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July 27 — September 8

ARTSPACE

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*Ball Snake Ball* presents objects and installations by a group of emerging and mid-career artists, based in cities and small towns across the U.S., who use clay to confront issues of environmental justice specific to their communities. Many of the artists incorporate locally sourced clay in their pieces to connect the material component of their work to site. The works explore local, regional and indigenous histories of land and water use, occupation, access, and urban development. Within these studies, questions of inheritance and identity emerge, specifically, who has the power to occupy, use and develop our natural environments.

The title of the exhibition references the process by which an individual might dig and process clay, straight from the ground. Approximately 80 percent of the earth's land surface contains clay. As a rule of thumb, if clay pulled from the ground can be hand rolled into a ball-like shape, and then a snake, and back into a ball again, it passes the test for optimal malleability.

Artists Include: Morel Doucet (Miami, FL), Rachel Eng (Carlisle, PA), Shannon Goff (Detroit, MI), Natalie Kuenzi (Philadelphia, PA), Roberto Lugo (Philadelphia, PA), and Ruben Olguin (Roswell, NM).

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**artspace** 

# One Place Understood

One of the great ironies about curating an exhibition on clay is that it is everywhere — in sewer pipes, toilets, musical instruments, medicines, bricks, manmade lakes, adobe homes, plaster, paints, roof tiles, wine production, dentures, kitty litter, spark plugs, etc. I sense that many people, like me, have used clay their entire life — walked over it and survived because of it, without really hearing its voice or following it back to its point of origin. Perhaps clay's omnipresence is what attracts some artists to the medium, and connects others to a concept of the local, place or even home.

In these two affiliated shows, *Hand Dug CT* and *Ball Snake Ball*, artists highlight clay as a willful medium that is written into the landscape by the people who live or lived there. In *Hand Dug CT*, a group of scientific-minded potters based in Connecticut look to clay and other naturally harvested resources as materials with unlimited aesthetic capacities. In *Ball Snake Ball*, six conceptually-driven artists based in cities and

rural communities across the U.S. recognize clay as a witness that gives testimony to the most deeply entrenched social, political and economic injustices of our time.

This essay looks New Haven as a case study by which we can begin to connect the dots between our region's ancient geological histories, indigenous histories, settler-colonial histories, industrial histories, and our more recent histories of land use, occupation and management, in order to better know where and who we are. By knowing our histories and the places we occupy, we might find ourselves in a better position to understand the experiences of other people and cultural groups. Or in Eudora Welty's words, perhaps "One place understood helps us understand all other places better."

## Geological Origins

Today, most ceramists would identify Connecticut as a region devoid of locally accessible and optimally malleable clay for throwing pots or making sculptures. Red earthenware, structurally the least durable of the three clay types, is prevalent throughout the region, but many local deposits are located more than six feet below the earth's crust.<sup>1</sup> The other clay types, stoneware and porcelain, are not locally available. As a result, few artists today carry on the lost tradition of harvesting clay, and knowledge of where these deposits exist is not readily available.

The material origins of Connecticut clays date back to the Paleozoic Era, roughly 540 to 250 million years ago, before dinosaurs roamed the earth. At that time, Connecticut was made up of an eastern and western highland of crystalline rocks that were coated by red clay. The highlands were separated by the present-day Connecticut River, which extended from Canada to the Long Island Sound. During the Triassic Era, 250-200 million years ago, these crystalline rocks disintegrated and washed into the river valley. Their sediments hardened into sandstone and shale, and took on a reddish-brown color, made redder by iron-bearing clay deposits,

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1. Loughlin, Gerald F. *Clays and Clay Industries of Connecticut*. Place of publication not identified: Rarebooksclub Com, 2012. Print.

producing the red earthenware Connecticut is known for. A series of volcanic eruptions, and the advance of a massive glacier, eventually pushed many of these clay deposits deep into the earth's crust. (Figures 1 & 2)

### Connecticut's Indigenous Potters

Archeologists date the first known uses of Connecticut clay to back to 1,000 B.C., when our indigenous ancestors used a coil technique to make vessels for drinking, eating and cooking. Anthropologist Lucianne Lavin describes the technique employed: "The first step was to prepare the clay body for molding by removing the pebbles and roots, and kneading it with water and particles of crushed stone, which helped prevent shrinkage and cracking. [Then] the artist would build the base, then the walls, the pots were then allowed to dry and, in the last step, were fired over an open hearth." <sup>2</sup> (Figure 3) These clay-fired vessels replaced cruder versions made from the artist chipping away at soapstone with a harder rock. (Figure 4) While soapstone bowls had a non-stick surface, they were less efficient for cooking and storing food, water and other objects. The discovery of clay was so significant that archeologists associate it with the advent of the Woodland Stage, (1,000 B.C. to European contact), a period defined by continuous development in stone, bone tools, leather crafting, textile manufacture, cultivation and shelter construction.

### Colonial-Settler Pottery

The first European colonists to settle in Connecticut in the early 1600's were strangers to the land. Without the means or knowledge to find, process or fire clay, they had to import their ceramics from England and China. In fact, all of their everyday necessities– clothes, household goods, seeds and livestock were imported.<sup>3</sup> As they developed their settlements and got to know their surroundings, potters began producing practical wares from locally sourced earthenware, which they nicknamed

2. Lavin, Lucianne. Connecticut's Indigenous Peoples: What Archaeology, History, and Oral Traditions Teach Us About Their Communities and Cultures. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015:147. Print

3. Silvestro, Clement M. Unearthing New England's Past: The Ceramic Evidence. Lexington, Mass: Museum of Our National Heritage, 1985:25. Print.

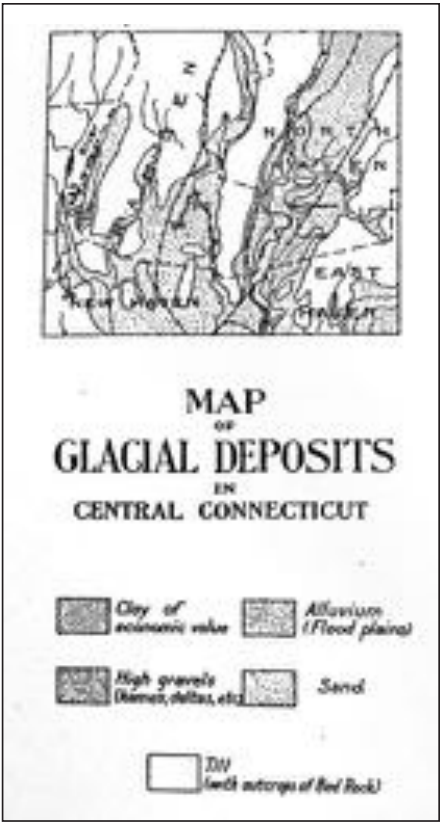
Figure 1: Source: The Clays and Clay Industries of Connecticut

Figure 2: Source: The Clays and Clay Industries of Connecticut (100 denotes feet above sea level)

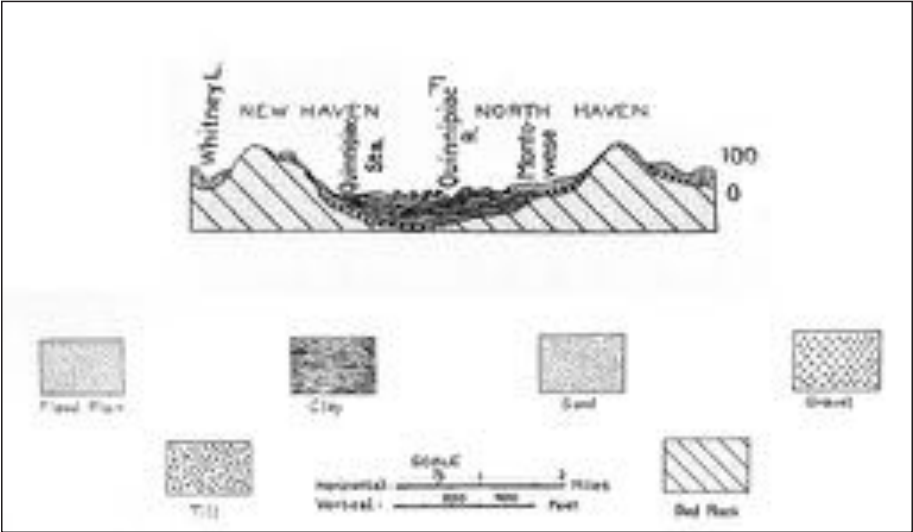
Figure 3: Replica Middle Woodland Jar, typical of the Northeast, created by Jeff Kalin in 2017



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Figure 5: Rim Fragment of a red earthenware pot made by Hervey Brooks. Source: Unearthing New England's Past: Ceramic Evidence



redware. Colonists relied on these locally sourced pots to fill their household needs through the nineteenth century, but starting in the 1850's, local wares were gradually replaced by more durable fashionable stoneware produced in New York and New Jersey.

Rural parts of Connecticut posed the exception to this rule, since many customers could either not afford the costs of domestic or international import, or preferred old fashioned forms. Hervey Brooks of Goshen, Connecticut epitomized a rural potter from this time. He was a bricklayer, blacksmith, sawyer, teamster, carpenter, merchant and entrepreneur; who taught singing school, took in boarders, pastured his neighbors' cattle, hauled loads of cheese to Georgia, and hired out his own services, as well as those of his ox, horse, wagon, and sons.<sup>4</sup> Unlike urban potters, who had to respond to consumer trends and compete with international imports, Brooks produced wares for his customers who appreciated quaint pudding and milk pans. (Figure 5) As canals, railroads, and roads improved ease of travel into the interior of the country in the late eighteenth century, ceramics became increasingly available in rural parts of New England, and by the end of the nineteenth century, only the finest porcelain and decorative table wares were imported from England and China.

4. Ibid: 58.

## Making a Soupstone Bowl

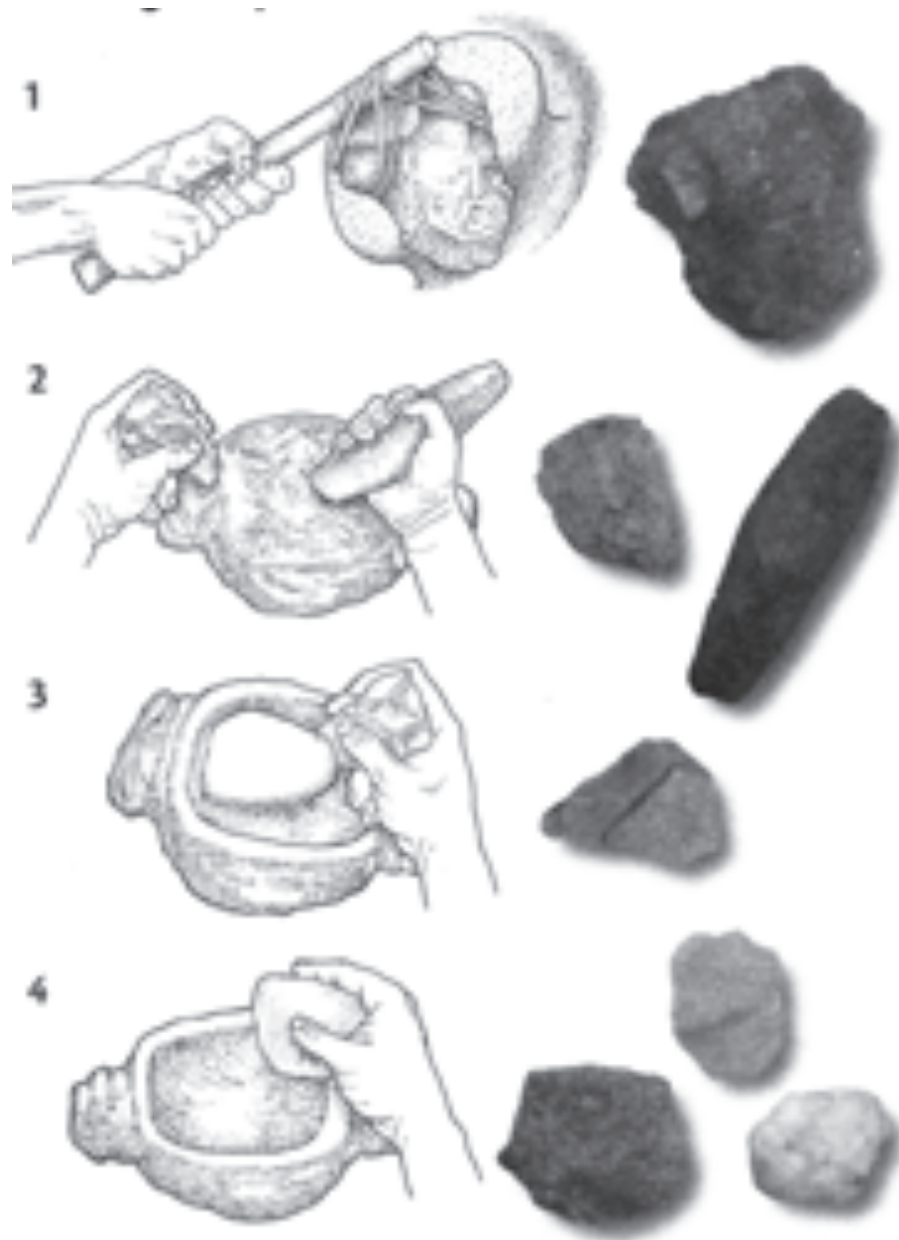


Figure 4: Source: Connecticut's Indigenous Peoples



Figure 6: Marcy Labella, River Runs Through, 2018

## Industrialization of Clay

The advent of the industrial revolution led to the machination of the ceramic industry. From 1895-1903, brick making was the highest grossing clay industry in Connecticut, with Stiles and Son's in the Quinnipiac District, producing 150,000 bricks per day using steam powered machines with the help of 200 male employees.<sup>5</sup> By comparison, the largest pottery manufacturer in Connecticut was Goodwin Brothers, which operated out of Elmwood, and employed around 40 men, 75 in its heyday.<sup>6</sup> By comparison, pottery shops like John O'Halloran's in New Haven, were run by a smaller staff of 5-10 men. While clay sales in Connecticut remained fairly steady from 1900-1909, manufacturers could not compete with other states who heavily invested in developing better technology. In 1896, Connecticut ranked eleventh in the country in clay sales, but seven years later, they ranked twenty-third together with Rhode Island. The color of Connecticut's bricks exacerbated this problem, since red was not in vogue.<sup>7</sup>

## Clay Today

Given Connecticut's history, it is not surprising that most ceramicists based in the region do not harvest their own clay. Out of the forty artists, who I asked, "have you used local sourced clay in your work?", only one, Marcy Labella, responded yes. Labella, a teaching artist and member of Wesleyan Potters, explained: "while I don't create the work itself from harvested local clay, I use harvested local clay to create beautiful organic natural slip and glazes." Her sculpture *The River Runs Through*, featured in *Hand Dug CT*, is made from stoneware, with a clay slip harvested from the Connecticut River in Middletown, CT. (Figure 6)

Most artists who answered "no" described the inconvenience of harvesting local clay. Michael Bradford, who manages the ceramic studio at Creative Arts Workshop in New Haven, called the harvesting process "hugely

5. Loughlin, Gerald F. *Clays and Clay Industries of Connecticut*: 93. Print.

6. Unknown Author. *Goodwin-Genealogy Wikia*. [http://goodwingenealogy.wikia.com/wiki/Harvey\\_Goodwin\\_\(pottery\\_founder\)](http://goodwingenealogy.wikia.com/wiki/Harvey_Goodwin_(pottery_founder)). Online.

7. *Ibid*: 65. Print.



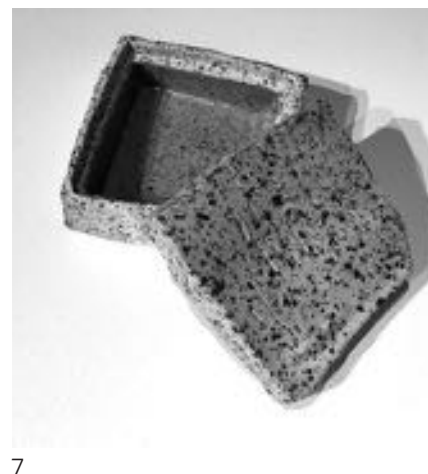
work-intensive for pretty small gain, and not economical... at least around here." Stephen Rodriguez described the region's limited clay options, "Connecticut does not have much to choose from, other than red or gray Earthenware clays & Feldspar which is no longer mined here." And Tim Scull of Canton Clay Works reflected upon the legal risks: "There are wetland laws in Connecticut that discourage us from harvesting/mining clay." Hayne Bayless, a ceramicist based in Ivorytown resituated the question. He wrote, "I have used a black sand I harvest at a road cut in Haddam, up Route 9." (Figure 7) Mark Potter also found an alternative entrance point, explaining "nearly all potters, have foraged natural materials for their work", including local sands, oxides and woods, which could be incorporated into a clay vessel to yield different effects. (Figure 8)

Potter attributes the region's reliance on commercially-purchased clays to industry. His response tarnishes the romantic picture of an artist going out into the field with a shovel and bucket in hand to find clay:

*It is nearly impossible to get access to 100% unrefined Connecticut clay today. The owners of the clay mines that still exist have allegiances to corporations, not to artists. The "historic" period of ceramics is over, dead, that "development" as a folk art, which later was elevated into "high" craft by the porcelain shops of Britain and China, have put an end to the sentimental dreams of Bernard Leach. I was captivated by his dreams too . . .but trying to do that again is like trying to write like James Joyce. Successful potters and ceramicists today must go with the industrial flow...not fight it.*

### One place understood leads to another...

The question of how one might look to the local to understand the experience of an unfamiliar place and culture plays out in Ruben Ogluin's contribution to Ball Snake Ball. Rubin flew in from Roswell, New Mexico to construct his installation the week before the exhibition opened to the public. His work, titled *Fractured: Broken Landscapes*, consists of a 4'x3' adobe bowl form, shaped to reference a kiva, a room used by Puebloans for religious rituals and political meetings, which functions as a surface for projecting video. The video shows Olguin "clay painting", dropping balls of clay, sand and water over a map of New Mexico to generate a moving



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Figure 7: Hayne Bayless, Box with Inclusions, 2018

Figure 8: Mark Potter, Pilgrim Vase, 2015

Figure 9: Box of raw materials for sale at Valley Sand and Gravel

image representative of the history of New Mexico's geologic time. As the water divides and trickles down the earthen materials, the video rewrites borders, boundaries, trails and public transportation systems that divide and govern New Mexican soil.

Rather than pay \$1,200 dollars to transport half a ton of adobe bricks from New Mexico to New Haven to reconstruct the bowl, Olguin decided to make it from scratch from locally sourced clay. On Day 1, he purchased 500 pounds of clay from Valley Sand and Gravel, a quarry in North Haven that sells recycled roadside materials by the ton, including clay from a mine in Manchester, Connecticut. (Figure 9) The clay had been so infrequently

purchased that it was sprouting plants. (Figure 10) An employee driving a backhoe effortlessly dumped the clay into Artspace's pickup truck, and for \$38, Ruben was off. Back at Artspace, he worked with helpers to shovel the clay into a wheel barrel. (Figure 11) After a dozen trips, he was done, and the residual clay was swept out of the truck and stored. On Day 2, he mixed the clay with water to create a milkshake-like slurry, which he poured into a handmade brick mold, and waited for it to dry. (Figure 12) Day 3, he continued to wait for it to dry, pointing fans at the brick forms and adding a dehumidifier to the room. The humid summer temperatures doubled the time it would have taken to dry in New Mexico's dry climate. Day 4, out of time, Olguin removed the still wet bricks from the rack, and built the structure, placing them delicately in layered circles. (Figure 13)

The work was a small miracle, made possible by a sleepless night and Olguin's extensive experience building adobe structures. The true magic of Olguin's piece is not the stability of the finished bowl, but rather the years of technical experience, informed by the passing on of cultural traditions that went into its making. For the final layer, Olguin added 40 pounds of purple, green and cinnamon terra cotta clay that he had hand dug the weeks before flying out to New Haven. The stories behind these clays go deeper than the eye can see, into local histories of land occupation, use and ownership. He foraged these clays from federal lands that were off limits, sneaking by trucks owned by the Bureau of Land Management, hopping fences into private properties, and even dodging gunfire from ranchers marking their territory.

Had Olguin built this piece for a show in New Mexico, the whole truck of clay would have cost \$10, and it would have been premixed. Or, he could have simply gone to his grandfather's ranch and dug the clay out in the field. Unlike New Haven, clay in New Mexico is readily available on the earth's surface, and it was the most common housing structure up to the 1950's. Olguin has worked with his family for generations to build adobe structures from scratch, and his practice continues to pay homage to his Pueblo heritage, and profound material knowledge of hand dug material.



Figure 1: Box of raw materials for sale at Valley Sand and Gravel

Figure 2: Industrial clay pile at Valley Sand and Gravel

Figure 3: Replica Middle Woodland Jar, typical of the Northeast, created by Jeff Kalin in 2017



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## Checklist: Ball Snake Ball

- MOREL DOUCET  
Born in Pilate, Haiti. Lives in Miami, FL.  
*White Noise, Let the choir sing a magnified silence (50 Affirmation)* 2017-8, dimensions vary, slipped cast porcelain, hand build & altered forms, (Fig. Image E)
- MOREL DOUCET  
Born in Pilate, Haiti. Lives in Miami, FL.  
*Cells/Follicles/Biota Series*, 2016 White earthenware, glazed and acrylic stain, (Fig. Image F)
- RACHEL ENG  
Born Rochester, NY. Lives in Carlisle, PA.  
*Rehydration*, 2017 dimensions variable unfired clay, plastic tubing, water, pump, soft brick, cardboard (Fig. Image I)
- RACHEL ENG  
Born Rochester, NY. Lives in Carlisle, PA.  
*Growth IV*, 2018 dimensions variable, unfired clay (Fig. Image A, before and after)
- SHANNON GOFF  
Born in Detroit, MI. Lives in State College, PA.  
*Raze Raise*, 2018 dimensions ongoing, clay (Fig. Image B, before and after)
- NATALIE KUENZI  
Born in Oklahoma City, OK. Lives in Philadelphia, PA.  
*In Bloom (A New Dream)*, 2018 dimensions variable, porcelain with foraged Philadelphia earth and Colorado mica, Philadelphia soil, wild flowers, ivy, and wood (Fig. Image G, before and after)
- NATALIE KUENZI  
Born in Oklahoma City, OK. Lives in Philadelphia, PA.  
*We All Have the Sky Series*, 2017 dimensions variable, terra cotta with porcelain and terra cotta slip, acrylic, oil, chalk pastel, foraged Philadelphia earth, salvaged cardboard (Fig. Image C)
- NATALIE KUENZI  
Born in Oklahoma City, OK. Lives in Philadelphia, PA.  
*Cloud-flowers*, 2017 dimensions variable, terracotta
- ROBERTO LUGO  
Born in Philadelphia, PA. Lives in Philadelphia, PA.  
*Ghetto is Re-source-ful*, 2011 8 min. 21 sec., video
- ROBERTO LUGO  
Born in Philadelphia, PA. Lives in Philadelphia, PA.  
*Winfred and I*, 2018 8x9x4 inches, earthenware, luster, china paint
- ROBERTO LUGO  
Born in Philadelphia, PA. Lives in Philadelphia, PA.  
*Stunting: Tupac and Dre*, 2018 8x8x4 inches, earthenware, luster, china paint, gun part
- ROBERTO LUGO  
Born in Philadelphia, PA. Lives in Philadelphia, PA.  
*Those Who Taught Me*, 2018 dimensions vary, earthenware (Fig. Image D, before and after)
- RUBEN OLGUIN  
Born in Sante Fe, NM. Lives in Roswell, NM.  
*Fractured: Broken Landscapes*, 2018, dimensions variable adobe clay, local earthenware clay, video projection (Fig. images 9, 10, 11 essay)
- RUBEN OLGUIN  
Born in Sante Fe, NM. Lives in Roswell, NM.  
*Traces Series*, 2015

9" x 5.5" each, foraged micaceous bowl with video projection, (Fig. Image H)

RUBEN OLGUIN  
Born in Sante Fe, NM. Lives in Roswell, NM.  
*Angostura Series*, 2015 16" x 20", optical print mounted on aluminum, electronics, wire, foraged micaceous clay kiln fired vessel

## Checklist: Hand Dug CT

- HAYNE BAYLESS  
*Box with Inclusions*, 2018 4'x 4'x 2", stoneware with Haddam, CT salt and pepper sand, wood/salt/soda firing (Fig. Image 6 from essay)
- RYAN PAXTON AND KIARA MATOS  
*Pit Fire Egg Form* 2017, ceramic
- STEPHEN RODRIGUEZ  
*Carved Earthenware Bowl*, 1998 3 /12" x 3, Maine White earthenware from edge of Bagaduce River in the Penobscot area, Unglazed, Pit-fired in Northford, CT
- DIANE COWEN AND COLLABORATOR  
*Wheel Thrown Vase*, early 1980's Sheffield red earthenware from southwestern Massachusetts, sprayed with a white engobe, and sgraffitoed.

MARCY LABELLA  
*Artifacts Series*, 2018 approx. 8"h x 2"w x 2"d each Cone 6 porcelain, sculpted, hand harvested clay slip, Hudson River tributary, Salt Point, NY, oxides, fired to cone 5 in oxidation, wool

MARK POTTER

*Carved Askus, thrown, altered and carved form*, 2009  
gas fired New Haven, CT, Shino glazed with wood ash application

JEFF KALIN

*replica Middle Woodland Jar, typical of the Northeast*, 2017  
12" x 9" (Fig. Image

MARK POTTER AND STEPHEN RODRIGUEZ

*Test Tile #1*  
50% Native Material with 50% with Custer Feldspar (Midwest Feldspar high in silica)

*Test Tile #2*  
100% Native Material  
*Test Tile #3*, 100% Native Material

Mark Potter

Selection of three small wood-fired plates, 2007-2010  
7" x 1", white stoneware, wood-fired to cone 11 in Cold Spring NY, unglazed, surface decoration only from fire-ash, (Fig. Image 2.5 from essay)

MARCY LABELLA

*The River Runs Through*, 2018  
Ceramic and Mixed Media.  
Stoneware - slab, pinch, coil sculpture, with Hand Harvested Clay slip CT River Middletown, Oxides, glaze, fired in oxidation, mounted on drift wood and cradled panel, (Fig. Image 5 from essay)

MARK POTTER

*Pilgrim Vase*, 2015  
9" X 7" X 4", white stoneware, gas-fired in West Haven, CT, shino-glaze with topical application of Adirondack beech and maple wood ash to create the drawing, (Fig. Image 6.5 from essay)

MARK POTTER AND STEPHEN RODRIGUEZ

*Pinch Pot #1*, 100% Native Material

*Pinch Pot #2*, 50% Native Material with 50% Hawthorne Fireclay (Missouri)

*Pinch Pot #3*, 50% Native Material with 50% EPK (Kaolin from Georgia)