

Eco Children

BY NUALA CREED

As a child I spent hours making dolls: cut-out paper dolls, knitted dolls, and stick dolls that I covered with fabric. I also had a series of mud dolls that lived in the hedgerow around our house. In my late 30s, I took a ceramics class and was smitten by clay. This led me to art school and eventually a career as a ceramic artist. Most of my work is figurative and narrative, often with a socio-political bent.

The sculptures shown here are part of a series that I made several years ago called Eco Children. The inspiration for this work came from young children that I taught art to in San Francisco. At the time I worked closely with a teacher who was planting a garden with the children at the school. The children learned about various plants and the insects and birds that were attracted to the plants. They knew the good bugs and how to differentiate between them and the unwanted bugs. They would come to the art studio and make drawings and 3-D renderings of the things they had learned about. It was a pleasure to see their enthusiasm and excitement as their garden flourished. I realized that the seed being planted was an understanding of nature and a love of the natural world that hopefully could last a lifetime.

My sculptures are made to engage people in a gentle way. The frogs, birds, butterflies, and insects that adorn the hair of the children are symbols for their thoughts. Frog Boy is a budding scientist as he patiently ponders his frogs, while Nature Child cradles frogs, owls, bats, and a jackrabbit in the pockets of her dress; her clothing becomes their sanctuary. Daydreamer is lost in her joy of being one with nature, while Bee Boy, glazed in earth tones, is abuzz with a hive of bees for hair. Bird Girl, with interlocking birds for hair, holds a little red bird behind her back. These pieces are allegorical, acting as a reminder for us to pay attention and protect our natural world. ►



Frog Boy

Nature Child



I use basic ceramic techniques of coiling and pinching to create my work. I start my pieces from the feet up, coiling the legs. Once I get to the skirt or pants, I flatten the coils so they are small slabs. This helps me make the folds in the clothing. I adhere the coils/slabs with my fingers as I go. Many of my pieces are made in two sections that fit together. I do this so my work fits in my kiln easily. It also makes the larger pieces easier to transport. I usually work from an idea in my head, but sometimes I have photos of children playing or in poses that I like to reference as I build my piece. I use a mirror as I work so I get to see what I am making in the round.



Day Dreamer



Knowing which clay to use is important. Some clays demand more attention because they dry out easily, such as porcelain. I work a lot with different stoneware clays; some of these clays can look like porcelain but are easier to work with and fire at lower temperatures. For larger pieces I use clay with grog that is stronger and holds up better; these clays are often referred to as sculpture mix. I also buy commercially made clays that are simple to use straight from the bag. There are many different suppliers around the country.

I use stains and underglazes to color and decorate my pieces. These are fired onto the work in my kiln. My pieces are generally fired two, three, or four times until I get the desired effect. Occasionally, I may use oil paint to finish an area. ▶



Bee Boy





If you are a beginner and are interested in learning more about how to work with clay, I suggest taking a class at a local art center, which is what I did over 20 years ago. As with most things, it takes time and commitment to learn a craft, but if the passion is there, it is so worth it. There are endless possibilities to explore, and growth happens with time. Often one idea or project leads to the next. There is so much to learn about working with clay, but it's in the doing that one learns the craft. Clay is a tactile experience — you touch it and leave your mark. You can also print onto and into the clay, leaving a recessed image from a wooden stamp. Fabrics, wire, flowers, bark, and pretty much anything can be printed into clay. There are many clay tools that are fun to explore. The tools I use are mostly small sculpting tools for finer details, but the best tools are your hands, your imagination, and the urge to create something that is uniquely yours.

Nuala Creed is a ceramic sculptor living in Northern California in the San Francisco area. To see more of her work, visit nualacreed.com and internetarchivists.org. She can be reached by email at nualacreed@gmail.com.

All photos by Ira Flushman, except Daydreamer by Jeffrey Ventrella.



Bird Girl