



THE HEAT IS ON

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COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

Barbara Davis likes to play with fire. As an associate professor at Florida State University School, she teaches high school students sculpture techniques including raku and saggar, firing processes that originated in Asia many centuries ago. These methods require high heat and combustible materials, a combination generally forbidden in classroom settings. However, because FSUS is a research and development school sponsored by Florida State University, instructors there are encouraged to seek out unconventional learning opportunities and Davis is happy to oblige.



BRUSHING SALT WATER ON A SCULPTURE WILL CREATE FLAMES OF COLOR ON THE PIECE WHEN IT UNDERGOES THE SAGGAR FIRING PROCESS.

Growing up, Davis loved making art in all forms. Her parents were both medical professionals and when she enrolled at the University of Miami as a freshman, her major was biology. She quickly realized that her heart was elsewhere and she turned her attention to sculpture full time. Davis' professors recognized her passion and talent and recommended

she apply to the Cleveland Institute of Art. Davis was accepted and she began a five-year program where she explored many different mediums. She was drawn to one in particular. "I found I loved the immediacy of clay, the give and take. It was during my third year that I decided to do my

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sculpture work in clay. I've been a clay person ever since."

After graduating with a BFA in sculpture, Davis took a detour to Botswana by way of the Peace Corps. She was asked to serve as an agriculture teacher. "They give you eight weeks of cultural training, language training, and then some training in your field but I had never taken any education courses. A lot of people there either had already been teachers or had been through education programs. When I got to my site to teach, I was completely unprepared, I flew by the seat of my pants."

Not only did she acclimate herself to the task, she excelled, and found that she loved being an educator. Davis developed a collaborative teaching style and was hired to train the new volunteers. "It wasn't stand in front, lecture style, but instead, get people to work in groups, give them guiding questions, let them discuss." After six years in Africa, she came back to the states and enrolled as an MFA student at FSU where she continued to teach and explore the fine arts.

"I was intrigued by artists who were doing art-work with groups of students. I like that interaction where it's not just me." Some of her professors encouraged her to reach out to local schools and FSUS (called Florida High, at the time) was a perfect fit. "I went and explained what I wanted to do. Debi Barrett-Hayes, the art teacher, was like 'yeah, sure, come on, come on.' I went Monday through Friday, two hours a day, for two years."

Though Davis had no intention of making teaching her profession after graduation, she landed a job with a federally funded educational research lab where she quickly rose through the ranks. "I did it for 10 years but I got tired of going into low-performing schools to gather data. I would watch as the teachable moment would come and go and I started thinking, I want to teach." She learned of an opening at FSUS for an art teacher and at age 42, she started building a second career.

In the 14 years since, students have benefitted from Davis' extensive knowledge, including her experience with specialized firing practices, such as raku. In this process, glazed ceramic pieces are taken, red-hot, from the kiln and placed into lidded containers filled with newspaper, leaves, or other flammable materials. The resulting smoke blackens the surface in unpredictable ways. Students are excited by the process and look forward to it each year. "Raku has become a rite of passage for my advanced kids."

Davis recently introduced her students to a technique called saggar firing. She explains, "here, the idea is you don't put glaze on the piece. Instead, you are going to put things on it or around it, that when heated, will fume." It is critical to properly prepare the surface by burnishing the clay to a smooth finish. Students may then brush on a solution of Epsom salt or position combustibles directly against the surface of the sculpture which is then wrapped in foil. Crinkles in the foil capture the smoke.

"All of my sculpture projects have design ob-



BARBARA DAVIS

These foil-wrapped pieces are waiting to be fired.



jectives, problems to be solved," said Davis. "My students learn that there isn't just one way to handle the surface of pottery. Glaze is not the end all. It also makes them pay attention to form because saggar does not lend itself to busy, intricate things. You need an open canvas on which the fumed colors will go. So they have to make very simple forms."

In addition to these technical and sculpture specific lessons, students also gain skills that transfer to other areas of their lives. "They're learning that you don't always have perfect control. It's serendipity, you don't know what you're going to get. I teach my kids about craftsmanship, and about going that extra mile, pushing something further than what you might initially do. Also, being aware, present, and mindful. Some live in a culture where, at a young age, you're taught calligraphy and brush painting, and you have to think and clear your mind but we don't do that here. Those are things that the arts can teach."

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).