind and communicates a powerful care capable of filling infinitely empty space with something as simple as a little girl's box or her homemade scarf.

I'm glad that our shared search has led us all here to NCECA 2024 and am inspired by the work and the people who make this journey so special.

**Andréa Keys Connell** is an Associate Professor at Appalachian State University. Her work has been featured internationally in publications and exhibitions. Connell also works on large-scale public art commissions. She teaches clay workshops internationally at institutions including Penland, the MET and, most recently, out of her home studio.