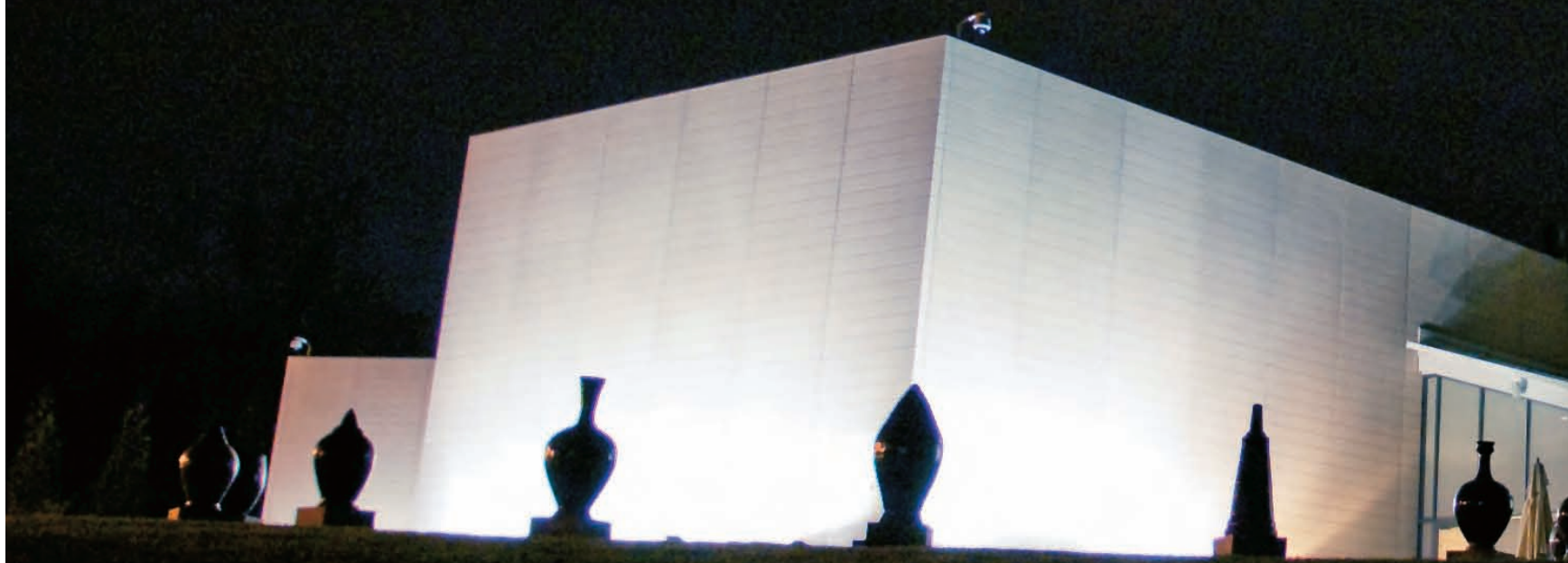


# A Colony of Dreamers

Mark Hewitt reflects on his journey from Stoke-on-Trent to North Carolina.



After more than thirty years, torn between hope and despair, I've come to love it here, despite its many flaws



'Far from implying the repetition of what has been, tradition presupposes the reality of what endures. It appears as an heirloom, a heritage that one receives on condition of making it bear fruit before passing it on to one's descendants.' Igor Stravinsky

I decided to become a potter against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, Woodstock, *The Whole Earth Catalog*, *Small is Beautiful*, the Club of Rome, and the 1970s oil crisis. Little has changed: world affairs are ever more precarious, oil wars rage, climate change is real, global financial and economic systems teeter, while alternatives are routinely dismissed. Like many European leftists, I considered the US to be the genesis of many of the world's problems, and never dreamed of living in America. But ironically, it was my passion for pots that led me there, to train with one of Michael Cardew's former apprentices, and after meeting my future wife, I decided to stay. After more than thirty years, torn between hope and despair,

I've come to love it here, despite its many flaws, and since moving south I've become immersed in all aspects of North Carolina's intriguing and venerable pottery tradition.

**CAROLINA HISTORY** Let me explain. Moravian and Quaker potters made vibrantly coloured earthenware here in the late eighteenth century, a tradition soon followed by two quite different stoneware traditions. The first began in Edgefield, South Carolina, and blended English vernacular shapes with decorations executed by enslaved African-Americans, as well as glazes based on Asian celadons, creating a pre-Leachian Asian fusion that is quintessentially American. This tradition soon migrated north to North Carolina



where potters in the Catawba Valley produced immaculately thrown, magnificently restrained, luminous green ash-glazed pots, accented occasionally with wild glass drips.

Other potters, borrowing from the New England salt-glazed tradition, utilised Southern cross-draught groundhog kilns to make wares strikingly similar to anagama-fired pots, and set the stage for the use of salt glaze, which is still prevalent today in Seagrove. Throw in colourful 'folk fiesta' artware made between the wars (still being made by a few of the old guard), and one begins to see the dazzling range of styles made here by successive potters. Bringing this thumbnail portrait up to date, we must include the experimental and innovative pottery made at Black Mountain College by Karen Karnes and Robert Turner, and the celebrated Penland School of

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2 Large pots in front of the Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Photo: Mark Hewitt) 3 *Hive* (detail), one of twelve large pots installed outside the Nasher Museum, 2010 (Photo: Mark Hewitt) 4 *Zweiunddreissig Blumen*, shapely sentinel with incised floral motif, blue glass runs, and amber alkaline glaze, wood-fired, salt-glazed stoneware, 2010, H142cm

Crafts, which continues to exert a powerful influence on the aesthetic range of contemporary North Carolina pottery.

I consider the existence of the older traditions liberating, not confining. If treated with imagination, they belong in our world now, living alongside the avant garde. The past and present complement each other; one does not cancel the other out, both can be made new.

**BRINGING IN OTHER INFLUENCES** As a British potter in America, I bring my own sensibilities and background, with Spode, Bullers, Cardew, Bayer, Bowen, Piker, Foulem, Saxe, Shapiro, and Sikora – Old Uncle Tom Coby and all – into the Carolina mix. My interests are multivalent: I like all sorts of pots; I steal ideas like a jackdaw, and I describe my style as mingled, mangled, Mingei. But how do I sort out all these influences without going potty? Theoretically it's easy: I recognise the quality in each of them, and let them all spend time with me in the workshop while shutting out the rest of the world as best I'm able. I follow their lead and let my hands do the work: playing, repeating, experimenting, finessing, mastering.

Practically, of course, it's much harder to keep things rosy all the time, as the daily pressures of making a living and raising a family, combined with the weariness of physical work and the demons of criticism, competition, and doubt, make each decision a potential battleground. But I relish each creative moment in the presence of, but not confined by, the traditions that pre-dated me from both my countries. As potters, all we have is the creative moment, so I keep dreaming, observing, reading, drawing, studying, paying attention, and assessing quality as I go along. In the end, of course, it's all about making pots, one after another, even if I'm not sure exactly where my inspiration originates.







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**CURVES** It seems as though we inherit curves, as if they were a genetic code, a sequence of actions distilled by one potter after another, one curve after another, until they became our own; distinct, pure, and potent. Chance always creeps into the mix (and let's not forget zeitgeist), but ultimately curves begin in the empty space where a pot will be, clay and skill gives them shape, your fingers identify them, and there they are, fragile, millions of possible permutations – but only one curve is realised, as if there were no choice.

I'm increasingly drawn to big, burgeoning, abstract shapes from beyond the typical repertoire of the functional potter, but not at the expense of mugs and plates and bowls, which, after all, can be just as big, burgeoning, and abstract. My big pots have a big presence, and they fetch more too. Some are inspired by grave markers, drainpipes, sieves, the components of moonshine stills, clay beehives, and chicken waterers, and also the sculpture of Martin Puryear – among others outside the pottery world.

Meanwhile, my new three-chambered glaze kiln beckons, my ball mill grinds, and Michael hovers gleefully, goading me towards making more sophisticated glazes – no task too arcane. My old salt kiln still sweetly rages, encouraged by Svend's stoic intensity, and Clive is in there too, with his seductive slips and gentle flourishes. These are the voices and hands from the past that keep tradition and innovation alive in my own work and encourage me to share my vision with my apprentices. Romantic and defiant, our hearts and minds are in our work, willing the world to be made right, against the odds. We are a colony of dreamers. ☞



**5** Teapot, wood-fired, salt-glazed stoneware, 2009, H11cm **6** Honey, large sentinel with impressed circles, blue glass runs, dark green alkaline glaze, and a manganese-slipped 'hive' finial, wood-fired stoneware, 2009, H138cm **7** Procession of big pots, H142cm max  
**Photography** Jason Dowdle

**Stockists** Almost all of my work is sold at three annual kiln opening sales; we have a mailing list of 6,000 people, and send postcards and emails announcing dates and times. These events are supplemented by occasional museum and gallery shows  
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**Mark Hewitt** is the son of and grandson of former directors of Spode. After university he apprenticed with Michael Cardew, and later Todd Piker in Connecticut, USA. There he met his wife Carol and in 1983 they moved to Pittsboro, North Carolina  
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