

SUSAN HALL

Studio, ceramics, creating
Digital images, 8 x 10



COURTESY THE ARTIST

DOUGLAS CRUICKSHANK

Out of the Fire

A talk about
artistic process with
ceramicist Susan Hall

One doesn't drive into Point Reyes so much as move toward it, through it, become enveloped by its deep, dark greenness. Then you are in the soul and the heart of the place, surrounded by the luscious, sloshing, sparkling waters of Tomales Bay, one of the most pristine on the West coast, and everywhere the forested hills, the blowy, galloping palomino fields, the inlets and eddies and wetlands, and the wildlife of course—always the wildlife, and abundant domestic animals as well.

When you grow up in that landscape, immersion in such rich reality—its flora, fauna, its colors, smell, texture and feel—makes it become part of you. Susan Hall, a ceramicist, and painter, who was raised in the small California town of Point Reyes Station, adjacent to the vast, staggeringly beautiful area that, in 1966, became Point Reyes National Seashore, sees her work as an homage to that town and the dramatic terrain that surrounds it. I visited Susan's studio to talk to her about her process.

She starts with the clay, building her ceramics from the ground up and not just any ground, but earth the same color as the dirt she dug in with her hands as a child. Point Reyes, its landscape, the color of the soil and foliage, became part of Hall when she was very young, and her feelings for it have never left her. Then, as now, the human connection of that small-town upbringing also had deep meaning for her.

"It is an homage in the sense that I experienced a rich human community embedded in a soulful landscape. The ceramics are an expression of devotion and loyalty to that environment, landscape and community intertwine with my own life journey, a theme I repeat often in my artwork. When you look at all my work, there are certain themes about journeys," she says.

Hall says color became very important to her at an early age.

"I pick the clay I use for its earthy red-brown color, and the back of each of my ceramics is dark green, like the oaks that speckle the yellow-ochre hills."

Hall's clay is low fire clay from California, most commonly used in making earthenware and terracotta pieces. High fire clay, on the other hand, tends to be employed for making stone-ware and porcelain.

"But I like the handmade, substantial look of the low fire," she says. "My ceramics express the parallels and interactions between people and nature."

Many ceramicists don't use low fire clay because it can be difficult to work with. It's softer and requires glaze to make it waterproof. But for Hall that's its appeal, its close association with the dirt she played in as a child.

The fact that she has kept that child alive, flourishing inside the woman she is today, is central to her art.

"I have fond memories of picking salad vegetables for dinner with my mother, and putting them in the old, cracked salad bowl which was on the ground. I was moved by the salad bowl, its palpable connection to the earth."

Decades later, those powerful feelings returned when she returned to California after a long stay in New York City.

"I'd just moved back to California and realized I'd forgotten about the earth, living in New York for so long."

Making practical, everyday things from clay is profoundly appealing to Hall. It keeps her grounded, literally.

"Working in clay comes from the ground. That's why I don't see a conflict between painting and clay. A big theme in my life work is helping people to get in touch with their own sense of groundedness, and one of the things that I am doing is taking them there, through my ceramics and painting."

Hall says there's spiritual aspect to her work, but it's seen through a practical lens.