



# GOOD & HEARTY

## TOMATO BISQUE

By Bruce Helander

The exclusively human exercise of modelling moist earthen clay into decorative or serviceable objects can be traced back for millennia to primitive societies that were determined to improve the quality of their lives. For example, prior to the discovery of “curing” clay by intensive heat, the most practical method for scooping up drinking water was to “cup” one’s hands together, creating a ten-fingered temporary seal which, although not exactly drip proof, quenched thirst in a simple, convenient way. In fact, archeological antiquity shows us that the first found clay fragments that were buried underground for thousands of years quite miraculously survived and most often were handmade decorative spheres originally strung together into bracelets and necklaces. Ceramics is one of the most ancient industries; the oldest known ceramic artifact, the Venus of Dolní Věstonice, was created during the late Paleolithic period. Later, particularly in prehistoric tombs in places like ancient China, armies of standing terracotta soldiers were discovered frozen in formation as potential spiritual guardians to accompany an emperor securely and safely into the afterlife. Fast forward to the time of sophisticated, high-fired, hand-built earthenware, when manipulated clay began to go in many inventive directions and evolved into bona-fide works of art. In today’s art world ceramics has become not only a legitimate object to acquire but is a medium ripe for exploration and self-representation and has developed an enthusiastic collector base.

Throughout art history, clay certainly has been a perpetual component in combining creativity with a useful purpose, but the functional attachment ultimately morphed into a constructive artistic tool by modern and contemporary artists. Picasso likely was the first internationally famous artist to take a break from painting and jump to ceramic works with a passion. Salvador Dali followed Pablo with a “melted” ceramic clock, and these pioneers opened the doors to other contemporary artists who wanted to advance beyond the canvas. Willem de Kooning, the celebrated abstract expressionist painter, experimented with molded clay in a well-known series titled the “Clam Diggers.” To many, the concept seemed unrealistic. What would a figurative clay sculpture look like crafted by the same hand as a renowned action painter? Answer: It looked remarkably just like his abstract work, complete with thumbprints!

Contemporary ceramic art is having a great revival in the realm of fine arts, including numerous museums that have added contemporary sculpture into their exhibitions and permanent collections. It was Peter Voulkos who first shook things up when he decided to poke holes and incise cuts into his unglazed vessels as a revolutionary gesture for ceramics as contemporary sculpture that set the art world on fire. Following his footsteps in innovation and eccentricity were stoneware artists such as Arlene Shechet, Ken Price, Betty Woodman and Ron Nagle. Others like Jesse Wine, Alana Wilson, Jun Kaneko and Klara Kristalova began to define the limitless possibilities of ceramic art, not just as a long-respected utilitarian skill, but as a genuine fine art extension instrument now recognized and highly respected. Today it is not at all unusual for artists like Kiki Smith, Louise Bourgeois and even Jeff Koons to explore the demonstrative versatility of hand-built clay sculpture that first attracted de Kooning to wet earthen media in the first place. Koons’ recent 12 x 10 ft. aluminum sculpture titled Play-Doh, initially constructed in a maquette actually using Play-doh (inspired by Koons’ son making a Play-doh mound) recently was auctioned off by Christie’s for \$22.8 million.

Francie Bishop Good is a gifted painter who recently exhibited her curious canvases in a solo exhibition at the Coral Springs Museum of Art, and like many of the artists mentioned above, has expanded into dazzling hand-assembled ceramic sculptures that are on exhibit at the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale in “Remember to React: 60 Years of Collecting” (continues through June 30, 2019). Jim Leedy, best known for being unknown as a brilliant ceramic artist (his mother had an urge to eat clay during her pregnancy with him!), whose abstracted forms are on the same talent level of de Kooning and John Chamberlain. Like Leedy, Francie Bishop Good also has a curious and intuitive talent for integrating her natural aesthetic as an accomplished painter into her ceramic pieces.

This new clay series began almost as art therapy for the artist after Donald Trump was elected president. Something tangible to hang onto perhaps, or a necessary positive over what she saw as a huge negative. Most artists feel compelled from time to time to experiment with different approaches to their work at different times in their lives. Robert Rauschenberg was legendary for experimentation, particularly his involvement with the E.A.T. (Experiments in Art & Technology) projects. Chamberlain tried making cut-out foam sofas as sculpture and Damien Hirst has attempted to try just about any material, from spin paintings to medicine cabinets to pasting butterflies on canvas.



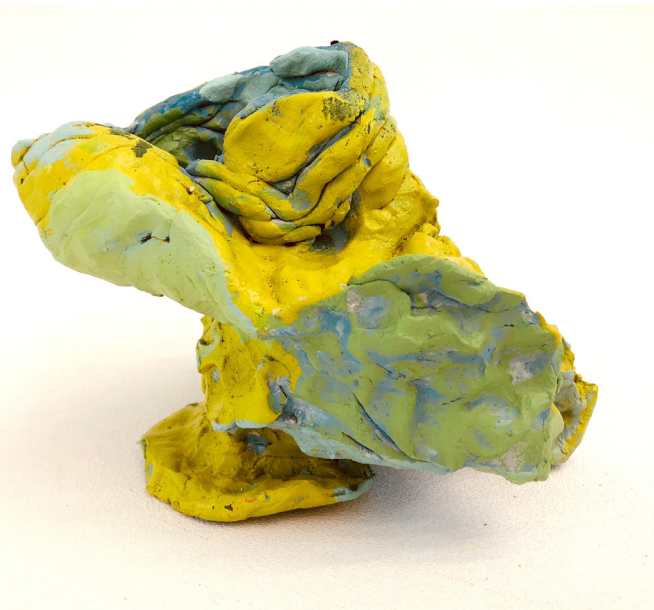
Francie Bishop Good, *Melted Nikon*, 2018, Bisque-fired raku clay with synthetic polymer paint, 7 1/2 x 7 x 5 in.



Francie Bishop Good, *Floating Purple*, 2017, Bisque-fired raku clay with synthetic polymer paint, 8 x 12 x 9 in.

THERE IS MUCH TO ENJOY WITH THESE UNASSUMING ROLLED OUT MASSES OF CLAY, THAT AMAZINGLY COME TO LIFE THROUGH THE ARTIST'S SKILLED HAND...

Francie Bishop Good in her studio. All photographs courtesy of the artist.



Francie Bishop Good, *Broken Coil*, 2018, Bisque-fired raku clay with synthetic polymer paint, 7 x 8 x 6 in.

In the circumstance of Francie Bishop Good, who was untrained in the use of ceramics, she began with vigorous experimentation in an unfamiliar substance without a concrete plan of action, initial sketches or any preconceived notion of what three-dimensional shapes would blossom from this new direction. The outcome not only was emotionally and aesthetically therapeutic, but it motivated the artist after early positive experiments to push forward with an ambitious series of hand-built objects. The final fired work truly is a kind of metamorphosis from paint on canvas to sculpture made from clay. For Bishop Good, she quickly discovered with this new malleable material that many of its characteristics had a seductive quality, which she enjoyed incorporating into various series throughout her colorful career. Her most recent solo exhibition at the Coral Springs Museum of Art cleverly utilized high school photo portraits from both her mother's yearbook and her own and presented a collage of imagery often drenched in bright colors that seemed to mesh together.

Like a classic abstract expressionist painting that has no planned beginning or end, Francie Bishop Good begins producing a solid silhouette in clay with only an intuitive sense of construction that investigates the often-sensual possibilities of handling a damp, amorphous irregular orb by pushing and pulling the materials in several directions until a plan of impromptu proportions, as they say, takes shape. The big difference from painting is that color and developing images are applied at the same moment, while ceramics must first be fashioned either by hand or by way of a potter's wheel, and when the profile is considered complete, the raw piece is loaded into a brick kiln and fired. When it cools down it is known as 'bisqueware.' Bishop Good does not presuppose what hue needs to be applied in the initial stages of constructing a clay sculpture. In fact, the artist has stated that she "has no idea" what's going to eventually surface in color until she begins the process of brushing on synthetic polymer paints, as well as sometimes using inks and occasionally even adding tiny beads. Francie Bishop Good is a fearless applicator of imaginative structures and often bizarre Day-Glo color schemes that seem to be natural allies for her free-wheeling approaches that can feel naïve and primitive while awkwardly balanced with a natural sophistication and built-in charm that can bring a smile to your face.

At first glance, Bishop Good's ceramics may take on the appearance of child-like innocence and imperfection, as if these forms may have hatched from a pre-school ceramics class where students have prepared something unusual for Mother's Day. But the second glance clearly reveals a deliberately unpretentious flavor of both asymmetric elements and color, for which the artist Jean Dubuffet strived for in his paintings and sculpture. There is a consistent dramatic richness to Bishop Good's ceramic series that when observed as a unit offers the viewer a comprehensive and cohesive understanding of the thoughtful and somewhat precarious equilibrium between elegance and naïveté that provides a satisfying edge. Since the artist resides in South Florida not far from the Atlantic Ocean, it's not surprising that many of her clay objects take on an aquatic, almost natural sponge-like essence and texture. Some of the works have a distinctive aura and tint of slightly bleached coral while others take on a shell-like personality that's gently kissed by sea water algae and accented by dozens of deliberate "scored" punched holes (see: *Voukos!*) that add a distinctive aquatic attitude. The work titled *Floating Purple* is an exquisite example of a careful blend of believable and sensitively brushed on pigment. In *Broken Coil*, the artist switches gears and proposes a simple form falling from its own weight, but perfectly anchored to the ground with the grace and proportion of a tabletop John Chamberlain. Occasionally Bishop Good adds a touch of humor, like de Kooning's red lips that he incorporated into his paintings, or ceramicist Robert Arneson's large heads that wear cheeky grins. In *Melted Nikon*, the pinch pot construction seems to have deteriorated after years of salt water punishment where all that's left of this sunken treasure is a lens-less box camera skeleton waiting for a decisive moment. There is much to enjoy with these unassuming rolled out masses of clay, that amazingly come to life through the artist's skilled hand and a good measure of well-baked objects rising to new heights that are made to last.

More at [franciebishopgoodart.com](http://franciebishopgoodart.com)

—Bruce Helander is an artist who writes on art. He is the former Provost of the Rhode Island School of Design, where he received a master's degree in painting and first met Peter Voukos and Norm Schulman, the head of the ceramics department at the college. He is a former White House Fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts and is a member of the Florida Artists Hall of Fame.