

Free Jazz Ceramics Class: Variations on a Theme

Jeff Shapiro leads students toward experimentation

BY PHOTOS BY AGATA STORER; TEXT BY ABRAHAM STORER AUG 24, 2022



Jeff Shapiro (seated) teaches his workshop “The Free Jazz Approach to Working,” at Castle Hill. Left to right: Stewart Grossman, Amy Fennick, Elizabeth Venuti, Ann McQueen, Carol Numrich, and Paul Merkelson.

Jeff Shapiro likes to break the mold of what ceramics students are typically taught in class. “I’m not particularly interested in teaching technique,” he says.

In a recent class at the Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill titled “The Free Jazz Approach to Working,” Shapiro used metaphors from music to expand the way one thinks about creating art. He explained that jazz — in contrast to classical music — allows one to begin training in technique but then expand beyond it toward personal expression.

He took an analogous path studying ceramics in Japan for nine years: “It took me a while to find my own voice when I came back,” he says.



Shapiro’s wife Hinako assists in leading participants in a traditional Japanese tea ceremony at the culmination of the class.



Shapiro demonstrates how his ceramic objects are used to prepare tea in a Japanese tea ceremony.



Amy Fennick shapes a ball of clay.

The voice he developed is expansive and improvisational. His forms are functional and sturdily constructed, yet distinguished by rough textures, imperfect shapes, and raw edges.

As he guides students to develop their own artistic voices, he encourages experimentation. “People stepping out of their comfort zones is a major part of it,” he says. And he hopes students will leave the class with their own ideas of how their work can evolve.

“I’m also not interested in them just taking home pieces from the workshop,” he says. “That’s just fluff.”



Participant Ann McQueen works on a piece in Jeff Shapiro’s ceramics class at Castle Hill.

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Barbara Levitov says that the workshop allowed her to challenge everything she does by “making it rough instead of perfect, not uniform instead of uniform, and learning to see the beauty in the organic.”



Demonstration items created by Jeff Shapiro during his workshop.